People Centered Approach
KPSRL Distilling Series
2021 – 2024

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Knowledge Platform
Security & Rule of Law

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Executive summary

This paper distills findings from KPSRL products on the theme of people-centered approaches during the current iteration 2021-2024. Although there was no specific learning trajectory on PCA, the latter was 'mainstreamed' in numerous conversations and learning pathways facilitated by KPSRL. The paper builds on these conversations and highlights some of the current debates and quandaries around people centered approaches.

A paradigm shift or a panacea?

People Centered approaches have emerged as a new paradigm carrying the potential to navigate global peace, justice and development challenges. From a *stricto sensu* institutional focus to a mainstreamed approach aiming to apply people-centric lenses to different levels of programs design and implementation as well as policymaking, PCA has evolved to become a holistic model for fostering trust, inclusivity, agency, accountability and relevance of services.

However, Implementing PCA is not without its challenges. While people-centered approaches emphasize community participation, there is often a gap between intent and reality. In many cases, participation is superficial, **with communities having limited influence over decisions. The significant resources** (funding, and expertise) required to implement people-centered approaches remain out of reach in fragile and conflict affected settings. **Traditional top-down approaches** remain deeply ingrained in many institutions, making it difficult to shift towards more participatory, bottom-up frameworks. Furthermore, **a lack of cross-sectoral coordination** often results in fragmented efforts that fail to address the interconnected nature of many SROL issues. People-centered approaches often focus on qualitative outcomes, such as empowerment and community cohesion, which are difficult to measure and quantify. The absence of **'appropriate' metrics** makes it **challenging to evaluate, compare, and scale successful initiatives.** Which undermines efforts to demonstrate the value of people-centered approaches to stakeholders and funders.

Recommendations

- There is a need to strengthen mechanisms for genuine community participation and ensure representation of those with 'lived experiences'(in their diversity): Institutions delivering services should move beyond 'tokenistic engagement' by creating platforms that allow for meaningful and **continuous dialogue with communities, and using participatory and culturally appropriate methods** (such as focus groups, community art, participatory planning workshops) **that empower communities to 'co-create' and take an active role in decision-making processes.** It is also crucial to invest time in building relationships and trust with communities. This includes being transparent about intentions, follow-through on commitments, and **creating feedback loops where community input is visibly incorporated into decision-making.**

- Institutions should actively work to foster cross-sectoral collaboration and break down silos within organizations and between sectors by establishing mechanisms to address the multifaceted nature of Security and Rule of Law challenges using for instance **multi-sectoral working groups, integrated service delivery models, and shared goals.** Which necessarily includes **a policy alignment effort.**

- Donors are advised to invest in **securing sustainable funding** that is flexible and long-term, allowing for sustained engagement with communities. This also means **leveraging partnerships for resource sharing** by collaborating with other organizations, governments, and donors to pool resources. Joint initiatives can help overcome individual resource constraints and create synergies in delivering people-centered interventions.

- Scaling and Sustaining People-Centered Approaches is a must: Institutions (and organizations) should invest in pilot projects that can be **tested, adapted, and refined** based on community feedback with the aim of scaling up at a later stage. **Documenting lessons learned and best practices** to inform broader implementation (and policy development) should be at the core of interventions.

Introduction

In 2024, KPSRL is finishing the 2021 – 2024 iteration of the platform. This article is part of a KPSRL 'distilling series' in the run up to the Knowledge Platform Annual Conference 2024 (KPAC24). It looks back at contributions of the network to KPSRL products (events, research, podcasts etc.) between 2021 and 2024 on four themes:

1. Locally Led Development (to be found [here](#))

   This collects findings on rethinking power relations and diverging interests within this sector, taking leadership and ownership, and navigating risks for local organizations and donors in times of donors focusing on domestic priorities and shrinking civic space in FCAS.

2. People Centered Approaches (this piece)

   This collects findings on bridging the gap between individual experiences and humane institutions, defining 'people centeredness', hybrid security and justice, fostering trust between communities and/or institutions, and taking needs instead of a system's siloes and regulations as a starting point.

