ROOTS OF DISAGREEMENT

KPSRL Distilling Series 2021-2024

Stefan Noël Hageman

Contents

Abbreviations Used

CEDAW	Commission for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
EU	European Union
FCAS	Fragile and Conflict Affected States
FFP	Feminist Foreign Policy
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KMF	Knowledge Management Fund
KPSRL	Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluating and Learning (instruments)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SRoL	Security and Rule of Law
ToC	Theory of Change

Executive Summary

This paper explores the roots of disagreement and polarisation in international development, aid and the Security and Rule of Law (SRoL) sector. Drawing on KPSRL and KMF outputs from 2021–2024, it examines three contentious debates: feminist foreign policy (FFP), liberal democracy and authoritarianism, and globalism and sovereigntism/isolationism. The paper seeks to identify the deeper assumptions and worldviews underlying these divisions and to highlight pathways for more constructive dialogue and inclusive policy.

1. Feminist Foreign Policy:

FFP advocates for gender equity and intersectional inclusion in international cooperation. It challenges dominant, patriarchal models by promoting local leadership and diverse knowledge systems. However, it is often criticised for imposing Western values, overlooking local cultural contexts, and privileging formal over informal knowledge. Common ground is found in the recognition of local ownership and the need to integrate feminist principles with cultural nuance, avoiding epistemic injustice.

2. Liberal Democracy and Authoritarianism:

Western-led development efforts typically favour liberal democratic models, seen as pathways to inclusive governance and resilience. However, these models are often built on assumptions that may not align with local realities or histories, and they risk marginalising traditional or informal governance structures. Critics argue for more grounded, hybrid approaches that reflect local legitimacy. The emerging consensus is that democratic aims must be reconciled with culturally embedded practices, moving away from one-size-fits-all models.

3. Globalism and Sovereigntism/Isolationism:

Development aid is increasingly contested. Sovereigntist and post-colonial critiques highlight dependency, inefficiencies and neo-imperialist undertones. At the same time, isolationist sentiments question the justification of aid in times of domestic strain. Despite this, there is agreement on the importance of partnerships based on transparency, mutual benefit and local agency. Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) tools are essential to ensure aid remains responsive and contextually appropriate.

These debates reveal competing ideologies that shape the development and SRoL landscape. However, shared priorities such as security, stability and inclusion suggest space for bridging divides. A recurring recommendation across the debates is the centrality of localisation: acknowledging and supporting local knowledge, leadership and legitimacy. This allows for

more sustainable, equitable and context-sensitive interventions, challenging the dominance of Western assumptions and contributing to a more inclusive understanding of governance and cooperation. Recommendations include:

- Localisation: embedding programmes in local knowledge and institutions, basing development cooperation in local legitimacy structures;
- Collaboration: focussing on the collaborative nature of equal partnerships instead of the hierarchical structures implied in aid;
- Accountability: providing structural scrutiny and feedback through transparent MEL tools;
- Listening: actively listening to the needs, comments and grievances of both the partner communities and the donor countries. It is essential to look beyond biases and finding locally based solutions.

Introduction

About Distilling — Roots of Disagreement

The development sector and the Security and Rule of Law (SRoL) community are going through turbulent times. With polarised debates on international responsibilities, value-based approaches and normative biases, there is a stark need for unifying, overarching frameworks to connect seemingly separate sides and work towards a more sustainable future. Through debates surrounding the ideas of (or concepts of) feminist foreign policy, liberalism, and globalism, this distilling paper seeks to find points of overlap and connecting approaches to opposing sides of politically and socially relevant debates. Borrowing from works from the last iteration of the Knowledge Platform and Knowledge Management Fund, this paper provides an oversight of the knowledge and experiences accumulated across KPSRL's international network. It looks back at contributions of the network to KPSRL products (events, research, podcasts, et cetera) between 2021 and 2024 on the above-mentioned themes. It does not seek to give a comprehensive historic and academic overview of the debates, and is not meant to advocate for one approach over another. However, we do briefly touch upon the most recent state of this debate for our field, including some key dilemmas and definitions, and concluding, where possible, with bridging arguments that help uncover common ground.

This distilling should clarify the overarching narratives and recurring recommendations over the years, and uncover common ground between parties to these polarised debates. This should facilitate further uptake with policy makers, researchers and practitioners within the KPSRL network.

The core debates this paper touches upon are the debates around FFP versus more traditional or patriarchal approaches, the debate between proponents of liberal democratic governance promotion and those who would consider more authoritarian forms of governance, and the debate on national sovereignty or isolationism versus globalism or the international responsibility to provide development aid. All debates are multifaceted and include multiple subdebates, with arguments coming from, among others, post-colonial, right-wing political or security primacy actors. Where possible, we have tried to acknowledge our own biases to better understand where we as a platform stand, and how we can best adapt our stance to new geopolitical realities. Lastly, an important notice is that the views reflected in the debates primarily are based on publications in the context of the Knowledge Management Fund (KMF) and the KPSRL, and can therefore at times seem biased or one-sided. In an effort to break with our own biases we have, at times, taken the step to include non-KMF sources. These are listed separately in the bibliography.

In writing this work, we have taken three objectives into account. These three objectives have led us through the research and writing processes, aiming to mitigate our own biases and accept the potential validity of arguments we do not personally stand for. These objectives are:

1. To learn to **recognise the arguments** that parties to polarised debates in our field use to justify their positions and their goals (including reflections on our role as KPSRL).
2. To ensure that **well-intentioned interveners (including the KPSRL) are aware** of what lies below their choices.
3. To develop pathways that increase the likelihood that discussions across positions are useful **dialectical opportunities** rather than a clash of worldviews.

