



Knowledge Platform Annual Conference 2024: Report

Building Trust, Pacifying Power, Connecting Realities

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
AES	Alliance des États du Sahel
CSOs	Civil society organisations
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
EU HRDDP	EU Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Due Diligence Policy
FCAS	Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations
FFP	Feminist Foreign Policy
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
LLD	Locally Led Development
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
PCA	People-Centred Approach
KPAC24	Knowledge Platform Annual Conference 2024
KPSRL	Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law
REPAOC	Réseau des Plates-Formes d'ONG d'Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre
SRoL	Security & Rule of Law
SSR	Security Sector Reform

Executive Summary by the KPSRL Secretariat

The Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (KPSRL) organized its 2024 Annual Conference (KPAC24) in Dakar (19 - 21 November), with a follow up event in The Hague (12 December). Below you can find an executive summary based on the KPSRL Secretariats' analysis of recurring themes throughout the sessions.

Polycrisis: Threats and Opportunities

The KPAC sessions jointly underlined our current times of polycrisis. Many of these crises are related to security and rule of law (SROL): the decline of multilateralism complicates collaboration based on shared rules and addressing shared challenges; climate change functions as a threat multiplier for conflict; authoritarian trends in the Sahel and beyond limit civic space to claim rights etc.

These simultaneous, interconnected crises are increasingly overwhelming traditional governance models and institutional responses - and affecting trust in such systems and solutions. An increasingly multipolar world order and widespread civil unrest should therefore also be seen as opportunities for change. Changes that are most welcome in our sector, which is often criticized for being ineffective and upholding post-colonial structures.

ECOWAS and AES

ECOWAS has faced significant challenges in responding to governance crises among its member states in recent years. This has contributed to the rise the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES). During the conference, participants discussed the need for a profound reflection on the root causes of this crisis, and the necessity for new people centered approaches to regional and international cooperation.

Participants encouraged thinking of ECOWAS and AES as complementary rather than competitive. Long-term AES success will depend on its ability to build inclusive partnerships and embed human rights in sustained dialogue with civil societies. Some KPAC24 participants still consider it a military-only approach. **If people's demands are not at the core of decision-making, the same causes will produce the same effects.** There is a need for the local population (e.g. community leaders, youth, women's associations, civil society) to be involved in designing security policies, to facilitate dialogue around them and co-develop durable solutions.

Redesigning Institutions

Redesigning institutions requires an inward (critical at own positionality and processes) and outward (listening to partners, outreach) perspective. Multilateral institutions generally

struggle with organizing meaningful dialogue with civil society. This requires a culture shift, stemming from a recognition by institutions (such as EU, AU, ECOWAS, governments) that they cannot be effective without CSOs as equal partners. This means **people centered policies require particular skills within institutions on how to create space for and engage in such dialogue and co-creation.**

At the same time, civil societies, INGOs and other key actors must also scrutinize their own dynamics, which are often marked by subtle - yet deep - inequalities. Civil society should constantly question its own legitimacy and whether it is amplifying a diversity of voices.

KPAC24 participants advocated for continuous multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms. Here, different (sometimes competing) institutions, the private sector, CSOs, research institutions and communities can coordinate collective responses to challenges, threats and opportunities.

Harnessing the Potential of People-Centred Justice

Justice institutions need to focus on providing locally relevant, practical solutions that directly address the challenges people face - particularly on how marginalized and vulnerable people gain access to justice. By embracing technology, local leadership, and legal empowerment, justice can become a tool for social transformation, not just punishment.

Pursuing 'people-centred justice' does exactly that: it shifts the starting point from legal institutions and processes to the needs, experiences, and realities of individuals and communities. This on the one hand puts formal procedures in a societal and humane context: an example at KPAC24 was alternatives to overcrowded incarceration (with large societal impact) by fostering social and economic reintegration of detainees.

This shifted starting point also acknowledges the complementary roles of formal and informal justice. Instead of relying solely on formal courts and legal frameworks, this approach also **prioritizes informal solutions if they are more accessible, inclusive and community-driven.**

It stimulates connecting realities among justice stakeholders at various levels to jointly assess evolving justice needs and plan responses. This means investing in innovative learning and evidence.

Re-imagining Peace-building Infrastructures

Traditional peacebuilding efforts have often focused on top-down diplomatic negotiations, military interventions, and short-term stabilization measures. However, reimagining peacebuilding requires a **more inclusive, locally driven, and multidimensional approach** that addresses the root causes of conflict rather than just its symptoms.

KPAC24 participants asserted that the future of peacebuilding lies in fostering equitable global and translocal collaborations, creating new relationships, spaces and infrastructures to challenge established hierarchies. Part of that is ensuring that civic actors who live and work in conflict lead these efforts and have their voices heard in global forums and institutions. **Locally led peace processes built around intergenerational co-leadership are key to ensure sustainability of these efforts.**

Reimagining peacebuilding requires also **harnessing the potential carried by responsible (and transparent) use of technology** to counter hate speech and misinformation, **investing in research (and knowledge sharing) on emerging digital threats and innovative peacebuilding, and promoting gender sensitive and youth inclusive digital peace education.**

Recurring Recommendations

On civil society	When supporting civil society, focus less on ‘projects’ and more on strengthening the organisation (skills, access, structure). Make use of network organisations to bridge gaps between donors and smaller CSOs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support grassroots representation at global level discussions.
	Civil society should remain critical at its own role: CSOs can also exclude voices and its own organizational culture.
On AES	A certain level of pragmatism by donors concerning AES is advised, as it answered a desire for change. However, it remains too top-down and military-heavy. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two important steps to improve this: involving the population in policy design (e.g. community leaders, youth, women’s associations, civil society) and setting up an independent framework for human rights monitoring.
On people-centred approaches	Coalitions of justice actors should set up joint mechanisms to identify justice needs , share data and evidence, jointly monitor and learn.
	Formal and customary justice systems are complementary in people’s daily justice needs. Coordinate their interconnections.
On donors	Donors should match resources with diplomatic efforts (dialogue, supporting civic space)
	Donors should strengthen regional institutions such as ECOWAS, the AU and potentially the AES by supporting interfaces with civil society.
	The implementation of Feminist Foreign Policies need to be contextualized to counter potential backlash related to political and societal norms.
	Given current zero-sum interpretations of security, donors can learn from what resilience means in FCAS : dealing with setbacks, rising above oneself to look for collaboration, being innovative as communities if systems fail you.
	Redefine ‘success’ for SROL support. It is not only about the result of a specific projects, but about how networks and organisations grew more resilient. Moreover, sometimes maintaining status quo is great.
On peacebuilding	Youth has an important role to play in peacebuilding , particularly through intergenerational coalitions. Their socio-economic vulnerability on the other hand can form a risk for extremism.
	Technology and peace or conflict are strongly connected . On the one hand stimulate digital literacy and fighting disinformation, but more positively use digital media promote dialogue or highlight underrepresented narratives.



Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Conference Theme: ‘Building Trust, Pacifying Power and Connecting Realities’

On 19 November 2024 KPAC24 opened at Gorée Island in Dakar, Senegal. The conference gathered 200 participants from all over the region, the Netherlands and beyond under the theme of ‘Building Trust, Pacifying Power and Connecting Realities’.

The aim of this theme was capture the latest trends of quickly changing power structures and a crisis of legitimacy of democracy - changes both present at geopolitical level and regionally in the Sahel. These developments are paired with an environment of increasing distrust and shrinking civic space, but also increasingly disconnected realities, both within and between countries. Building trust, pacifying power and connecting realities are ingredients to counter these trends:

- **Building trust** is needed to be able to work together both at multilateral and at community level. Without it, there is no basis to take risks together to tackle shared

challenges. To put it economically, the ‘transaction costs’ in society are far higher without trust.

- **Connecting realities** can contribute to building trust. It nuances dominant narratives and shows the layered, often even conflicting realities that different people face from their position or context.
- **Pacifying power** is a way to take the edges off the changing power structures. Support for strong leaders is increasing and multilateral institutions’ regulations are no longer a given. Pacifying power means ensuring checks and balances in these new structures and making sure those that govern have the capacities to listen to people and answer their needs.

1.2 Organisation and Program

This conference was the result of a collaboration between KPSRL, the Gorée Institute and Réseau des Plates-Formes d’ONG d’Afrique de l’Ouest et du Centre (REPAOC). KPSRL opened a call for co-hosts in the first half of 2024, after which the three organizations jointly put together the theme, program and conference logistics.