3. Roots of Disagreement and Polarization (in development)

   This paper collects findings on the sources of polarization and diverging world views, identifying arguments that parties to polarized SRoL debates use to justify their positions. Ultimately, the piece aims to suggest points of common ground to allow for useful dialectical opportunities rather than a clash of worldviews.

4. Learning About Learning (in development)

   This paper collects collects findings on knowledge management and organisational learning, It reviews the variety of theories of and approaches to organisational learning, and the conditions under which they have been successful. Ultimately, the paper offers the reader a map and compass to find the learning approaches that suit their organisations.

The distilling papers' goals are to bring together KPSRL's 2021 – 2024 efforts on these themes, that can feed into KPAC24. It does not seek to give a comprehensive historic and academic overview of the debates. However, we do briefly touch upon the most recent state of this debate for our field, including some key dilemmas and definitions.

This distilling should solidify the overarching narratives and recurring recommendations over the years. This should facilitate further uptake with policy makers, researchers and practitioners within the KPSRL network.

Distilling People Centered Approaches

This distilling paper's goal is to bring together KPSRL's 2021 – 2024 efforts on people centered approaches for peace and security, and therefore does not seek to give a comprehensive historic and academic overview of the PCA debate. We do however want to set the stage by briefly touching upon the most recent state of this debate for our field, including some key dilemmas, building on some key themes that were discussed within our network in the past years such as:

- The importance of building on (nuanced and diverse) lived experiences to shape programming and policy.
- The fluidity of dynamics[1] around 'people centered approaches.
- The shift toward more 'humanized' institutions.
- The cruciality of a 'multi-sectoral' approach.
- Leveraging new forms of partnership.

Debate and definitions

In the past decades, there has been a growing emphasis within the development field on empowerment and rights-based approaches. These approaches aim to strengthen the agency and voice of marginalized groups, promote social justice and equality, and hold duty-bearers accountable for fulfilling human rights obligations. They draw on principles of participation, non-discrimination, accountability, and empowerment to advance human rights and social inclusion.

The shift towards people-centered approaches sits within that framework and reflects a broader repositioning towards recognizing the importance of **human dignity, agency, and participation in shaping development processes and outcomes**. From the human rights movement to contemporary empowerment and rights-based approaches, **these frameworks share a common commitment to placing people at the center of peace, justice and development efforts**.

Whether within security, justice or governance sub-fields, the use of a people-centered approach is now recognized as the cornerstone of both normative frameworks and implementation roadmaps at different levels:

- At the UN level, the signature of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2016) was explicitly launched **"on behalf of the peoples"** the UN serves rather than the member states that make up its ranks.
- The **OECD Framework and Good Practice Principles for People-Centered Justice** (2021) highlights **the need to identify citizens' justice needs and what works for each group in society**, as well as how to deliver **accessible services**, including for the most vulnerable groups.

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[1] Multiple and changeable dynamics

- The African Union Commission's Agenda 2063[1] (2015) calls for an Africa whose development is **people-driven**, believing in the **capabilities of African people, especially its women and youth**.

Historically, the Security & Rule of Law (SROL) field has learned from other sectors such as the health sector, which *internationally has chartered an important trajectory – focusing increasingly on the needs of people rather than "disease"; on appropriate investment in rigorous research and evaluation; and on investment in and use of data."* Learning from pioneers*, "the SROL's ecosystem has, since the end of the Cold War, initiated a transformative shift from State to People centric thinking[2].*

Finding a unified definition of a 'people centered approach' in the literature seems tenuous. The concept is rather defined within the specific areas within which it is being applied by different stakeholders.

A couple of key and ''common'' objectives seem, however, applicable throughout different SROL related people centered approaches:

- **renewing the social contract** between the state and the population it serves.
- **empowering people at the local level** to express their fears, needs, insecurities and vulnerabilities and to hold accountable all security and justice providers whether they are formal, informal or semi-formal actors.
- Correcting power imbalances and improving the **inclusivity, accountability and relevance of services**.