In addition, we recognise that we ourselves are driven by biases, ideas and assumptions.[1] The core assumption we have identified on our side are that it is possible to move from analysing the surface-level arguments in polarised debates to identifying the deeper worldviews that hinder mutual understanding. We assume that common ground is only possible when there is both agreement on what matters, and a shared understanding of the concepts used to describe those matters. Ideological thinking, in this context, is seen as an inevitable response to the complexity of the world. Not something to be discarded, but something to be acknowledged and critically examined.

We further assume that ideologies operate at both conscious and unconscious levels, shaping how individuals and organisations perceive the world and engage in conflict. Unexamined assumptions can contribute to polarisation and conflict in ways that may be avoidable, reinforcing structural problems such as inequality and exclusion. While all ideologies simplify reality, they are not all equivalent in their effects or implications. Importantly, those involved in international cooperation on security and rule of law are not outside this ideological framework. The very system in which these actors operate is itself shaped by ideological assumptions about its purpose and methods, meaning that rational action is always embedded in a broader worldview that deserves scrutiny.

With these reflections in mind, we begin by exploring the debate around feminist foreign policy, which illustrates many of the tensions at the heart of polarised discourse on international cooperation. This first section unpacks the competing interpretations of FFP and contrasts them with more traditional, often patriarchal, approaches to foreign policy and international engagement. From there, we move into the broader discussion on liberalism, particularly in relation to democratic governance promotion and the legitimacy of alternative, often more authoritarian, political systems. Finally, we address the globalism debate, where questions of sovereignty, isolationism, and international responsibility intersect. Each of these discussions builds upon the previous one, gradually revealing the layered nature of ideological positioning in the development and SRoL sectors. The concluding section brings together the insights from each debate and outlines possible ways forward, not necessarily through consensus, but through a clearer understanding of the fault lines and the possibilities for productive engagement.

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1   Žižek, Slavoj. 1989. The Sublime Object of Ideology. London: Verso.

About the KPSRL distilling series

Box 1

As of June 2025, the KPSRL is finishing the final iteration of the platform. This article is part of a KPSRL 'distilling series' in the run-up to the platform's closing. It aims to preserve the knowledge gathered during the platform's years of work and 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 organisations and donors in times of donors focusing on domestic priorities and shrinking civic space in FCAS.

2. **People Centered Approaches** *(to be found* here*)*

This collects findings on bridging the gap between individual experiences and humane institutions, defining 'people centeredness', hybrid security and justice, building 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 Polarisation** *(this piece)*

This paper collects findings on the sources of polarisation and diverging worldviews, identifying arguments that parties to polarised 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** *(to be found* here*)*

This paper 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 follow-up initiatives. 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 policymakers, researchers and practitioners within the KPSRL network.

Debate One — Feminist Foreign Policy

The first debate explored in this paper centres on the application of feminist foreign policy within the field of development cooperation and rule of law promotion. Through these sources, FFP is examined not only as a normative ambition, but also as a practical approach to addressing entrenched global inequalities. The discussions presented here consider the opportunities and criticisms surrounding FFP, particularly in relation to its implications for international development, power dynamics and policy legitimacy in diverse socio-political contexts. Please note that while FFP as a field is inherently broader than *just* international development, touching on policies ranging from trade to defence, the scope of this chapter is limited to development cooperation and rule of law promotion. This because these fields were the focus points of the KMF publications used as source material.

Arguments for FFP being the right approach to take

Feminist foreign policy is an approach to international relations and international development cooperation that prioritises gender equity, human rights, and the inclusion of marginalised groups. FFP as a theory is largely based on the assessment that issues faced in development and international relations are intersectional.[2] FFP recognises that various forms of inequality (e.g. gender, race, class, et cetera) intersect and shape individuals' experiences. FFP analysis helps reveal and eventually dismantle the patriarchal power structures that perpetuate these intersectional inequalities.[3] Through civil society involvement and bottom-up interventions, FFP works to hold governments and institutions accountable, committing them to gender equality and ensuring transparency.[4] This eventually helps shift foreign policy away from the dominance-centred approaches and zero-sum games more present in patriarchal worldviews.[5]

Feminist-related perspectives and the inclusion of women can provide impactful solutions to pressing problems, as shown by the case of climate activism and climate change-related security problems in Colombia, where indigenous and women's voices are critical in combating climate change.[6] The inclusion of indigenous women's voices in climate initiatives reflects not only a commitment to gender equality but also a challenge to the dominant technocratic systems that have traditionally shaped environmental governance. FFP helps prioritise the leadership and meaningful participation of women and local communities, leading to alternative paths forward

2   KPSRL and Human Security Collective. 2023. The Impact of EU Policies on Peace and Security in Libya from an Intersectional Perspective. Video Report. Tamazight Women's Movement.

3   Action Aid. 2021. Feminist Knowledge Management: The Role of Power, Access, and Privilege in Shaping Narratives. Annual Conference Session, KPSRL.

4   Consultations with KPSRL experts.

5   KPSRL. 2023. FFP Events Note. Feminist Foreign Policy Event Summary.

6   DCAF and Continua. 2023. "Why Indigenous Women's Views on Climate Security Matter — A Colombian Case." 'Fragile Truths' Podcast. Geneva: DCAF.

for development initiatives.[7] A similar case can be found when looking at the intersectional nature of the issues behind EU migration policies and related funding streams in Libya. Here, a limited and one-sided understanding of Libyan issues helped fuel conflict and civil strife.[8] Directing resources towards FFP and feminist organisations helps ensure that development aid effectively supports solutions to intersectional issues through keeping local perspectives in mind.[9] Feminist analysis helps reveal the invisible power structures that prelude existing knowledge and narratives, and can be critical in providing platforms for alternatives, building transparency and local ownership and creating a more diverse repository of tools to use.[10]

Furthermore, creating space for women's groups through integrating FFP in development can help to reduce the further shrinking of civil space in authoritarian contexts. Active collaboration with women's groups is necessary for "*building contextualised, bottom-up interventions that tackle sticky norms and create effective networks.*"[11] As such, there is a moral argument to be made for pressing FFP as a policy goal. This normative argument is further backed by the plethora of important global agreements around pushing FFP. Signatories to these agreements, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the 2015 Paris accords, have an obligation to pursue feminist foreign policy.[12]