The program consisted of:

- 19 November: After welcoming words and the launch of the African Alliance for Peace and Justice, participants visited each other’s stands at the ‘Marketplace of Ideas’, accompanied by art and music.
- 20 November: The main conference day with many plenary and parallel sessions.
- 21 November: A third day in Dakar solely dedicated to main takeaways of participants and key recommendations resulting from the previous days.
- 12 December: A follow-up event in The Hague, stimulating uptake of the conclusions from Dakar with INGOs and donors in The Netherlands.

By the end of the conference in Dakar, a [public statement](#) was signed by 46 organizations and 61 individuals. Its key messages:

- The world - and the Sahel region in particular - are changing at a rapid speed. This can be uncomfortable and create tensions, but also offers opportunities for different countries and communities to exercise agency and leadership in addressing their needs for peace and security.
- **Peace and security are the business of all, not just the state or elites.** Our efforts at the country and international level should ensure safe pathways to express discontent and to co-create alternative solutions.

1.3 Report Structure and Methodology

This report captures the main points and recommendations per KPAC session. Chapter 2 covers insights from Dakar, chapter 3 covers insights from The Hague. The content of those reports are based on notes taken during KPAC, though shortened to limit the size of this report. It highlights insights and recommendations that were not necessarily object of consensus among all participants. The session leads had the opportunity to check the summaries of their respective sessions.

In chapter 4 and 5, the KPSRL Secretariat has distilled key findings for its network and formulates follow up in 2025.



Chapter 2

The Dakar Hub

2.1 Welcome (day 1)

Gorée Institute, REPAOC, KPSRL, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Speakers: *Doudou Dia (Gorée Institute), Marja Esveld (Department for Stabilization and Humanitarian Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sever Dzigurski (KPSRL).*

Each of the KPAC co-host presented what KPAC24 means for them, and what drove them to invest in co-hosting it.

- Gorée Institute chose to be one of the co-hosts of KPAC24 because it recognised the importance of KPAC24's themes of discussions on trust building, collaborative partnership, pan-African democratic dialogue, and synergies between theory and practice.
- For the Dutch MFA, KPAC24 is an opportunity to contribute to building trust between and within countries across the Sahel and West Africa. It noted this trust cannot simply be expected after centuries of Dutch involvement on the slave trade and colonial

exploitation in the region. KPAC24 is a chance to build connections, generate ideas and create energy around cooperation for governance, security and rule of law systems that work for people, in times when cooperation is under pressure. This means dialogue rather than confrontation: connecting realities in common ground, expanding vision and eliminating blind spots.

- The Dutch MFA had to cut funding for the KPSRL's next phase, but will instead support the KPSRL network's transition towards a self-sustaining future.
- For REPAOC, KPAC24 is a moment to bring together its members from across West African countries, as REPAOC is the organized civil society of West Africa. It sees this as one moment in its broader work to strengthen ties across countries and between people and governments.
- For the KPSRL, KPAC24 is the flagship learning event in the calendar, which takes even more significance as it is the second time that such an event takes place away from the Hague. For the KPSRL, these days are also a launch-pad for its future after the end of funding from the Dutch MFA as the KPSRL, in the end, is about its network.

2.2 Launch of the African Alliance for People Centred Justice Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies

Speakers: *Themba Mahleka (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies), Hon. Alpha Sesay (Ministry of Justice, Sierra Leone), Justice N.M. Mbhele (Free State Division of the High Court, South Africa), Souleymane Aminatou Daouda Hainikoye (HiiL) Abbas Luyombo (Young Justice Leader), Aimee Ongeso (Grassroots Justice Network), Fernando Marani (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies).*

Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies acts as an impact hub, convening countries, civil society, and multilateral and regional organisations to close the justice gap by accelerating action on people-centred justice. Pathfinders provides a platform to exchange innovative practices on data collection, evidence-based policy making, and effective use of resources to bridge silos and transform justice systems in preventing and resolving people's common justice problems.

An initiative of Pathfinders, the [African Alliance for People Centered Justice](#) (AAPCJ) seeks to mainstream the concept of people-centred justice on the continent, supporting local and national actors in implementing justice-focused policies and fostering a unified understanding of its principles. Launched during KPAC24, the AAPCJ was established to contribute to the reduction of the justice gap and foster equal access to justice for all by promoting people-centered justice.

People-centred justice is instrumental to strengthen social contracts and trust between citizens and their governance. Worldwide and continental research projects on people's justice needs have consistently found that the problem of unaddressed needs is widespread and has a negative impact on people's wellbeing. Some of the leading justice problems people face include **problems related to housing, land, and family issues.**

People-centred justice is an approach to address justice needs at scale. It begins with the mapping of people's needs. Then, stakeholders collectively design justice solutions to meet those needs. Coalitions, such as the African Alliance for People-Centered Justice, have a role to play in supporting these interventions. This includes systematically strengthening the data ecosystem on justice needs and experiences, with prevention of the root causes of justice problems in mind.

2.3 Opening Plenary (day 2)

Gorée Institute

Speakers: *Doudou Dia (Gorée Institute), Dr. Bakary Sambe (Timbuktu Institute ACPS), Valence Kouame Kadja (ECOWAS), Binta Sidibé Gascon (Observatoire Kisal).*

Speakers noted a painful paradox: the youth fighting for more democracy in the '80s and '90s in West Africa are now forming juntas. **Parts of the current youth are calling this a democratic turn, tired of façade democracies and fruitless anti-terror initiatives.** Meanwhile, it is impossible to depend on - and trust - China's economic pragmatism, Russia's aggression or the EU's inconsistencies.

However, some **participants pointed out junta's have been tried before in the region, without results.** They call these approaches violence-driven and capital centred, risking a generation traumatized by violence and disappointed in government.

ECOWAS should theoretically play a role in supporting governance, economic growth and security. Think of early warning systems, peace forces and coordinating with the UN. However, **participants criticized ECOWAS heavily for its top-down structure and inability (or unwillingness) to for example stop violence or limit presidential terms.** Some participants noted that ECOWAS also suffered from external blows and unfair expectations; its mandate is limited in comparison to for example the EU. It is more a gathering of heads of state, which do not reach consensus at the moment.

Recommendations

- Open up ECOWAS for civil society, while simultaneously being critical of civil society's legitimacy.
- Stop discussions around labels (democracy, autocracy, dictatorship) and focus on how people's needs are met: work with what you have and improve it.

2.4 Recontextualizing Crime in West-Africa - Impact and Implications for Stability and Development

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

Speakers: *François Patuel (UNODC), Jeannine Ella Abatan (ISS), Momar Dieng (freelance journalist)*

The Sahel as a Strategic Criminal Hub

This session discussed the outcomes of the UNODC's Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment in the Sahel (TOCTA Sahel). The assessment's sub-[reports](#) looked specifically at crime concerning medicine, fuel, human trafficking, narcotics, weapons, and gold. Transnational crime negatively impacts the Sahel region in many ways, threatening peace and stability, human rights, governance and rule of law, and sustainable development.

Since the '90s, the Sahel has increasingly become of strategic value as a hub, source of resources and market. This went hand in hand with **weaponized access to such resources, and in turn, harming access to e.g. medicines or justice.** This illegal economy is further marked by exploitation in the form of forced (child) labor and human trafficking. The criminal networks are fluid and highly innovative. Measures to counter human trafficking have for example led to new trafficking routes, while migrants take more dangerous risks and prices have gone up.

Impact

As this economy thrives on instability and impunity, the gains feed further conflict and hamper peaceful solutions. Money generated from illegal activities is also used to infiltrate the state or influence elections, using its protection and infrastructure. Leaders of criminal

networks are able to challenge traditional power structures. Independent journalism - and therefore checks and balances on power - is also threatened by these groups.

There is an impact on wider development as well. Besides from the limited access to basic services mentioned, illicit trade and money laundering also disturbs market dynamics, while taxes (that in principle translate to public goods and redistribution of wealth) are evaded. For example, Burkina Faso loses 490 million USD a year on gold networks, while its healthcare budget is 435 million USD. From a health care perspective, fake medicine, limited access, and opioid epidemics are a serious problem.