People centered justice

*People-centered justice resolves legal problems people have, prevents them from occurring, is tailored to what people need to move on and, therefore, creates opportunities for people to fully participate in their societies and economy. **It puts people and the outcomes they need at the centre, not institutions**.*

'Delivering People-Centered Justice, Rigorously', HIIL

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centered security approach was defined in response to the critique of the human security agenda. It retained its focus on meeting the diverse security needs of men, women, boys and girls, but sought to engage rather than antagonize the state in pursuit of this goal. It narrowed the definition of security and justice to an essential core of issues and envisioned the role of donors to be that of a facilitator of dialogue between the state and civil society and a balancer of top-down and bottom-up reforms.

'A People Centered Approach to Security', UNDP

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[2] Evolutive terms have been used, sometimes in an interchangeable way: client centered, citizen centered, human centered design.

Recurring themes 2021 - 2024

Key narratives and impasses

Different attempts to integrate a people centered approach had expanded from a *stricto sensu* institutional focus to a mainstreamed approach aiming to apply people centered lenses to governance structures, services design and delivery, MEAL and community agency. And though there is growing recognition that people centered approaches can help us navigate global peace, justice and development challenges, those striving to implement people-centered approaches face several conceptual and practical quandaries.

- ♣ 'Multiple' lived experiences: Recent developments within PCAs are striving to build on lived experience as much as possible. First-hand knowledge and meaningful participation are key to effective (context specific, locally legitimate) programming and policy making. "*However, this comes with the necessity to ''navigate'' the said experiences, as they greatly vary from community to community. The diversity of experience means that there no one-size blueprint and* **this requires taking a critical look at the composition of the community whose members don't always work in each other's best interests**."[2] Navigating lived experiences involves understanding, reflecting on, and making sense of one's personal life events and their impact on an individual's worldview, identity, and interactions with others; a process which can be complex, multifaceted and messy.

- ♣ Ticking box exercise or meaningful shift? In a frantic "race" to prove that they are people-centered and to build ''evidence' on what works, organizations document their engagement with community. And while this can be laudable from a downward accountability and learning perspective, the frameworks used to capture this engagement often don't align with the philosophy of people centric programming. Enormous energy and resources are devoted to inclusive reporting and tools that foster transparency by establishing two-way interactions between the community and the project team. But even though this enhances the abilities of communities to distinguish pros and cons of services and development projects from their perspective, this methodology tends to create **a hierarchy of what counts as valid evidence worth acting**

upon and comes often at the expense of human interaction and the 'relational'[3] element which is crucial for people centered approached.

- Between (geo)politics, social norms, and organizational values and practices: People Centered approaches sit within a complex interface of (geo)political interests, institutional/organizational values and practices, social norms. On the one hand, geopolitical interests often shape the distribution of development aid and resources. It influences the prioritization of human rights and the quality of governance in countries. On the other hand, people centered programming can be highly dependent on organizational culture and mental landscapes with which a specific donor is entering ''the field''. These factors combined don't leave enough room for policies and actions that are rooted in empathy, inclusivity, and a deep understanding of local contexts.

- New ''allies'' for people centered approaches: Recent initiatives around people centered approaches describe multistakeholder dialogue as the 'way forward'. However, the level of trust that such a dialogue necessitates still leaves much to be desired. For example, the private sector is one of the stakeholders that is seen as having the potential to be a significant force for advancing people-centered approaches by aligning business interests with broader societal goals and priorities. By embracing social responsibility, inclusive practices, partnership-building, innovation, and responsible investing, businesses can indeed contribute to building more equitable, sustainable, and thriving communities. But not everyone considers the private sector a reliable player. And as a sector, despite some 'good intentions' it remains stuck in 'olds ways of working' and traditional forms of supply chain, which doesn't necessarily align with the 'people centered' approach' philosophy.

What does this mean for programming and policy?