Arguments for FFP being the wrong approach to take

Critiques of FFP come from both recipient communities and aid-providing states. While much of the backlash to FFP can be traced back to patriarchal assumptions of women being inferior to men,[13] there are also critiques coming from the post-colonial and anti-imperial angle. An important critique of feminist foreign policy is the idea of (Western) feminism being a tool used by the West to undermine recipient communities. This argument is often seen in societal discourse in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, but is also common with anti-imperialist scholars in Western Europe and the US.[14] Related to this is the argument that terminology is often misused or misunderstood by both consortia and recipients. Terms such as 'gender' and 'feminist' are often conveyed without the needed cultural sensitivity, translation capacity or intersectional understanding, leading to a view of FFP being inherently external and imposed.[15]

Concurrently, politicians in Western countries often critique feminist foreign policy on several grounds. They argue that FFP imposes Western liberal values on other societies, potentially

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7 Consultations with KPSRL experts.

8 KPSRL and Human Security Collective. 2023. The Impact of EU Policies on Peace and Security in Libya from an Intersectional Perspective. Video Report. Tamazight Women's Movement.

9 Consultations with KPSRL experts.

10 Action Aid. 2021. Feminist Knowledge Management: The Role of Power, Access, and Privilege in Shaping Narratives. Annual Conference Session, KPSRL.

11 IDS. 2021. How May External Actors Support Women's Claim Making. Annual Conference Session, KPSRL.

12 Ibid.

13 Women Unlimited Eswatini. 2023. Knowledge Management and Gender Dynamics in Eswatini's Crisis: Building a Stronger Women's Movement. KMF Paper.

14 KPSRL. 2023. FFP Events Note. Feminist Foreign Policy Event Summary.

15 Re:Orient. 2022. Imagine Madaniya! A Call to Advance the Dialogues on the 'Civil' State in the Arab World. KMF Paper.

undermining local cultures and traditions.[16] There is also concern that FFP challenges traditional family structures and gender roles, which some right-wing groups view as essential to societal cohesion. Additionally, critics contend that FFP may prioritise gender issues over pressing economic or security concerns, potentially compromising national interests.[17] Some also express scepticism towards international agreements promoting gender equality, viewing them as infringements on national sovereignty. Furthermore, there is apprehension that FFP could be used to justify foreign interventions under the guise of promoting women's rights, a concept referred to as "embedded feminism" or "purple washing".[18]

What are the key assumptions behind those arguments?

Several causal assumptions guide and drive the theories behind and critiques of feminist foreign policy in international development. The most entrenched of these assumptions is the patriarchal system itself — built on traditional gender and power dynamics, cultural norms and informal structures.[19] The assumption here is that women and men have specific, determined and gendered roles to play in society.[20] Privileging institutional and academic knowledge over social norms or local, lived understandings limits the adaptability of feminist foreign policy frameworks, reducing their potential legitimacy and resonance in partner contexts.[21] The path taken in the West is promoted as the only workable path towards inclusivity, resilience and feminism.[22] Critics argue not only that Western FFP frameworks impose cultural values, but that they privilege certain forms of knowledge — legalistic, institutional, empirical — over others, such as oral traditions, communal wisdom, or lived experience. This assumption blinds these frameworks to local approaches, philosophies and ideas as workable alternatives.[23]

Simultaneously, feminist foreign policy is often underpinned by assumptions that external interventions, such as *women peace and security*-initiatives or direct support to women as

16 Robinson, Linda. 2023. "The Global Assault on Women in Politics." Foreign Affairs, October 17, 2023. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/global-assault-women-politics-linda-robinson.

17 Krystalli, Roxani. 2023. "Affective Reckonings: Emotions and Feminist Knowledge Production in Political Violence Research." Paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference, Prague, September 4–8, 2023. https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/54152.

18 Krystalli, Roxani. 2023. "On Emotions, Epistemology and Feminist Fieldwork." LSE Gender Blog, February 24, 2023. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2023/02/24/4808/; Sewpaul, Vishanthie. 2022. "The Politics of Epistemic (In)justice in Social Work Education." PERIPHERIE — Politik, Ökonomie, Kultur 167(1): 30–47. https://budrich-journals.de/index.php/peripherie/article/view/22464/19660.

19 Women Unlimited Eswatini. 2023. Knowledge Management and Gender Dynamics in Eswatini's Crisis: Building a Stronger Women's Movement. KMF Paper; KPSRL. 2021. Learning from Assumptions: Promoting Women's Political Participation as a Pathway Towards Inclusive Governance. Practice Labs 2 Report.

20 KPSRL. 2021. Learning from Assumptions: Promoting Women's Political Participation as a Pathway Towards Inclusive Governance. Practice Labs 2 Report; Re:Orient. 2022. Imagine Madaniya! A Call to Advance the Dialogues on the 'Civil' State in the Arab World. KMF Paper.

21 KPSRL. 2022. Reimagining Social Contracts: An Analytical Paper of KPSRL Discussions in 2022.

22 KPSRL. 2022. Report: Localised SRoL Support in a Multipolar World. With IDLO.

23 Re:Orient. 2022. Imagine Madaniya! A Call to Advance the Dialogues on the 'Civil' State in the Arab World. KMF Paper.

beneficiaries, will automatically result in more women in positions of power.[24] Inclusive participation, through this lens, will automatically result in inclusive outcomes, participation in influence and inclusivity in resilience.[25] The theory underlying these assumptions is that more inclusive participation will generate a more inclusive and stronger civil space, allowing for a more equitable sharing of power.[26] This theory and these assumptions frequently overlook deeper contextual realities — women's access to power may hinge less on outside support and more on practical constraints, cultural dynamics or domestic political structures.[27] Effective interventions must be grounded in these local conditions, engaging informal influencers and broadening the notion of 'beneficiary' to include men, male allies and diverse role models, in order to create inclusive, learning-oriented systems of change.[28]

Are there points of common ground?