Recommendations

- A regional approach is required to uncover illicit supply chains and networks.
- Action often only occurred after violent attacks took place, whereas the focus should be on prevention by addressing the criminal networks that fund or enable violence.
 - This means seeing criminal networks not as problematic groups or individuals, but as a systemic problem for peace and development.
- De-stigmatize socially accepted and practically necessary illicit trade (for example in fuel), as the need to cover it up strengthens illicit networks.
- Protection of journalists is key: civil society needs their information for action.

2.5 The Digital Space - A Double-Edged Sword for Peace and Trust in West Africa? Addressing (Mis/Dis)information and Building Peace Online Search for Common Ground

Speakers: *Habibou Bako (SfcG), Bilal Tairou (AFCA), Lena Slachmuislder (SfcG), Fatouma Harber (Bamako Forum on Digital Technology and Social Cohesion), Maud Bakirdjian (SfcG)*

Opportunities and Risks of Social Media for Peace

This session discussed digital media's potential for both peace and conflict. From a positive perspective, social media can highlight marginalized voices, e.g., TikTok influencers sharing stories from Timbuktu in accessible and engaging formats. Cross-border collaboration and the integration of traditional communication channels (e.g., radio and word-of-mouth) offer great opportunities for areas with limited internet access.

However, disinformation is rampant - especially during crises - and often driven not only by individuals but also by state actors in West Africa. Artificial Intelligence plays a dual role as both a driver of disinformation (algorithms prioritize polarizing content) and a tool for its detection.

Fact checking (for example by empowering micro-influencers) and training of digital moderators (e.g. WhatsApp group stewards) are useful, but the root causes should be addressed: community resilience, fostering inclusive narratives (initiatives like [TRAFIC](#) and [DONIBLOG](#)), and building trust between groups is key to countering divisive narratives and preventing fertile ground for disinformation.

Recommendations

To transform the digital space from a source of conflict into a platform for trust and peacebuilding in West Africa, the session organizers advised:

- Partnerships and knowledge-sharing among civil society, governments, tech companies, and international organizations for effective digital peacebuilding.
- Force transparency for big tech and align digital norms or algorithms with social cohesion.
- Expand the nascent *AU Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy*.
- Combine research on emerging digital threats and on innovative peacebuilding.

- Design digital peacebuilding initiatives that are gender-sensitive and youth-inclusive, recognizing that these groups often bear the brunt of digital harm.
- Promote media education to help individuals identify disinformation, assess source credibility, and make informed online decisions.

2.6 CSO Perspectives on Implementation Guidelines for the European Union Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (EU HRDDP) PAX

Speakers: Charles Elkins (PAX), Roger Minoungou (PAX).

The EU HRDDP

The European Union Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (EU HRDDP) was approved by the EU's Foreign Ministers in 2024. The policy aims to avoid and reduce potential human rights violations as a result of EU security support to non-EU countries. It mostly impacts the European Peace Facility (EPF) and its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions. The EU HRDDP is highly influenced by a similar UN policy, though the EU-version further develops a focus on gender analysis and the role of civil society.

For most civil society actors in this session, this was the first time they heard about the policy. Even though they welcomed the initiative, they had little faith in the EU's capacity to act on the policy, based on current engagement patterns with civil society (see below).

EU Cooperation with Civil Society

Civil society actors from across several African countries (Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin, Cabo Verde, the Gambia, and Cote d'Ivoire) expressed frustration with the way in which the EU communicates and engages with the public and civil society. This does not show genuine partnership. This matches PAX's experience supporting CSOs from six West African countries. Civil society actors reported frustration about EU funding requirements as well as being treated as just a resource, rather than genuine partners. Representatives from foreign missions also pointed out the myriad of EU (or EU member states') development initiatives without coordination.

(Not) Learning from History?

These concerns about previous EU initiatives were also reflected in the session discussions. While the policy EU HRDDP contains positive messages and promises, participants doubted whether the EU has the capacity to implement the policy. If not, it will simply become another paper reality.

The new CSDP mission in the Gulf of Guinea (Benin, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ghana) shows that the EU seemingly did not learn from the failed G5 CSDP mission (Mauritania, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali), which suffered from a lack of resources, overambition, and overreach. The Gulf of Guinea mission is operating on a small crew, possibly as little as 6 people. Additionally, participants wondered whether this SSR support to the Gulf of Guinea (including lethal weapons that could be used against Benin) is fundamentally different from similar (but pre-EU HRDDP) support to Niger right before the coup - what lessons were implemented?

On a broader level, participants noted that Africa does not seem to be a top priority for the new Commission, exemplified by reducing EU diplomatic missions in line with the Global Gateway policy. The EU can accordingly hardly remain a significant security and rule of law actor in Africa.

Participants saw opportunities for the EU's support to the AU, and especially ECOWAS, in attempts to make them more accessible. These suffer from a lack of credibility among civil society in Africa. Regarding ECOWAS, there is a common perception that the organization is a closed and elitist club, propped up by Western leaders - most notably France.

Recommendations

- It is important for the EU to also engage locally based CSOs in the policy implementation guidelines.
- The EU should match such SSR ambitions with resources for diplomatic cooperation with West Africa and the Sahel.
- If the EU and member states like the Netherlands should play a role in assisting the AU and ECOWAS in becoming more open to listening to civil society.

2.7 The Alliance of Sahel States - A Regional Response to the Failures of the G5 Sahel in Combating Violent Extremism **L'école de Maintien de la Paix**

Speakers: *Mady Ibrahim Kante (École de Maintien de la Paix), Dr. Bakary Sambe (Timbuktu Institute ACPS), Fatoumata Traoré (Centre for International Studies and Cooperation), Binta Sidibé Gascon (Observatoire Kidal).*

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

This session explored the emergence of the AES as a response to the G5 Sahel's failures. It evaluated its prospects for regional stabilization and combating violent extremism.

The G5 Sahel's inability to address security challenges and its dependency on foreign decision-makers paved the way for an alternative in the form of the AES. Its objectives are a unified regional military command, reduced dependency on external forces and socioeconomic initiatives to address the root causes of extremism. It also involves new partners like Russia and China.

Recommendations

- Optimal intelligence sharing, resource allocation and military capacity are necessary to boost effectiveness.
- Regional relationships: Working consistently with African institutions and emerging nations would strengthen the AES' regionally autonomous character. Success also depends on how the AES shapes its relationships with its neighbors and whether it is able to navigate relationships with ECOWAS.
- People-Centred: Although the AES answered a widely shared desire for change, human rights violations are persistent in the central Sahel region and there is a need for **rule of law to protect civilians**. This is seen by some as the result of a military-only approach. There is a need for the **local population** (e.g. community leaders, youth, women's associations, civil society) to be involved in designing these security policies and to facilitate dialogue around them.
- **Combine security strategies with interventions in basic services**, education, health, agriculture and employment would enhance the legitimacy of the AES. This also prevents root causes for violent extremism.
- Implement an independent framework to monitor human rights violations and ensure perpetrators are brought to justice is necessary to address these challenges, including justice reforms for equal access. Training military and law enforcement in the law and engagement with citizens adds to that.

2.8 Restriction of Freedom and Civic Space in West Africa

The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS)

Speakers: Adam Dicko (*Association des Jeunes pour la Citoyenneté Active et la Démocratie*), Komi Abitor (*Entreprises de Production de l'Ouest*), Vincent Azumah (*West Africa Network for Peacebuilding*), Mamadu Queta (*United Nations Peacebuilding Commission in Guinea-Bissau*), Peter van Sluijs (*CSPPS*).

A Vision for an Open Civic Space in West Africa

An open civic space in West Africa is a space where people, communities, women and girls, youth, and marginalized communities are not afraid of expressing themselves to the government, including by expressing concerns about and challenging some of its policies. It requires that governments do not control all institutions and organisations. An open civic space is:

- A space of **solidarity and partnership** among civil society, in its diversity, to showcase the needs and wishes of a diverse population. Collaboration across networks is essential to expand reach and achieve greater influence.
- A space where civil societies and communities can **readily trust each other**.
- A place where social media, the press, and other media communication tools are not misused against civil society and civil society has **access to media**, including social media, to communicate with communities and public.
- A space where activists, organizers, and representatives can hold meetings and implement their activities **without harassment**.
- A space of **collaborative advocacy**, in which civil society translates the needs of the people to the language of government, whilst staying true to its mandate and values.
- A space where civil society supports each other in **denouncing injustices** and guiding funding flows from government and partner countries to those who need them.