The (State-centric) assumption that *fixing imperfect or weak states through solid institutions, securing their legitimacy through elections, and extending their remit throughout a particular territory would yield peace and justice dividends for citizens and communities* is too simplistic, and was proven wrong by contemporary crises. And while People Centered approaches carry the promise of more inclusive, relevant and sustainable justice and peace, every context requires nuances and adjustments to make an effective shift towards PCAs.

Embracing new ways of working to better understand mental models and lived experiences

'Lived experiences' and 'mental models' are key lexicon emerging around inclusive and people centered programming, and though different, they are strongly interconnected. Within the field of SROL, people centered programming starts with the assumption that those with lived experiences of conflict and instability are the most legitimate actors to point out their security and justice needs and SROL policies

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[3] In her book 'Lives Amid Violence', Mareike Schomerus explains for instance, how best practice but transactional program design cannot compensate for what matters to people most - their social relationships and networks, which often get ignored.

and interventions that can benefit them[4]. To be meaningful, such an integration starts on the one hand, with the ability to **understand the mental models**[5] of those who live through conflict and instability, including recognizing traumatic experiences of violence and marginalization and how the latter influence their perceptions. On the other hand, these approaches challenge development actors, in particular donors, to revisit their own mental models and understanding how development work should be carried out and ideas as to how change occurs.

The importance of building on lived experiences and bridging mental models is not necessarily contested, but the practice remains elusive. **Tools to include lived experiences in policymaking and programming are currently under-utilized** though having the potential to shape alternative and inclusive programming and policy making. They include theatre, visual art, music, and poetry since these help in engaging on personal topics and in expressing deep mental models.

Making progress on understanding and translating lived experiences for policymaking and programming requires **diversifying the definition of and channels through which knowledge informs programming and policy making**.

Fluid dynamics around ''people centered approaches''

A PCA means *understanding the needs of the people as close to the micro and individual level as possible, while acknowledging the fluid dynamics and multiple interpretations that are hidden behind terms used to designate entire categories of people. Broad categories such as "local" are overused and hide enormous differences in power and conditions.[6]* The same goes for commonly used labels such as "youth", "women", ''refugees" and "displaced persons".

Interveners must understand the complexity, the fluidity, the diversity and the multiplicity of audiences. Otherwise, interventions risk **exacerbating power differences and tensions**[7] hence creating civil society fragmentation and making the latter less strong to resist and respond to the growing civic space restrictions.

The reductionism and romanticization of the 'people' or 'local' create blind spots and impedes an advanced theoretical and practical understanding of people centered approaches.[8]

Humanizing institutions

Effective people centered approaches seek to 'humanize' institutions. Humanizing institutions involves shifting the focus from bureaucratic efficiency to the well-being

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[4] 'Margins To Center: Victims, Survivors & Justice Processes' with Impunity Watch, INOVAS & University of Birmingham, KPAC22.

[5] 'Building on lived experiences' Mareike Schomerus-BUSARA Center, Jeremiah Kinyanjui - Green String Network, An Michels-ICC; KPAC23.

[6] 'Margins and Centers of SROL: People Centered Approaches', Knowledge Platform Annual Conference 2023 (KPAC23)

[7] See for example the research on EU border policies in Libya, performed by Human Security Collective and Tamazight Women's Movement under KPSRL's Knowledge Management fund here.

[8] To read more about KPSRL's work on Locally Led Development, read the Distilling Series report here.

and needs of individuals within those institutions, by **making institutions more responsive, accessible, and empathetic to the needs and rights of individuals**.

On the one hand, this means recognizing that they exist to serve people and should prioritize their dignity, autonomy, and empowerment. On the other hand, this also means revisiting traditional operational frameworks and embracing new (sometimes labelled as ''soft'') ways of engaging people by:

- Empathizing: Institutions should seek to understand the lived experiences, perspectives, and needs of the people they serve and work with. This requires active listening, empathy, and a willingness to adapt policies and practices accordingly. They should encourage stakeholders to share their stories and experiences using a variety or channels based on specific contexts[9].
- Co-creating: Institutions should involve stakeholders, (including community members), in the design, implementation, and evaluation of institutional processes and services. While the term is sometimes used interchangeably with 'collaboration', **co-creation places a greater emphasis on process**. Similarly, emphasis is placed on creating conditions of equality among the different stakeholders involved in the creative process, enabling therefore: a better connection between actors that would normally not collaborate; bridging the gap between the capacity/resources available to contribute from community members vs institutions staff and development workers; awareness and sensitivity towards important issues with (or between) certain groups and individuals; a safe space for sharing; building a common understanding and the creation of more layered, nuanced and durable solutions.
- Fostering accessibility and Inclusivity: Institutional spaces, services, and information should be accessible to all individuals, regardless of their background, abilities, or circumstances. This involve removing barriers, and actively promoting diversity and inclusion.

Adopting a multi-sectoral approach to tackle interconnected risks

Hybrid and multi-sectoral policy and programming approaches are an integral part of People-Centered approaches. They take various forms and bring together formal and informal institutions, multiples levels of government, and state and non-state actors. However, their practical realization remains difficult in the absence of policy and financial coherence – the development field is simply too fragmented.

Meanwhile, contemporary crises such as climate change, food insecurity, displacement, gender-based violence and violent extremism are all issues that do not separately wait for a dedicated pot of funding but come together in complex crises[10]. This forces the SROL sector to take the **search fo**r **new partnerships across the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus** seriously. Policy and programming

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[9] See above, under 'Key narratives and impasses' section.

[10] 'Margins and Centers of SROL: Integrated Approaches', Knowledge Platform Annual Conference 2023 (KPAC23)

should choose concepts like "resilience" as useful frames to understand interconnected risks and opportunities. Innovative financing mechanisms that are not constrained by sectoral boundaries are also necessary.

A more proactive approach to development and sustainability

Attempts to integrate PCA into the corporate sphere have been for years restricted to minimal due diligence obligations from companies. Current shifts under *just transitions, social impact and sustainability* narratives entail a more pro-active accountability approach from the private sector and require a multistakeholder dialogue to rebuild trust and to allow communities to engage equitably with traditional power holders.

New tools such as the Human Security Business Partnership framework,[3] for instance, provide an interesting blueprint to structure sustained multistakeholder dialogue anchored in company-community interactions. It puts local communities at the centre of conversations about social impact at the local level, how it can be best measured, the ways to protect local communities from harmful effects of business operations, and about working jointly and proactively towards mutually beneficial outcomes. *The approach is premised on a shift away from a sole focus on risk minimization to taking opportunities for positive action while enabling the local community to engage as a partner.*

Multistakeholder dialogue can help design and implement different forms of community engagement, contribute to better understand the local context, foster relation-building through better interactions with communities, improve the quality of social impact processes and generate better long-term mutual benefits and profitability. This however is not a panacea, given the traditional mistrust between companies and communities. An insufficient knowledge sharing about good practice around social impact and sustainability still prevails, and changing this would contribute to trust building. **Maximizing impact of such a multi-stakeholder dialogue will require a holistic approach that prioritizes transparency, engagement, shared value creation, environmental stewardship, and long-term commitment.**

Gaps & Future Action

While people-centered approaches are widely recognized as essential for addressing complex SROL and development challenges, several gaps remain, both in terms of systemic issues and practical constraints, and tackling them require further dialogue and exploration. SROL stakeholders need to reshape their ways of 'thinking and doing'. And this requires uncomfortable conversations about:

- **Power and decision making**: Political will and practical methodologies for genuine participation to move beyond 'tokenism' and ensuring that **community voices have a tangible impact on decision-making.**
- **A financing framework for PCA**: to fully (and practically) commit to PCA approaches and accommodate their resource-intensive nature (time, funding, and expertise)
- Addressing **institutional resistance and bureaucratic inertia**: via a concrete operational shift from traditional top-down structures that can be reluctant to embrace more participatory, bottom-up models.
- **Cross-Sectoral Coordination**: translated in concrete approaches and frameworks to tackle siloed working practices and competing priorities within SROL (and beyond)
- **Measuring Impact including what it is labelled as 'soft' outcomes**: People-centered approaches often focus on qualitative outcomes, such as empowerment, satisfaction, or community cohesion, which are harder to measure and quantify than traditional metrics like output or efficiency.
- **Evidence based practice**: to ensure actions that are grounded in proven methods and outcomes ('soft' ones included).