The question of whether feminist foreign policy can be meaningfully applied across diverse cultural and political contexts continues to provoke debate. As with broader liberal agendas, there appears to be a tension between universalist ideals and the local realities in which they are implemented. However, growing critiques from within communities themselves point not to a rejection of equality or justice, but to the need for locally grounded approaches that reflect cultural nuance and ensure genuine inclusion. Underlying these debates is the notion of epistemic injustice (see Box II), where local knowledge systems are disregarded or devalued, reinforcing asymmetries of power not only in practice, but also in the frameworks through which interventions are understood and designed.

Feminist foreign policy, in its current form as implemented in the fields of international development and rule of law promotion, often carries with it the weight of externally imposed frameworks, overlooking the necessity for homegrown approaches rooted in the lived realities of local communities. The drive for change, if it is to be meaningful and sustained, must come from within — led by local changemakers, thought leaders, groups, and both women and men who hold cultural and social influence. At times, the debate becomes entangled in conceptual issues, philosophy and etymology, with disagreement centred less on the principles of equity and more on the term 'feminism' itself, which can carry colonial and Western connotations.

Local organisations are responding to this tension by articulating alternative frameworks that reflect their own histories, cultures, and priorities — not to reject the need for feminist principles, but to reframe them in ways that resonate more authentically. This does not disregard the very actual and very real positioning of governments, groups and ideologies that disregard

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24 KPSRL. 2021. Learning from Assumptions: Promoting Women's Political Participation as a Pathway Towards Inclusive Governance. Practice Labs 2 Report.

25 ECDPM. 2021. Position Paper on Inclusive Governance. KPSRL Event; KPSRL. 2022. Reimagining Social Contracts: An Analytical Paper of KPSRL Discussions in 2022.

26 IDS. 2021. How May External Actors Support Women's Claim Making. Annual Conference Session, KPSRL.

27 KPSRL. 2021. Learning from Assumptions: Promoting Women's Political Participation as a Pathway Towards Inclusive Governance. Practice Labs 2 Report.

28 Women Unlimited Eswatini. 2023. Knowledge Management and Gender Dynamics in Eswatini's Crisis: Building a Stronger Women's Movement. KMF Paper; KPSRL. 2021. Learning from Assumptions: Promoting Women's Political Participation as a Pathway Towards Inclusive Governance. Practice Labs 2 Report.

or actively block marginalised voices. However, it remains critical to underline the importance of allowing space for local knowledge, language and leadership in shaping the policy narratives that affect communities. Ultimately, the debate around feminist foreign policy in development cooperation is as much about power over people as it is about power over knowledge. The legitimacy of FFP will depend not only on the values it espouses, but on its willingness to recognise, engage with and centre diverse forms of knowing.

Box II   On Intersectionalism

Intersectionality is a way of understanding how power operates across systems. It recognises that gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identity markers do not function in isolation, but shape and reinforce one another in complex and context-specific ways. It helps shape the acknowledgement that women — or any other group — are not a monolith, but part of complex social hierarchies shaping their experiences and understandings. This also applies to knowledge: whose experiences are deemed credible, whose expertise counts, and whose voices are systematically excluded from policymaking.

Epistemic injustice occurs when people are wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers. In the context of feminist foreign policy, this can mean disqualifying the lived experiences of indigenous women, or failing to engage with grassroots knowledge because it does not align with institutional or Western epistemologies. These forms of injustice are often intersectional, rooted in gender bias, racism, colonial legacies, and socio-economic hierarchies.

Recognising this intersection is crucial. The challenges addressed through feminist foreign policy, from migration and climate change to the shrinking of civic space, are not isolated problems. They are symptoms of deeper systemic structures that connect global security, rule of law, development, and power. As such, they require equally systemic, intersectional approaches to produce just and sustainable outcomes. Without confronting how power shapes both knowledge and policy, efforts at reform risk replicating the very inequalities they aim to address.

Debate Two — Liberal Democracy versus Authoritarianism

The second pressing debate this paper highlights concerns the contradictions between what are viewed from a Western perspective as 'liberal' and 'illiberal' philosophies of state, society and government. This debate is held around the concept of a 'social contract' (see box III) — how a social contract should be defined and how it should be fulfilled, and which systems are best at fulfilling social contracts most efficiently and effectively. This section has pulled from case studies in Colombia, Burkina Faso, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, and from the scientific debates around social contracts and their design.

Arguments for Liberalism and Democratic Forms of Governance being the right approach to take

Our understanding of what, in international development, has come to be called 'liberalism' and democracy (two terms often understood as interchangeable, but in fact distinct) is heavily grounded in the concept of the social contract as the basis of state and society. A social contract is the implicit understanding that lies at the basis of how state and civil society interact with each other.[29] Stability results from both sides adhering to and fulfilling the agreed upon social contract — either through democratic processes or authoritarian bargains.[30] In building more inclusive and more resilient societies, the SRoL sector has been working with local civil society actors, institutions and groups on reimagining these social contracts to better reflect societal needs. This has been done on the basis of a set of core assumptions on the side of the SRoL sector and those working with it.