People-centred Transnational Governance

Putting people at the centre means giving space for local civil society and communities, in all their diversity, to organize themselves, express themselves and put forward their ideas for the future.

Recommendations

Partner countries and multi-lateral institutions should:

- Restructure funding opportunities to open them up to new, local, diverse civil society organisations.
- Avoid putting up barriers in the form of length of experience/establishment or complex procurement procedures. Give priority to those organisations with the strongest connection to their constituent communities.
- Civil society strengthening policies and programmes should include the following components:
 - Connecting civil society organisations in networks for collective advocacy, learning, and mutual support.
 - Supporting free, independent media, including social media.
 - Legal and security protection of civil society organizers.
 - Support skills for effective policy influencing and lobby and advocacy.

2.9 Feminist Foreign Policy: What role for CSOs

KPSRL

Speakers: Ndèye Laïty (*Collectif JAMA*), Fatou Wasso Tounkara (*Senegal Action Feministe*), Marie-Josée KANDANGA (*UN Women*).

Civil Society in the Promotion and Implementation of Feminist Foreign Policy

This KPAC24 session explored the essential role of civil society—NGOs, grassroots movements, advocacy groups, and feminist networks—in promoting and implementing Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). It also addressed the challenges civil society actors face and identify strategies to amplify their influence in international policy spaces.

Civil society actors have so far played a crucial role in shaping, implementing, and holding governments accountable to feminist foreign policies. In FCAS, many feminist foreign policies rely on partnerships with CSOs to deliver programs on the ground. These organisations often have local knowledge, legitimacy and trust that governments lack, making them key actors in achieving policy goals. CSOs also act as watchdogs, holding governments accountable for their commitments to feminist principles in foreign policy. They monitor progress through independent assessments, policy reviews, and reporting mechanisms.

Challenges for CSOs in Promoting FFP

Nevertheless, CSOs path towards a more equitable FFP's implementation remains fraught with obstacles:

- Who set the agenda for Feminist Foreign Policies? Most of the CSOs highlighted that FFPs tend to be imposed and are quite politicized, protecting essentially global north political agenda.
- Fragmentation and politicisation of CSOs: the division of civil society (in particular women's organization) into smaller, often competing, groups with differing agendas, ideologies, or approaches, has been pointed out as one of the main issue hampering FFP implementation. This often occurs along lines such as sectoral focus, ethnicity, religion, working approach and political orientation. (traditional CSOs versus new emerging feminist movements)
- Lack of resources and backlashes: Civil society actors face challenges such as funding limitations, restrictive governmental policies, and the risks of operating in hostile environments due to cultural and religious backlashes.

Recommendations

- Civil society actors are indispensable to the development and success of feminist foreign policies. Their advocacy, expertise, and grassroots connections ensure that these policies remain rooted in the lived experiences of the most marginalized. **Governments pursuing FFP must prioritize partnerships with civil society to create inclusive, transformative, and sustainable change.**
- Implementing FFP requires an inward and an outward perspective. As much as traditional donor countries in the North need to ensure that foreign policy documents are depoliticized, contextualized and adjustable to the contexts in which they are to be applied.
- Civil society and other key players in donor countries also need to **keep under scrutiny their own organizational culture, ethos and dynamics of implementation;**
- The term “feminist foreign policy” remains controversial, particularly in the South. It is important to **continually question the extent to which its use undermines the realization of its objectives. And if need be, think about ‘alternatives’ or creative ways of to package and implement FFP.**

- The implementation of FFP **needs to be contextualized to counter potential backlash** related to cultural differences, political systems, economic conditions, and societal norms in other and especially fragile countries.
- Bridging the gap between policy institutions and CSOs (in particular emerging feminist movements) is key. This implies:
 - **considering CSOs as a dynamic source of ideas and policy perspectives**, partnerships, and support,
 - **establishing a framework for permanent dialogue** between institutional players on the one hand, and civil society in all its diversity on the other.
 - **offering concrete (financial and institutional) support** in particular to emerging feminist movements.

2.10 Whose Mandate? Local security governance in fragile contexts VNG International

Speakers: *Didier Kanimbu Mulolo (IGTER RDC), General Sébastien Gobula Ebua (Police Nationale Congolaise), Jean de Dieu Selemani Mabiswa (Administrateur territorial d'Uvira RDC), Mahamady Togola (WANEP).*

A Comparative Analysis of the DRC and Mali

How do you stabilize the war-torn eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo? How do you build trust between citizens and local governments? Lessons learned about decentralized security governance in DRC cannot be seen in isolation from recent dynamics of collective conflict management through international peacekeeping missions. After a quarter of century, MONUSCO started its withdrawal from DRC, bearing resemblance to the MINUSMA pull-out in 2023 from Mali. How can the security vacuum best be filled? Who should play the main role? How to support local government to govern security? How do you ensure that citizens' solutions for local security issues are heard and taken into consideration?

Building from the [ESPER program](#) funded by the Dutch MFA in DRC, this session discussed experiences and best practices on local security governance in eastern DRC and reflected on how local governance mechanisms and peacekeeping missions interrelate in practice. The session examined gaps, lessons learned and opportunities for practice in the specific context of UN withdrawal, with comparative analysis of the DRC and Mali experience.

Recommendations

- Ensure that **local authorities are at the heart of security governance and stabilization**. This means on the one hand, providing technical assistance and institutional support to enhance their capacity; and on the other hand, fostering partnerships between local authorities, national security forces, and international agencies to enhance coordination and information sharing and establishing joint task forces or committees to address specific security issues collaboratively.
- A **strong partnership between local authorities, police, and civil society** is essential to ensuring citizens' security, particularly in the context of MONUSCO's withdrawal. To achieve this, it is essential to establish joint mechanisms to track evolving security and justice needs, monitor the effectiveness of local security initiative and regularly assess the impact of policies on community safety, conflict prevention, and stabilization efforts to co-create adaptive strategies.
- Promoting transparency and accountability in local security operations is vital to build trust and legitimacy among the population.

2.11 Voices of Youth: Building trust for peace and security through dialogue, responsible use of technology and intergenerational co-leadership

Interpeace and Initiative Sougourounoma pour l'Education, la Paix et la Santé (ISEPS)

Speakers: *Henri Kabore Sougourounoma (IESPS), Oumarou Diallo (Interpeace Burkina Faso), and Jalia Niyonkuru (Interpeace Burundi).*

During this session, experiences from Burundi and Burkina Faso served as catalysts for more in-depth exchanges on improving youth participation in peace processes.

Burkina Faso: Interreligious Dialogue

Supporting interreligious dialogue in Burkina Faso creates spaces for young people to exchange ideas to overcome mistrust and combat radicalisation and violent extremism. Dialogue combined with capacity-building sessions aims to help young people understand conflicts, promote social cohesion, and foster interreligious harmony. Online, young people are supported to combat misinformation, protect themselves from hate speech, and fact-checking.

Action-research and dialogue are key methods used to engage youth, listen to them, and ensure everyone has a voice. Participants added that in the fight against violent extremism and radicalisation, literacy programs for women and encouraging them to articulate their needs is also crucial, as well as developing income-generating activities.

Funding for youth projects remains a challenge, as are political instability and the prioritization of military approaches over peace initiatives.

Burundi: Youth Participation

To overcome political and ethnic divisions, youth from different political parties are brought together in platforms for social cohesion and development. This enables them to manage electoral processes peacefully and responsibly in a context where elections have previously been marked by violence between youth. Development projects counter the manipulation and exploitation of young people during elections, which often result from their socio-economic vulnerability.

Participants stressed a need to assess whether young people possess the required skills for participating in peacebuilding processes, while others noted a need to redesign strategies developed in academic and intellectual circles to meet the local needs of communities in peacebuilding efforts.

Recommendations

- Increase direct support initiatives for youth (avoiding tokenism) and create networks for experience sharing between youth and elders.
- Work towards the **economic empowerment of youth and women**, as their socio-economic vulnerability makes them vulnerable for (endorsing) extremism.
- Treat youth as actors with agency, rather than beneficiaries.
- Sincerely **strengthen youth capacities in peacebuilding processes and decision-making bodies** - and put their expertise into practice.
- As youth, learn to work in synergy rather than competing with one another.
- Elders should "step aside and think about training the next generation instead of occupying leadership positions eternally."