This distilling paper serves as input for the Knowledge Platform Annual Conference 2024 in November with the theme 'Building trust, pacifying power, connecting realities', during which some of these gaps will be further unpacked.

Notes

[1] African Union (2015). *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*.

[2] I. Nepal and N. Klein-Kelly (2023). 'Navigating dilemmas in people-centric humanitarian action'*. Humanitarian Law & Policy.* https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2023/08/31/navigating-dilemmas-in-people-centric-humanitarian-action/

[3] United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security and LSE Ideas (2022), *Human Security Business Partnership Framework A risk-informed approach to achieve the SDGs.*

Annex: Underlying KPSRL reports, events & projects 2021 - 2024

	Title	Lead	Type	Context	Year
1	Stockholm Forum for Peace & Development: 'Still Engaging, But Differently: Shifting the Power to Locally Led Peace Initiatives'	KPSRL & Peace Direct	Events		2024
2	Pathways to Locally Led Change	KPSRL, CSPPS, NL MFA	Report	LLD Trajectory	2024
3	Towards Effective Partnership And Shared Ownership; A Framework Based On Equity, Diversity, And Inclusion	Media INK	Report	PLI	2024
	What Strengthening Localisation through Capacity Building and Inclusion in Iraq	IHSCO, HALO	Report	PLI	2024
4	Power Dynamics in Foreign Aid	Radboud	Report	KMF	2023
5	KPSRL Annual Conference (KPAC) Nairobi	KPSRL	Session	Annual Conference	2023
6	Internal report on support to learning within the SRoL portfolio of the Somalia desk - NL MFA	KPSRL	Events	PLI	2023
7	Unboxing Localization VI - Innovative funding for local peacebuilding action: walking the talk	GPPAC	Events	LLD Trajectory	2023
8	Unboxing Localisation V - From Consultation Towards Local Leadership: Inclusive Programming in Practice	WKPSRL	Events	LLD Trajectory	2023
9	Unboxing Localisation IV - Measuring Localisation	CSPPS	Events	LLD Trajectory	2023
10	Inconvenient Realities: Discussing the recent IOB evaluation	KPSRL & IOB	Events		2023
11	Localization in Humanitarian Mine Action in Afghanistan	MAPA, DRC	Report	PLI	2023
12	Unboxing Localisation III - Chains of Influence	CSPPS	Events	LLD Trajectory	2022
13	Unboxing Localisation II – Prioritization Trajectory	CSPPS	Events	LLD Trajectory	2022
14	Localized SRoL Support In A Multipolar World	KPSRL & IDLO	Events		2022
15	Mapping Tensions And Power Imbalances In NIMD's Ecosystem	NIMD	Report	KMF	2022
16	Reimagining Social Contracts - An analytical paper of KPSRL discussions in 2022	KPSRL	Report		2022
17	The Knowledge Economy: Somalia	KPSRL	Podcast		2022
18	Manifesto: Re-Envisioning Security And Rule Of Law Responses In The Great Lakes Region In East Africa.	Centre for African Research	Report	KMF	2021
19	Unboxing Localisation I - Building Forward Better by Strengthening Local resilience	CSPPS	Session	Annual Conference	2021

20	How effective is the current peacebuilding financing architecture at building peace? Reflections from local to global peace actors	Life & Peace Institute, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation	Events		2021
21	A Clash of Contagions: The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict in Nigeria, Colombia and Afghanistan	Mercy Corps	Events		2021
22	Local Voices Leading To Local Solutions In Pakistan, Nepal & Zimbabwe	Accountability Labs	Session	Annual Conference	2021
23	Time to Decolonise Aid	Peace Direct	Session	Annual Conference	2021

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