A primary assumption driving international support for SRoL reforms towards a more 'liberal' interpretation of local social contracts has been the idea of liberal societies being more inclusive and more resilient. Whereas authoritarian regimes are often seen as less flexible, less efficient and more corrupt, liberal social contracts would, according to these assumptions, constructively lead to more sustainable states and better service delivery.[31] In short, the assumption is that liberal social contracts bring inclusivity and resilience, whereas the alternatives lead to power asymmetry and instability.[32]

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29 KPSRL. 2022. Reimagining Social Contracts: An Analytical Paper of KPSRL Discussions in 2022.
30 PAX. 2022. Practice and Policy on Social Contracts and Burkina Faso. Session Report, Annual Conference, Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law; Jasmine Foundation. 2023. Encountering the Local State: Reimagining the Social Contract in Tunisia through Local Policing and Public Administration Reform. KMF Paper.
31 ECDPM. 2021. Position Paper on Inclusive Governance. KPSRL Event; KPSRL. 2021. Highlights Expert Roundtable: Initial SRoL Lessons from Afghanistan. Event Report.
32 International IDEA. 2021. Notes from Session on Restructuring Power in Conflict-Affected Settings. Annual Conference Session, KPSRL.

Concrete examples behind this line of argumentation can be found in Colombia, where inclusive, liberal and democratic approaches to state-development have allowed for marginalised groups to voice their opinions and be heard by decision makers. This led to more sustainable social contracts, allowing for a more diverse range of approaches to combat pervasive issues.[33] Another concrete positive effect of liberal, democratic approaches to social contract building is its effect on private sector development.[34] While there is a correlation between autocratic regimes and corruption (creating an extractive business climate), democratic and inclusive governance resulting from liberal reform allows for better anti-corruption measures, broader economic development and an overall more effective business climate.[35] Lastly, it is assumed that liberal social contracts would allow for more youth inclusion, creating a greater base of support amongst next generations, and thus contributing to more sustainable governments.[36]

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Box III How do social contracts define the relationship between state and society in different contexts?

The concept of a social contract refers not to a singular document or moment of agreement, but to an evolving process through which those in positions of power, whether state institutions, informal authorities, or political challengers, make promises or claims that alter expectations within society. These expectations concern how power is used, what political goals should be achieved, and what services and rights should be delivered. When these expectations are met, relationships of trust and cooperation are built. When unmet, they can trigger contestation or breakdown. The social contract therefore reflects a balance of rights, duties, and shared goals that is continuously negotiated and reshaped over time.

This relationship between state and society takes different forms depending on historical, political, and cultural circumstances. In some contexts, particularly where democratic norms are weak or under strain, social contracts may resemble authoritarian bargains. Here, regimes maintain legitimacy not through inclusive participation but through the delivery of economic growth and security, often at the expense of civil liberties and equal representation. Conversely, inclusive social contracts, often presented in Western discourse as 'liberal social contracts'[37], seek to involve a broader range of voices, especially those historically marginalised, in shaping public policy and state functions. This form of contract is about ensuring that all groups have the power and opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives.

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33 ECDPM. 2022. "Inclusive Process vs. Inclusive Outcomes." 'Fragile Truths' Podcast.
34 KPSRL. 2022. Reimagining Social Contracts: An Analytical Paper of KPSRL Discussions in 2022.
35 ECDPM. 2021. Position Paper on Inclusive Governance. KPSRL Event.
36 Re:Orient. 2022. Imagine Madaniya! A Call to Advance the Dialogues on the 'Civil' State in the Arab World. KMF Paper.
37 It is important to note and to reiterate that, although 'liberal', 'democratic' and 'inclusive' are in the context of international development and SRoL programmes are often used interchangeably, they are in fact distinct terms and ideas. In light of this publication being a summary of and distilling the works published in the Knowledge Management Fund, we use much of the terminology put forth in these papers.

Arguments for Liberalism and Democratic Forms of Governance being the wrong approach to take

However, the lacking materialisation of the promise of liberal democracy, as experienced in both the so-called global south and in the global north, has given momentum to counterarguments to liberal social contracts. This has given rise to assumptions ranging from the disillusionment with liberal social contracts and nostalgia to more 'pragmatic,' authoritarian contexts experienced in Eastern Europe[38] to the social and cultural backlash against imposed Western ideas faced in many Middle Eastern and Sub-Sahara African countries.[39] These arguments, while not always positively contributing to international cooperation, security and rule of law, do force us to think about the ways in which we promote (and at times impose) our values and ideas.[40]

One of the recurring arguments is that of postcolonial imposition. The idea of a liberal political order that forms the foundation of the social contract, as promoted by Western INGOs, is grounded in capitalism and perceived as inherently Western. This results in issues with language, legitimacy and, at times, systemic incompatibility.[41] A lacking recognition of traditional, 'informal' sectors, such as the traditional justice systems encountered in Somalia[42] or clerical authority in Iraq[43] as legitimate partners and necessary voices has led to significant pushback to Western value-based approaches. Issues with language and frames used can be detrimental to the trust-building that is needed to build these mutual recognitions.[44] As a result, this lack of trust, combined with the changing demands and priorities of the consortia and their donors, can fuel anti-aid, anti-liberal and anti-democratic sentiments.[45]

What are the key assumptions behind those arguments?

These arguments are built on core assumptions by both sides. Probably the most pervasive of these assumptions is the validity of social contract theory itself. This theory is built around a set of ideas that hail from a long tradition of Western philosophical and conceptual thought around systems of state and society and can thus be considered inherently biased to Western history. As such, it comes with certain assumptions that resonate with Western consortia and INGOs, but do not always hold empirical truth. The core assumption behind this idea of a

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38 KPSRL. 2024. Democracy Promotion During the Crisis of Democracy. Podcast. The Hague: Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law.

39 Ibid.

40 Radboud University. 2023. Power Dynamics in Foreign Aid: Consultation Report. KMF Paper.

41 Re:Orient. 2022. Imagine Madaniya! A Call to Advance the Dialogues on the 'Civil' State in the Arab World. KMF Paper.

42 KPSRL. 2022. Report on the Seventh Quarterly Meetings of Security and Rule of Law Programming Partners — Somalia Unit, Embassy of the Netherlands. Event Series.