- Create schools that not only teach democracy but also operate and educate in a democratic manner.

2.12 RESPACE Peace: Reimagining Equitable Spaces and Infrastructures for Sustainable Peace

Conducive Space for Peace

This session aimed at sharing and reflecting on the four RESPACE scenarios about the future of global collaboration (described below) and on their implications.

Four Scenarios

In the **maze scenario**, multilateralism experiences a renaissance. Think of a top-down, bureaucratic reform of the UN: a more participatory institution, but still experiencing power dynamics benefiting powerful states and limiting civil society inclusion.

For this scenario, participants predict more resource-intensive work for CSOs due to heavily procedural processes. It would lack bottom-up perspectives, which would cause problems in terms of representation (e.g. women and youth) and in terms of legitimacy of the reform.

Research should be prioritized to bridge the gaps between grassroots communities and the newly reformed UN system. Connections between the private sector and human rights advocates would be key.

The **bridges scenario** regards a complete shift within global collaboration where much power is bestowed to civil society and social movements, especially through bottom-up citizens assemblies.

In this scenario, participants would develop tools for enhancement of interconnectedness between trans-local civic networks. This would simplify the mobilization of resources and grant more autonomy vis à vis actors such as tech organisations and media. The starting point should be equitable partnerships, also within civil society. Organisations should further solidarity, be accountable to each other and create genuine space of exchange.

The **towers scenario** concerns fragmentation of the world in isolated regional, competing blocs. Intra-regional cooperation within blocs lead to greater unity between those states and networks that belonging to the same blocs.

In this scenario, participants predict a focus on cooperation within regions could mean the end of intersectional partnerships and a further shrinking civic space. However, powerful regional blocs could improve the implementation of the localisation agenda (incl. resource mobilization at local level) and community-based approaches. “If you want to do something for us without us, you will end up doing something against us”.

A **walls scenario** implies heavy militarization and securitization of the world, with a global authoritarian wave. States would act unilaterally.

Participants think the very existence of civil society would be threatened, hence the importance of 1) early actions, to act before the windows for collaboration are fully shut down, and 2) finding ways of working under the radar.

Recommendations

- Address the risks posed by the possible scenarios, specifically those of the Tower and Walls scenarios.
- Encourage inter-regional collaboration within civic space and resist efforts to support heavy militarization and securitization.
- Recognise the importance of inter-organisational trust and accountability to facilitate genuine spaces of exchange.

- Within discussions of reforming multilateral institutions, such as the UN, emphasise the active inclusion of grassroots communities to the global governance level.

2.13 Rebuilding Trust and the Social Contract through People-Centred Policies: Using data to put justice-users at the heart of justice The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law

Speakers: Dr. Thomas Ouédraogo (Centre for Democratic Governance), Maitre Hamadou Mounkaila Kadidiatou (Association pour la Défense et la Protection de l'Enfant et de la Femme au Niger), Maiguizo Kane Mahaman Mansour (Chef de Canton of Tessaoua, Niger), Cedric Tapsoba (HiIL).

Reliable Data for Inclusive Justice

The session, focused on strengthening democracy and rule of law through people-centred justice (PCJ) systems. The discussion explored using data to understand people's justice needs and design effective policies.

There is a need for a paradigm shift towards PCJ, focusing on the justice needs of individuals and communities rather than institutions. Discussions highlighted the importance of understanding the daily realities and challenges in accessing justice, of evaluating the effectiveness of interventions and of tracking progress towards SDG 16.3.

However, questions were raised about the feasibility of implementing PCJ in FCAS, due to a lack of reliable (disaggregated) data to understand the experiences of marginalized groups. This data should support considering the needs of all, particularly women, children, and other marginalized groups. "Data is not just numbers; it's about people's lives." Examples of initiatives promoting women's access to justice are legal aid programs and gender-sensitive training for justice actors.

Traditional Justice Systems

Presentations explored the potential for integrating traditional and formal justice systems to enhance access to justice for all, given that traditional systems are key in providing access to justice at the community level. Successful integration can counter concerns of human rights compliance within traditional systems and ensure alignment with national legal frameworks.

Civil Society Engagement

Civil society plays a role in promoting PCJ and advocating for justice reforms (e.g. legal awareness campaigns, community-based paralegal programs, advocacy for policy change). Discussions explored the challenges faced by civil society organizations in fragile contexts and the need for greater support and collaboration.

Recommendations

- Conduct further **research to understand the justice needs** of people (particularly in FCAS), the effectiveness of different justice interventions to inform policy-making and the role of traditional justice systems in promoting peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion.
- **Integrate traditional justice systems with formal systems** to enhance access to justice at the community level.
- Ensure that justice policies are inclusive and address the specific needs of marginalized groups, such as women, children, and people with disabilities
- **Promote the use of technology and innovation to improve access to justice**, such as mobile courts and online dispute resolution platforms.
- Strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to advocate for justice reforms and provide legal assistance to communities.
- Encourage collaboration between justice sector institutions, civil society organizations, and traditional leaders to promote people-centered justice.

2.14 Implications for Practice (day 3)

KPSRL

On the third day of the conference, participants distilled main programming and policy recommendations emerging from conference insights. Below is a summary of the discussions.

How to put people at the centre of governance:

Strengthen ECOWAS as a regional body and restore trust: ECOWAS must shift from a **state-centric, elite-driven organization** to a **people-centered, decentralized, and accountable institution** that directly speaks to and addresses the needs of citizens. A reformed ECOWAS must become **more democratic, decentralized, security-effective, and economically integrated** to regain credibility and legitimacy. Institutionalization of direct citizen participation is crucial in regional decision-making bodies. ECOWAS's government should invest in citizen's assemblies, digital consultation platforms, quotas systems and enhanced advisory roles for specific groups such as CSOs, youth and grassroots movements.

Foster diplomatic dialogue: Donor's governments and international organizations should institutionalize structured, continuous, and inclusive diplomatic dialogues that bridge geopolitical divides befitting the current multipolar landscape. This is done by engaging not only state actors but also civil society, regional organizations, and diverse stakeholders. If done with the right amount of expectation management, this will foster trust, address underlying tensions, and create sustainable pathways for cooperation.

Develop mechanisms to identify people's needs and aspirations, thereby also **identifying approaches to expand access of social actors to decision and policy making.** This access could require support for local and decentralized (informal) governance, and the inclusion of civil society. 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.

How to reimagine the future of peacebuilding:

Prioritize flexible funding models that allow programs to adjust to changing needs and priorities. Donors should ensure that partnerships are *long term, adaptable and locally driven* through multi-year funding agreements instead of short-term, project-based grants.

In parallel, programming actors at different levels need to work on strengthening local ownership and **community led design and implementation** through promotion of local expertise, direct donor funding to grassroots organizations and community-driven needs assessments to ensure funding aligns with real, on-the-ground challenges.

Mainstream "peace" by engaging religious actors and traditional chiefs. Religious leaders and traditional chiefs hold significant influence within their communities, making them pivotal partners in promoting peace and social cohesion. To effectively maintain peace initiatives through these actors and institutions, Governmental authorities should interfaith and intercultural dialogue platforms where religious leaders and traditional chiefs from diverse backgrounds can engage in open and inclusive dialogues with communities (here, specific engagement modalities to ensure women's rights remain central to the debate are key). These platforms can serve as safe space to discuss common challenges, share best practices, and develop unified peace-building strategies. **National governments should work to develop metrics and feedback mechanisms to evaluate outcomes of such platforms,** gather community input, and adjust strategies as needed.

Promote inter-generational co-leadership: Governments should encourage (and work towards) shared decision-making and power sharing by establishing intergenerational councils and platforms where elders and youth work together. Promote **mentorship programs** where

experienced leaders guide and support emerging youth peacebuilders and encourage youth representation in local and national peace processes. Beyond ‘ad hoc’ initiatives, it is crucial to push for national policies that **institutionalize intergenerational co-leadership in governance and peacebuilding**. Such an institutionalization should be accompanied by measures aiming to strengthen community-based peace initiatives that **integrate traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms** (though adaptable to contemporary challenges).

Leverage data and technology for peacebuilding: Governments, civil society, and international organizations should **harness data, evidence and digital tools** to improve decision-making and community engagement in peacebuilding efforts.