43 Re:Orient. 2022. Imagine Madaniya! A Call to Advance the Dialogues on the 'Civil' State in the Arab World. KMF Paper.

44 KPSRL. 2022. Report on the Fifth Quarterly Meetings of Security and Rule of Law Programming Partners — Somalia Unit, Embassy of the Netherlands. Event Series.

45 Radboud University. 2023. Power Dynamics in Foreign Aid: Consultation Report. KMF Paper.

social contract is that the fulfilment leads to stability, and that the only way to achieve this is through liberal, democratic means.[46] The starting point here is that the state and the individual are utility-maximising actors that engage in constant bargaining on the delivery of material goods — fulfilment of a social contract is thus equated to utilitarian service delivery and capitalist economics. This view does not account for the presence of groups or regimes that act as identity providers and social safety nets, and in which people cooperate for logics of loyalty and teamwork.[47] Nor does it align with the alternative forms of egalitarianism experienced in socialist authoritarianism or other forms of rule.

A second assumption is that authoritarian regimes, such as the Afghan Taliban, will not provide services such as water, waste management or municipal services without external intervention or incentivisation.[48] In the theories that liberal interventions are built upon, the delivery of services will enhance trust and lead to a strengthening of the social contract, which will lead to increased legitimacy of the government and thus greater stability.[49] The idea that non-liberal regimes inherently cannot provide such services is largely based on a simplified counter-terrorism narrative centred around images of informal or customary institutions as religious extremists.[50]

This ignores political alternatives that illiberal or customary, or even violent actors impose, as well as local political dynamics based in non-Western traditions. Taliban governance was, in the case of Afghanistan, at times preferred on local levels due to their improvements in service delivery, and many rebel groups build on municipal services and local conflict resolution as tools in mobilising support.[51] The Union of Islamic Courts of Somalia provided rulings manifesting customary justice for local communities feeling left behind in broader juridical formalisation processes. Similar processes can be at work for youth inclusion, which is often a cornerstone of rebel groups. The functionality of institutions, states or social contracts is as such mainly measured through a lens of primarily Western assumptions, leaving out the reality of rebel governance or other forms of customary service delivery.[52]

Are there points of common ground?

The seeming incompatibility of Western 'liberal' thought and the idea of a democratic social contract, with the political, institutional and ideational realities of Afghanistan, Somalia and similar contexts seems daunting. seems daunting. As with the earlier case on feminist foreign policy, it seems like liberalism and local informal institutions, ideas and values cannot be combined. However, as the case of marginalised groups in Colombia exemplifies, there is a certain need for democratisation, the promotion of rule of law and the provision of equitable opportunities in protecting minorities and providing more efficient, effective and innovative solutions.

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46 KPSRL. 2021. Highlights Expert Roundtable: Initial SRoL Lessons from Afghanistan. Event Report.
47 KPSRL. 2023. Key Notes to the Event: The Nature of Authoritarian Regimes. Event Summary.
48 KPSRL. 2021. Highlights Expert Roundtable: Initial SRoL Lessons from Afghanistan. Event Report.
49 KPSRL. 2022. Report on the First Quarterly Meetings of Security and Rule of Law Programming Partners — Somalia Unit, Embassy of the Netherlands. Event Series.
50 Willemijn Verkoren. 2022. Webinar: Applying SRoL Lessons from Afghanistan to the Sahel. Informal Summary.
51 Consultations with KPSRL experts.
52 KPSRL. 2023. Key Notes to the Event: The Nature of Authoritarian Regimes. Event Summary.

Social and economic securities are a necessity to participate in a democratic state and make use of the rights and freedoms democracy offers. Western liberal democracy has, in the eyes of many, failed to provide these securities. The notion of a more localised or homegrown liberalism emerges as a response to the perceived shortcomings of these earlier, externally imposed liberalisation efforts, lacking substance and local relevance. There is a growing recognition of the need to develop resilient democratic systems that are both inclusive and grounded in local realities. This involves combining liberal institutional frameworks with local philosophies, values and modes of governance, rather than displacing them. Such an approach seeks to build institutional capacity in a manner that reflects the lived experiences and priorities of local populations, rather than assuming a universal blueprint for democracy.

In this context, the informal sector and its value-based practices should not be viewed as inherently incompatible with what we in the West consider liberal ideals. Rather, they require a reframing that allows for mutual recognition and negotiation between differing worldviews. Dialogue, trust building and the amplification of local voices (particularly those of youth) are repeatedly cited as necessary for inclusive democratic development. This inclusivity must extend beyond demographic representation to encompass diverse philosophies and ways of thinking. The objective is not to dilute our values, but to reconfigure our narratives and frames so that they resonate with and respond to local conditions, ultimately offering a more sustainable and legitimate democratic model.

Debate Three — Sovereigntism and Isolationism versus Globalism and Development Aid

The third debate this paper discusses considers the discourse around globalism and international development aid. This debate is held around concepts of globalism, isolationism and post-colonialism (see box IV), and whether there is a responsibility to provide aid or whether aid is another form of imperialism or a misallocation of resources. This section has pulled from case studies in Libya, Afghanistan and Somalia, and from the scientific debates around aid and its effectiveness.

Arguments for Sovereigntism or Isolationism being the right approach to take

Aid and international cooperation, even if well-intended, do have negative consequences, and thus cause backlash, both 'at home', with the states and societies that sponsor projects and consortia, and in the recipient regions and localities. The arguments on the sovereigntist side of this debate can globally be coalesced in two groups: postcolonial arguments and isolationist arguments. The former primarily look at the unintended consequences resulting from aid and the (perceived) neo-imperialist intentions that drive international cooperation. The latter mainly focuses on the assumed lacking efficiency of international cooperation, and how international (development) aid should not be a state's responsibility or a burden on citizens' taxes.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, it is important to recognise that aid and globalist cooperation always come with unintended consequences. As an influx of money and material goods, aid oftentimes creates lasting dependencies, reinforcing existing inequalities and creating new forms of (spatial) inequity and segregation, as well as a brain-drain of local talent to INGOs, leaving governments relatively incapacitated.[53] Additionally, as an imposition of (foreign) value-based systems with the sometimes explicit goal of upending or overturning existing social contracts,[54] aid is often seen as yet another form of Western, white neo-imperialism.[55] This incites backlash and feeds populist politics.[56] It also builds on a long history of societal distrust

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53 KPSRL. 2023. Unintended Effects and Backlash to Aid. 'Fragile Truths' Podcast.

54 Ibid.

55 KPSRL. 2023. FFP Events Note. Feminist Foreign Policy Event Summary.

56 Koch, Dirk-Jan. 2009. Aid from International NGOs: Blind Spots and Unintended Consequences. London: Routledge.

resulting from colonialism and conflict related traumas, giving rise to a legitimised distrust towards (Western) NGOs and a view of aid as yet another form of intervention.[57]

On the isolationist side, further arguments are brought up regarding the unintended consequences of aid. Some of those arguments hail from stereotypical depictions of recipient communities, or from the notion that that international development cooperation is simply not a state's responsibility.[58] An additional argument that is being used is that of aid being an additional burden on tight budgets, with taxpayer money better used domestically.[59] Some overlap, however, can be found when looking at the concerns of aid furthering existing inequities through corruption,[60] exacerbating existing conflicts,[61] or spurring backlash against already marginalised communities.[62] An interesting example providing a valid argument against aid comes from our recent experiences in Afghanistan, where the dominance of and dependency on INGOs unintentionally exacerbated the faltering legitimacy and the capacity of the central government through decentralisation programmes.[63]

Arguments for Sovereigntism or Isolationism being the wrong approach to take

Concurrently, there are definite positive sides to international development cooperation and foreign aid. With the underlying intention being a slow but structural change to the social contract through a continued effort,[64] many of these effects, such as long-term economic growth, stability and novel economic opportunities, often only come to the fore after multiannual continuous processes.[65] Additionally, there is a strong normative case to be made for our shared international responsibility,[66] as well as for a very real security concern. The latter argument is backed up with the assumption that international actors use aid for security purposes or to expand their international influence. This would lead to a need to counter those actors through liberal democratisation, aid, and support.[67]

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57 KPSRL. 2021. Fostering Constructive Relations: Approaches to Trust-Building in Peacebuilding Interventions.

58 Institute of Economic Affairs. "Debate: Does Foreign Aid Work?" IEA, accessed June 16, 2025. https://iea.org.uk/debate-does-foreign-aid-work/.

59 Mitchell, Daniel J. "The Case Against Foreign Aid." Foundation for Economic Education, September 26, 2024. https://fee.org/articles/the-case-against-foreign-aid/.

60 Radboud University. 2023. Power Dynamics in Foreign Aid: Consultation Report. KMF Paper.

61 KPSRL and Human Security Collective. 2023. The Impact of EU Policies on Peace and Security in Libya from an Intersectional Perspective. Video Report. Tamazight Women's Movement.

62 KPSRL. 2023. FFP Events Note. Feminist Foreign Policy Event Summary.

63 KPSRL. 2023. Report: Inconvenient Realities — Discussing the Recent IOB Evaluation. Event Report.

64 PAX. 2022. Practice and Policy on Social Contracts and Burkina Faso. Session Report, Annual Conference.

65 KPSRL. 2023. Unintended Effects and Backlash to Aid. 'Fragile Truths' Podcast.

66 KPSRL. 2023. Report: Inconvenient Realities — Discussing the Recent IOB Evaluation. Event Report.

67 IFSH. 2023. 2nd Round Table Security Sector Reform (SSR): Rivals, Competitors, or Partners? How to Respond to Competing Approaches to Security Sector (Reform) Assistance. Hamburg: IFSH. Held 8 February 2023 at the Europasaal, Federal Foreign Office.

What are the key assumptions behind those arguments?

These arguments are based on assumptions not too dissimilar from those in the other two debates — especially when it comes to the perception of aid and international cooperation as forms of neo-colonial value imposition and imperialism. An underlying assumption for proponents of globalism is the assumption that international aid can be used as a political tool. This is especially salient in instrumentalisations of aid as a tool to counter perceived Chinese or Russian influences.[68] However, this instrumentalisation of aid reinforces perceptions of value imposition and perpetuates dynamics that closely resemble those of earlier imperial projects. The issue is compounded by a persistent lack of contextual understanding, as seen in the case of aid and support as anti-migration tools in Libya, where externally driven efforts appeared disconnected from local complexities.[69]

This line of critique reveals a broader disillusionment with international aid practices, particularly the tendency of donors and implementing partners to prioritise short-term, measurable outputs over long-term structural transformation. This backlash reflects a frustration with the superficiality of certain interventions, which often fail to address deeper societal issues such as trust, legitimacy and the enduring impact of imperial legacies.[70] Theories of Change (ToC) are frequently criticised for their lack of transparency and their limited ability to guide actors through the complex dynamics of post-conflict or fragile contexts.[71] The conceptual vagueness of many ToCs means that they rarely account for the nuanced political and social realities on the ground. Repeated cycles of overpromising and underdelivering contribute to a credibility gap that undermines local trust in both international actors and the liberal frameworks they seek to promote.[72]

Are there points of common ground?

In splitting up this debate into two sub-debates, two different streams of outcomes and overlaps can be distilled. An important underlying understanding, prevalent in all three arguments — post-colonial, anti-globalist and pro-aid or globalist, is the assumption that aid will always have unexpected consequences, whether positive or negative. We have to recognise that unintended outcomes will be a part of any international project, and that measures poised at mitigating *negative* and observing *positive* outcomes, such as monitoring, evaluating and learning procedures are therefore integral to any project. In this, there should be room for more integrated, intersectional and holistic approaches, taking more divergent effects into account.