Beyond formal data, harnessing evidence must include less conventional data rooted in lived experiences and should encompass both formal and informal actors. Leveraging technology means expanding digital platforms for community dialogue through responsible use of social media, mobile apps, and digital forums to promote dialogue, enhance digital literacy and combat misinformation. Partnering with social media platforms to flag and remove harmful content, training youth and civil society groups on fact-checking and responsible digital engagement and investing in AI-driven tools that provide real-time fact-checking services are some of the ways carrying potential.

How to effectively meet justice needs:

Connect realities among justice stakeholders at various levels: Governments should foster dialogue between formal and informal justice actors in regions affected by conflicts. Structured mechanisms to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between formal justice institutions (such as courts, police, and legal authorities) and informal justice actors (like community leaders, traditional elders, and local mediators) should be established. This collaborative approach will enable them to collectively assess the dynamic justice needs of the community and co-design responsive strategies.

Reflect on and pilot alternatives to formal judicial procedures and incarceration: Legal frameworks must evolve to address **contemporary social dynamics, human rights standards and technological advancements**. Policymakers should adopt **reforms prioritizing restorative justice, decriminalization of minor offenses, and alternatives to incarceration**, socio-economic integration to ensure a fairer and more efficient legal systems. To achieve meaningful social justice, reform of policies and laws is necessary to ensure **fair access, protection, and opportunities for all**, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, or nationality.

Engage with data: Expanding access to justice for **women, youth, children, and rural populations** requires a combination of learning and community driven **legal reforms**. Policymakers and justice actors should engage with data and invest in evidence-based learning, to ensure that legal systems are **affordable, accessible, culturally sensitive, and tailored to the specific needs of marginalized groups**.

2.15 Side Event: Strengthening diverse pathways to people-centred justice in West Africa and the Sahel - Regional policy dialogue.
International Development Law Organisation (IDLO), Cordaid, UNDP, UN Women, and Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies

Speakers: Catherine Phuong (UNDP Senegal), Maiguizo Kane Mahaman Mansour (Chief of Tessaoua, Niger), Ibrahima Amadou Niang (UNDP Senegal - moderator), Ibrahima Amadou Maiga (RENEDEP), Patrick Ndikumana (IDLO), Fanta Sow (Women), Youssouph Diedhiou (IUCN).

IDLO, Cordaid, UNDP, UN Women, and Pathfinders convened the regional policy dialogue on customary and informal justice (CIJ), to launch the French-language translation of the report *Diverse pathways to people-centred justice* (published in English in Sep. 2023). The report, co-produced and endorsed by 20 international and national justice stakeholders from the global Working Group on Customary and Informal Justice (CIJ) and SDG16+, is a landmark study of the centrality of CIJ systems to achieving access to justice for all in line with SDG 16 target 3.¹

In West Africa and the Sahel, CIJ systems are predominant and of increasing interest to bilateral and multilateral donors constrained by barriers to engagement with formal justice actors in politically estranged contexts. Speakers at the dialogue, including senior representatives of the multilateral system, civil society, and a CIJ practitioner, highlighted key recommendations in the report as they pertain to the context in West Africa and the Sahel, and made the case for the centrality of CIJ systems in achieving justice for all in line with SDG16.

Recommendations

Countries in the region and multilateral institutions should:

- Ensure that financing supports the legal empowerment of justice seekers, irrespective of whether they are accessing justice through formal or informal pathways, and protects civic space for grassroots justice defenders, especially women’s and environmental human rights defenders
- Enhance interface and coherence between formal and informal systems, using models such as the successful “Cadres de concertation” adopted in Burkina Faso that foster contact and coordination at the local level
- Boost respect for women’s rights and accountability to women justice seekers in CIJ systems, including by strengthening the participation and leadership of women as justice providers in those systems
- Recognize the essential conflict preventive role of customary and informal actors, which can contribute to mitigating local level disputes (including over and land and natural resource management) that give rise to violence, and enhancing social cohesion in ways that contribute to sustaining peace

¹ Which can be accessed [here](#).



Chapter 3

The Hague Hub

3.1 Opening Plenary - Human Security in A Fragmenting World Order

KPSRL

Speakers: Haroon Sheikh (WRR), Rolien Sasse (PAX), Ingeborg Denissen (NL MFA), Djiby Sow (ISS), Marja Esveld (NL MFA).

The Report

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) [report](#), *The Netherlands in a Fragmenting World Order*, describes many challenges from a Dutch perspective, that were discussed in Dakar from a Sahelian perspective. In short, the WRR report describes amongst others how the time of ‘freeriding’ on a favorable geopolitical wind is over for The Netherlands. This provokes trade-offs between its values, resilience and prosperity. **We see the loss of the ‘master narrative’ of free trade and democracy, towards many different ones** including authoritarianism, traditionalism and anti-Western sentiments.

In that fragmented landscape, the EU will not be able to lean on the USA as before. Moreover, **decades of globalized interconnections are now being used in geopolitical competition,**

leading to ‘weaponization’ of business, migration etc. The fact that competition plays out beyond military means, also means it reaches citizens more directly.

Reframing Security

Although this master narrative has declined we should not go along in the frame that rule of law is ‘Western’: **a need for agency is shared by people worldwide**. The West played into this frame by acting like it ‘brings’ democracy and freedom. Instead of imposing values, it is more effective to discuss these behind closed doors. It is worthwhile to note that most African countries and people are still closer to the EU than China or Russia: the relationships are far more comprehensive, ranging from trade to diaspora connections to development cooperation.

In the Sahel, we see mostly illegitimate leaders using legitimate concerns. Rule of law should be seen as a crucial element for long-term security: fair dispute resolution builds resilience, together with social cohesion. On an international level, ‘might makes right’ would also not work in favor of a small country like The Netherlands.

Instead, politics is **stuck in a narrative on security marked by rearmament**, seeing deterrence as prevention. **Resilience is also about a society being able to absorb shocks**, to not be easily divided and to democratically overcome challenges. The audience noted current thinking is the product of generations in Europe living through the Cold War, where this seemed the winning strategy. In hectic day-to-day policy making, especially during crises, there is little time to **reflect on such mental models that shape current security solutions**. Meanwhile, **building arms while cutting civic space is a risky combination**, even more so in times of hybrid threats.

The Netherlands could learn from many Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings in terms of resilience. Dealing with power cuts or organizing oneself without pointing passively to the government is the norm in many of the context the KPSRL network works.

Recommendations

- Don’t simply accept as donors that “human rights are a Western concept”. However, instead of thinking of yourselves as ‘bringing’ values, look for shared values behind closed doors.
- Make space between hectic day-to-day work to reflect on our interpretations of security and resilience, and how they can be reframed in a non-zero-sum way.
- Especially in times of hybrid threats, it is important to complement investments in defence with investments in a vibrant civil society.
- In terms of resilience, donor countries should learn from FCAS’ experiences with dealing with power cuts or organizing oneself without government interventions.

3.2 World Café Tables

A New Narrative on International SROl for Dutch Politics

Hiil

The Security & Rule of Law sector has a PR problem. The vast majority of the people care for democracy and value security. However, the sector is perceived as too complex and distant from the realities of peoples’ every justice problems, with no clear results. This is contributing to a decrease in support from donors and justice providers.

Partially, there is a need for stronger and clearer communications: finding concrete ‘win-win’ examples, removing jargon (legitimacy → representation), creating a clear link with emerging priorities such as security, economic progress and trade, and avoiding legal language. The ‘anti-voice’ is strong, simple, and relatable to the realities of people’s everyday lives, so ‘people

centered justice' should also be simplified. AI can be a practical tool to help in 'translating' texts for social media or to find speaking metaphors.

Mentioned examples:

- "We support fast and fair solutions to disputes, before they grow into conflict."
- "There is no stability without justice. Under the surface, the fire will grow and suppressed feelings of injustice will explode in an uncontrollable way."
- "Without a proper business climate, tomorrow's iPhone will cost you 2000 EUR. The risk of doing business would be huge and access to materials is difficult."

Besides from changing language, it is also important to redefine success:

- In countries with momentum, you can achieve concrete results at scale (x amount of people with improved access to justice, x amount of cases etc.).
- In very fragile settings, upholding the status quo and coordinating with local partners that fight for justice is a big achievement - don't expect high level changes, but also don't start huge development programs.