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68 IFSH. 2023. 2nd Round Table Security Sector Reform (SSR): Rivals, Competitors, or Partners? How to Respond to Competing Approaches to Security Sector (Reform) Assistance. Hamburg: IFSH. Held 8 February 2023 at the Europasaal, Federal Foreign Office.
69 KPSRL and Human Security Collective. 2023. The Impact of EU Policies on Peace and Security in Libya from an Intersectional Perspective. Video Report. Tamazight Women's Movement.
70 KPSRL. 2023. Unintended Effects and Backlash to Aid. 'Fragile Truths' Podcast.
71 KPSRL. 2021. Fostering Constructive Relations: Approaches to Trust-Building in Peacebuilding Interventions.
72 KPSRL. 2023. Preserving SRoL as the Priority of the Netherlands — Second Meeting. Event Report.

Furthermore, in order to mitigate both the perceived neo-colonialism as well as the idea of money-badly-spent, there is an outspoken urge for more focus on *collaboration* rather than *aid* — allowing for equitable exchange, trade facilitation, and mutual benefits. Partnerships rather than imposition. For these partnerships to substantiate, and to thus further amplify the effectiveness of development programmes, there is a further need for local ownership, transparency and trust-building on both sides.

Given that corruption, excessive spending and the entrenchment of problematic dynamics is always a risk, development cooperation will always remain under scrutiny — from both the post-colonial and the isolationist perspectives. This scrutiny calls for mitigation measures, such as strong MEL instruments. Using this scrutiny to improve existing practices would allow for international projects to not only be more effective, but also better at resonating with political sentiment, whether in the partner communities or the contributing countries.

Box IV   Isolation, Sovereignty or Right-Wing Ideology?

This paper assumes a difference between sovereigntism from a recipient perspective, and isolationism from a donor country perspective. We underline the importance of highlighting that rejecting globalism can come both out of a post-colonial understanding of aid as a tool of imperialism, and out of a right-wing or an isolationist rejecting of the internationalist responsibility (or perceived tax burden) that comes with globalism, development and aid, especially in SRoL. It's important to understand this difference, as it shows that our own understanding of aid and responsibility is not devoid of colonialist legacies either.

Finding Common Ground

The three debates above are some of the most polarised debates in the SRoL and development communities. The debates show the fissures between proponents of international development, feminist foreign policy and democratisation, and those groups with alternate views — often stemming from traditionalism, anti-imperialism, isolationism or a rejection of the general responsibility of the international community. These discussions can often be related to more conceptual debates on, for example, ideology, the universality of human rights, or the role identities play (or ought to play) in international cooperation. Often highly sensitive and very polarised, these debates can seem daunting or even insurmountable.

Yet, connectors can be found. Arguing on the basis of differing assumptions, the end goals of many involved in these debates often overlap — whether it's security promotion, societal development or the resolution of deeply rooted conflicts. Each approach comes with valid criticism of its adversary, and with poignant flaws of its own. In taking these critiques seriously, and in trying to work on these flaws, our sector can and should work towards reimagined discourse and practice in the promotion of values such as democracy, equity and rule of law. This work, and the many KMF-supported publications which it distils, make an effort in addressing these gaps and building a new future for our sector in light of new, transactional politics, geopolitical tensions and societal polarisation.

The debate on feminist foreign policy highlighted its potential to challenge entrenched power structures by promoting diverse forms of knowledge and inclusive, bottom-up approaches to development and rule of law. However, critics argue that current FFP frameworks risk reproducing imperial dynamics by privileging Western norms, failing to adequately account for local contexts and overlooking deeper socio-political constraints. A key point of convergence lies in the shared recognition that meaningful change must be locally driven, with policy legitimacy depending on the inclusion of culturally grounded knowledge and leadership.

The second debate explored the tension between democratic and authoritarian approaches to governance, particularly in relation to how social contracts are defined and delivered in diverse contexts. While democratic models are often seen as pathways to inclusion and resilience, critics argue that they are, again, rooted in Western assumptions and can disregard local governance traditions, leading to mistrust and inefficacy. A shared recognition is emerging that sustainable and legitimate governance must integrate inclusive or 'liberal' institutional aims with locally rooted practices, enabling mutual recognition, trust and more contextually relevant forms of democratic development.

The third debate examined the tensions between globalist and sovereigntist perspectives on development aid, highlighting concerns over aid's unintended consequences, its perceived neo-colonial nature and questions about responsibility and effectiveness. While critiques point to aid reinforcing dependency or imposing external values, there remains a normative and strategic rationale for international cooperation in an increasingly multipolar world. Common ground can be found in the shared recognition of aid's complexities, with growing calls for more

reciprocal partnerships, increased transparency and context-sensitive practices that respond to both donor accountability and local legitimacy.

While these debates touch on different aspects of our sector's assumed role and the many facets of the work our organisations do, there are some shared themes to be distilled. Many of the works published within the KPSRL network press localisation as a potential solution to some of the fissures defining international development and SRoL. Taking local perspectives and philosophies into account in designing interventions or setting up partnerships allows for a more diverse approach, better rooted in familiar practices and legitimacies, creating a larger potential for sustainability and success. This closely aligns with a second observation being that SRoL, development and aid are immensely complex fields, requiring organisations to look beyond existing paradigms of Western philosophies of liberalism or feminism and tap into local legitimacies.

Ideas of democratisation and locally grounded approaches to governance aren't necessarily in opposition, nor are traditional structures and feminist policies, or sovereigntist thought and globalism. Instead, when taking local voices seriously, when taking local thinkers seriously, and when taking local philosophies seriously, more sustainable, more structural and more contextually sensitive approaches can be developed. Approaches not only allowing for a homegrown, inclusive and philosophically grounded form of rule of law, but also enriching our collective understanding of what it means to govern, what it means to develop, and what it means to be truly, inclusive.

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