The Future of the KPSRL Network **KPSRL**

This table discussed potential pathways to harness the gains (knowledge products, network) of KPSRL after its funding cycle in July 2025.

- KPSRL's added value to preserve:
 - (1) its diverse network of policy makers, grassroots, INGOs, researchers and more, from both the Global North and South. In this multipolar world, such networks with different world views represented are crucial. Engaging the business sector would add to that.
 - (2) its unique space for open and candid discussions between those actors, where these different realities meet beyond talking points. Such spaces for peer learning are increasingly rare in times of shrinking civic space.
 - (3) its combination of justice, democracy and security themes. Especially given the securitization of current policy. It's important however to align with similar initiatives (ALNAP, Geneva Peace Week, SIPRI etc.).
- To add more value in the future:
 - Continue investing in policy spaces beyond The Netherlands (EU, UN, Germany etc.) and decentralization to move (partially) closer to realities in FCAS.
 - Focus on online exchanges (with attention to language diversity), with only 2 or 3 in-person meetings a year.
 - Set up thematic/regional groups to continue the conversation.
- Routes for continuation of funding could be:
 - Estimate minimum and maximum costs. Subsequently engage donors in the network.
 - A big organization in the network volunteering to (co-)chair and covering basic costs.
 - Ask for membership fees, potentially differentiating between smaller and bigger organizations.
 - Offer concrete services for fees: (1) programmatic and organizational learning, (2) network growth and management, (3) organization of multi-stakeholder international conferences, (4) cross-sector engagement (e.g. CSO engagement in International IDEA processes), or (5) advocacy on behalf of members.

Insights from KPAC24 Dakar and Dutch SRoL Policy in the Sahel
The Gorée Institute and Institute for Security Studies (ISS)

This table had a dual objective. It first discussed the contribution of the Netherlands to development efforts in the Sahel region in light of the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy report “The Netherland in a Fragmenting World Order”. In that regard, participants recommended focusing on human security and fine-tuning interventions to achieve Dutch foreign policy goals by:

- Promoting an **honest and a more equal partnership with countries** of the region by understanding the interests of the authorities better and building trust behind closed doors.
- **Keeping a presence in-country** in support of civil society and creating safe spaces for CSOs and media organisation to do their work and speak. Special efforts should be made towards developing networks of CSOs and think tanks for the benefit of local constituents.
- Developing a better understanding of the root causes of conflict in order to support locally led efforts more efficiently.
- Supporting ECOWAS reform, including CSO access to the regional body.
- Strengthening Europe’s engagement in the region as a distinct geopolitical player by actively supporting team Europe and its Sahel strategy.

Feminist Foreign Policy
Cordaid and Care

This table discussed how to break the gender bubble and integrate feminist foreign policy and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda into SROL practice (and policy) in times of shrinking civic space. In fact, despite their potential, the implementation of these policy instruments remains problematic, due to several challenges:

- **Siloed implementation (and partnerships) based on constructed divisions** of the WPS agenda in both global north and south (gender is more appropriate to some ‘soft’ or social related spheres, more relevant for some specific stakeholders and not others, hence the term ‘gender bubble’)
- As authoritarian trends rise, **civil society groups working on WPS and Gender are increasingly being silenced**, weakening efforts to promote gender equality, inclusive security, and sustainable peace. Governments in various regions have imposed restrictive laws, increased surveillance, and criminalized advocacy efforts, limiting women’s participation in peace and security processes. Women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, and feminist organizations face threats, harassment, and even violence for their work in conflict resolution, human rights, and governance.
- **SROL Funding cuts are affecting WPS initiatives and feminist organizations** and have severely weakened efforts to promote gender-inclusive peacebuilding and security governance. Reductions in financial support, whether due to shifting donor priorities, economic crises, or political backlash, have led to program closures, staff reductions, and limited outreach, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

The WPS agenda and the FFP framework have potential to advance gender equality within multiple types of HDP nexus processes and form part of wider peacebuilding efforts. Harnessing this potential requires however, a broader interpretation of WPS and FFP, and a recognition of their relevance across a broad range of thematic areas. This means:

- **Breaking down thematic and sectoral silos** in international programming to integrate strategic synergies and mutually reinforcing components.

- **Establishing regular consultations with CSOs** (at different levels) to gather insights and conduct context-specific gender analyses, facilitating a deeper understanding of evolving needs.
- **Recognising and supporting (in particular) women-led initiatives through engagement with local actors and communities.** Even in politically estranged contexts, there are opportunities to continue channelling funds through informal (feminist) networks and various innovative (also online options) ways to keep supporting capacity strengthening and skill development. But also, for example, by strategically looking into opportunities to work with men and boys who are allies.
- Continually **questioning the extent to which the use of terms such as FFP or some of the WPS approaches undermine the realization of their objectives in some culturally sensitive contexts.** And if need be, think about 'alternatives or creative ways of packaging and implementing them.
- Adopt a **feminist reflex in all areas of governance and foreign policy,** ensuring that gender equality, women's participation, and intersectional approaches are embedded in all decision-making processes.



Chapter 4

Conclusions

Below you can find an overarching summary based on the KPSRL Secretariats' analysis of recurring themes throughout the sessions.

4.1 Polycrisis: Threats and Opportunities

The Secretariat observed that the KPAC sessions jointly underlined our current times of polycrisis: a complex combination of interconnected crises that amplify each other. Decades of globalization and digitalization have connected the world like never before - **interconnections that are now regularly politicized in a multipolar landscape with the logic of zero-sum competition.**

Many of these crises are related to security and rule of law: the decline of multilateralism complicates collaboration based on shared rules and addressing shared challenges; climate change functions as a threat multiplier for conflict; authoritarian trends in the Sahel and beyond limit civic space to claim rights; the militarization of Europe brings back a Cold War mindset of what peace and resilience means - the list goes on. The sessions discussed what these trends mean for our work on justice, peace and security.

These simultaneous, interconnected crises are increasingly overwhelming traditional governance models and institutional responses - and affecting trust in such systems and solutions. The need for systemic change has never been greater. Many KPAC sessions emphasized that an increasingly multipolar world order and widespread civil unrest should therefore also be seen as opportunities for change. Changes that are most welcome in our sector, which is often criticized for being ineffective and upholding post-colonial structures. This situation calls for the creation of new spaces, partnerships and infrastructures to challenge established hierarchies, and promoting new relationships anchored in lived experiences and local ownership.

4.2 ECOWAS and AES

In the face of multilateralism's crisis, a profound institutional overhaul is needed.

ECOWAS has faced significant challenges in responding to governance crises among its member states in recent years. Perceived double standards in addressing military coups have eroded the organization's credibility. This has contributed to the rise of a new regional bloc, the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES). As authoritarianism spreads and violent extremism intensifies, regional political and security cooperation has become increasingly fragmented, further weakening collective stability efforts. During the conference, participants discussed the need for a profound reflection on the root causes of this crisis, and the necessity for new people centered approaches to regional and international cooperation.

Participants encouraged thinking of ECOWAS and AES as complementary rather than competitive, taking a focus on people's needs and fostering dialogue as a starting point, instead of thinking in systems first. The AES (as other regional blocks) holds potential, but its long-term success will depend on its ability to build inclusive partnerships and embed human rights in sustained dialogue with civil societies. KPAC24 participants affirmed that there is much to lose for the populations with an "either-or" approach to such institutions, aiming to move away from other regional partnerships. **If people's demands are not at the core of decision-making, the same causes will produce the same effects.** A people-centred approach prioritizing dialogue and recognizing both challenges and opportunities for these partnerships should be the way forward.

From a security perspective, it is crucial for governments to adopt a **regionally unified approach to the planning and execution of security operations**. This includes optimal sharing of intelligence, resources and military capabilities. For the international community, it is critical to promote self-reliant security and development strategies, while fostering mutually beneficial strategic partnerships with non-traditional allies, such as emerging countries or African institutions.

From a human rights and participation perspective, new blocks such the AES remain seen by some KPAC24 participants as the result of a military-only approach. **There is a need for the local population (e.g. community leaders, youth, women's associations, civil society) to be involved in designing security policies**, to facilitate dialogue around them and co-develop durable solutions. Conference participants also reaffirmed the importance of adopting and integrating multi-sectoral approaches (including access to basic services in terms of health, education and employment) to ensure legitimacy and sustainability of stabilization efforts.

4.3 Redesigning Spaces to Foster Dialogue and for Genuine Partnerships

Institutions and organizations engaged in social and political change in tough and complex environments need to adopt an 'inward-outward perspective' and embrace dialogue with communities and governments.

Despite the rhetoric, the way both intergovernmental and multilateral institutions are designed and operate does not truly lend itself for meaningful dialogue with key civil society players at different levels. It is crucial to translate existing political commitments into real political will - including a cultural change in attitudes - for real engagement with CSOs. This culture shift must stem from a recognition by the Institutions (such as EU, AU, ECOWAS, governments) at all levels and across all services, that they cannot be effective without civil society actors as fully-fledged partners

While expressing frustration on how institutions such as the European Union communicate and engage with the public and civil society (an engagement which in their view doesn't reflect genuine, equal partnership), KPAC24 participants emphasized the importance of a sustained multi-stakeholder dialogue. Building from specific policies (such as European Union Human Rights Due Diligence Policy), participants discussed concrete cases and the potential to co-create meaningful narratives with shared direction together with such institutions. This could help to maintain functioning interfaces between different, sometimes competing institutions, sectors, and community categories, and coordinate collective responses to challenges, threats and opportunities.

Rebuilding trust and reconnecting realities requires engaging with a wide spectrum of stakeholders from communities, the private sector, civil society organizations, research institutions, governments and non-governmental organizations. For institutions, this means to **(un)learn how to engage in such dialogue, create room for maneuver, and establish spaces for consultation and co-creation**. People-centred policies demand improved skills and means for such engagement from institutions.

Redesigning institutions also means adopting an inward (critical at own positionality and processes) and outward (listening to partners, outreach) perspective as to their agenda setting and implementation roadmap. KPAC24 participants emphasized the need for countries and institutions to ensure the 'depoliticization' (not influenced or controlled political agendas), contextualization, and adaptability of their foreign policies to the context in which they will be applied.

At the same time, civil societies and other key actors in donor countries must also scrutinize their own dynamics and operations. Dynamics which most often remain tainted by subtle (yet deep) inequalities. Between different parts of civil societies. This should be about amplifying the voice(s) of the entire civil society, in all its diversity, and the voice(s) of the people.

4.4 Harnessing the Potential of People-centred Justice

Justice institutions need to focus on providing locally relevant, practical solutions that directly address the challenges people face in accessing justice, particularly marginalized and vulnerable populations.

People-centred justice shifts the starting point from legal institutions and processes to the needs, experiences, and realities of individuals and communities. Instead of relying solely on formal courts and legal frameworks, this approach **prioritizes accessible, inclusive, and community-driven solutions** that ensure justice works for everyone, especially marginalized groups.

KPAC24 participants reiterated that harnessing people-centred justice means **moving beyond rigid legal systems to flexible, community-driven solutions** that truly serve people's needs. By embracing **technology, local leadership, and legal empowerment**, justice can become a tool for social transformation, not just punishment.

From a practical point of view, this implies combining different approaches (at different levels) including:

- Connecting realities among justice stakeholders at various levels: fostering dialogue between formal and informal justice actors in regions affected by conflicts, enabling them to jointly assess evolving justice needs and plan effective responses (e.g. **consultations frameworks**);
- Reflecting on and testing alternatives to formal judicial procedures and incarceration and fostering social and economic reintegration of detainees as part of sustainable rehabilitation processes;
- Investing in innovative learning and engaging with evidence on evolving contextual justice needs. This evidence, sometimes less conventional (individuals' specific journeys in their quest for justice, stories of change...) and rooted in lived experiences, should encompass both formal and informal actors.

4.5 Re-imagining Peace-building Infrastructures

Traditional peacebuilding efforts have often focused on top-down diplomatic negotiations, military interventions, and short-term stabilization measures. However, reimagining peacebuilding requires a **more inclusive, locally driven, and multidimensional approach** that addresses the root causes of conflict rather than just its symptoms.

KPAC24 participants asserted that the future of peacebuilding lies in fostering equitable global and translocal collaborations, creating new spaces and infrastructures to challenge established hierarchies, and promoting new relationships. It is essential to avoid repeating past mistakes or merely making minor adjustments and instead focus on systemic changes for a more just and peaceful world.

This requires collaboration among diverse actors at various levels, ensuring that civic actors who live and work in conflict contexts lead these efforts and have their voices heard in global forums and institutions, which are often dominated by elites from Western countries or government actors. **Locally led peace processes built around intergenerational co-leadership are key to ensure sustainability of these efforts.**

Reimagining peacebuilding requires also **harnessing the potential carried by responsible (and transparent) use of technology** to counter hate speech and misinformation, **investing in research (and knowledge sharing) on emerging digital threats and innovative peacebuilding**, and **promoting gender sensitive and youth inclusive digital peace education**.

4.6 Recurring Recommendations

On civil society	Stimulate multilateral institutions to engage with civil society (AES, ECOWAS, EU, AU). They are key in a regional approach to security and justice.
	When supporting civil society, focus less on ‘projects’ and more on strengthening the organisation (skills, access, structure). Make use of network organisations to bridge gaps between donors and smaller CSOs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support grassroots representation at global level discussions.
	Civil society should remain critical at its own role: CSOs can also exclude voices and its own organizational culture.
On the AES	A certain level of pragmatism by donors concerning AES is advised, as it answered a desire for change. However, it remains too top-down and military-heavy. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two important steps to improve this: involving the population in policy design (e.g. community leaders, youth, women’s associations, civil society) and setting up an independent framework for human rights monitoring.
	Regional security in the Sahel and West Africa requires optimal intelligence sharing, resource allocation and aligned military capacity.
On people-centred approaches	Coalitions of justice actors support scaling people-centred justice by setting up joint mechanisms to identify justice needs , share data and evidence, jointly monitor and learn. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Look for cross-sectoral partnerships, including the private (tech) sector and knowledge institutions.
	Formal and customary justice systems are complementary in people’s daily justice needs. Coordinate their interconnections.
On donors	There is a discrepancy between donor’s aid and diplomacy in the Sahel and West Africa. Without matching resources with diplomatic efforts (dialogue, supporting civic space), there is little scope for scaling progress.
	Donors should strengthen regional institutions such as ECOWAS, the AU and potentially the AES by supporting interfaces with civil society.
	The implementation of Feminist Foreign Policies need to be contextualized to counter potential backlash related to political and societal norms.
	Given current zero-sum interpretations of security reminiscing of Cold War logic, donor countries can learn a lot from what resilience means in FCAS : dealing with setbacks, rising above oneself to look for collaboration, being innovative as communities if systems fail you.
	Redefine ‘success’ for SROL support. It is not only about the result of a specific projects, but about how networks and organisations grew more resilient. Moreover, sometimes maintaining status quo is great.
On peacebuilding	Youth has an important role to play in peacebuilding , particularly through intergenerational coalitions and by harnessing the potential of digital media. Their socio-economic vulnerability on the other hand can form a risk for extremism. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Similarly, the role of religious actors and chiefs should not be overlooked during peacebuilding processes.

	<p>Technology and peace or conflict are strongly connected. On the one hand stimulate digital literacy and fighting disinformation, but more positively use digital media promote dialogue or highlight underrepresented narratives.</p>
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Chapter 5

Next Steps

The KPSRL Secretariat encourages participants to share this report and their most important take aways with their network. It will include KPAC takeaways in some of its own knowledge products, to be published in the first half of 2025. These pieces are written in the light of the upcoming closure of the KPSRL Secretariat due to the ending of its funding on June 30th 2025.² The focus of the Secretariat is therefore the uptake of past research and events (including KPAC), plus handing over ongoing trajectories and initiatives.³

KPSRL encourages KPAC participants to [contribute to the 'Transition Group'](#), a network-led and independent initiative that is dedicated to trying to explore possibilities for the future of the network developed under the KPSRL beyond June 2025.

² See full announcement [here](#).

³ Examples are four 'distilling pieces', of which the upcoming ones are on Learning About Learning (e.g. the network's findings over the years on adaptive management or knowledge management) and Roots of Disagreement (think of countering polarization and reimagining social contracts). The ones on [Locally Led Development](#) and [People-Centred Approaches](#) are already out.



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