

NAVIGATING THE NEW TERRAIN

FIVE PATHWAYS FORWARD
FOR THE U.S. RULE OF LAW
ASSISTANCE COMMUNITY

SEPTEMBER 2026



Introduction: Navigating the New Terrain

For more than four decades, the U.S. rule of law assistance community played a leading role in designing and delivering rule of law and justice system strengthening activities around the world. This work did not solve every problem, and the results were uneven. But it helped advance meaningful reforms, improve institutional performance, and build human capacity for achieving more just, peaceful, and prosperous societies.

Before the assistance disruption in early 2025, this work was beginning to evolve. It was moving beyond traditional legal and judicial reform and institution-building toward more people-centered, locally-led, and innovative approaches to close justice gaps, improve how justice is administered, and make the rule of law matter more in people's everyday lives.

In other words, the U.S. rule of law assistance community was learning to do rule of law better by doing it differently.

The dismantling of USAID, reorientation of State Department foreign assistance, and the de-prioritization of international donor funding for rule of law and justice interrupted much of this effort. For the now largely sidelined U.S. rule of law assistance community and those connected to it, the effects were immediate, practical, and consequential.

Local partners were left to carry the hard work of legal and justice reform forward on their own. Relationships with government and non-governmental justice leaders built over years of collaboration were strained or severed altogether. In addition, local and international rule of law networks, expertise, and knowledge have fragmented and are now at risk of disappearing.

But the need for the U.S. rule of law assistance community has not ended. Since the disruption, challenges have intensified as the global rule of law recession expands, judicial independence erodes, and billions of everyday justice needs remain unmet. The persistent global justice gap is now accompanied by widening gaps in public trust and financing.

At the same time, justice systems around the world continue to operate and innovate. Courts, justice ministries, legal aid providers, and community justice actors remain engaged in solving problems. Digitalization and artificial intelligence are reshaping how justice services are delivered and how institutions interact with the public. In many countries, the commitment to reform remains real.

This continuity and change bring real promise and real risk. Yet many justice actors are navigating them both with less funding, less technical support, and fewer trusted partners than before.

What began as a funding disruption has become a structural inflection point for the field. The old rule of law assistance model is not coming back in the same form. The immediate question is how the U.S. rule of law assistance community moves forward in navigating this new terrain.

This Pathways Brief offers a practical starting point.

It is intended for those who helped build the field of practice, and who now have a role to play in keeping what remains active, connected, and future-ready.

Pathway 1

Preserve the Rule of Law Knowledge Base and Invest in Learning

A future-ready U.S. rule of law assistance community needs to take stock of what it has learned, preserve what remains useful, and continue learning before it can effectively reimagine new approaches and shape what comes next.

Much of the substantive rule of law knowledge and technical expertise accumulated over decades is spread across organizations, national staff, and consultants. The risk of fragmentation and loss is real. Capturing and preserving it is imperative. Making it accessible to local partners now carrying the work forward, international donors designing and financing new activities, and the next generation of rule of law practitioners is equally essential.

Not all knowledge and learning should be preserved. But the best of it should be curated by rule of law experts who know the field, not lost inside broader development repositories. A dedicated rule of law knowledge management platform would be a practical place to start.

This is also a moment to invest in thought leadership and learning. The U.S. rule of law assistance community should use this time to develop new case studies, practice notes, and tools based on learning in real time. Elevating the expertise of former local partners and national staff should be part of the effort. Continued upskilling for the future also matters, especially in digital justice and artificial intelligence, justice financing, and cross-sectoral integration.

Pathway 2

Reconnect and Reorganize the Rule of Law Community

The U.S. rule of law assistance community needs to reconnect and reorganize to effectively navigate the terrain ahead, respond to opportunities, and articulate a coherent and stronger value proposition for why rule of law matters.

Even before the disruption, the community was often siloed across judicial reform, anti-corruption, citizen security, legal empowerment, human rights, and other technical areas. The disruption has made those divides more pronounced and costly, leaving the community less able to compete for limited resources and to keep rule of law prioritized. The task now is to reconnect community members around shared goals, collaborate more deliberately, and engage expertise from other sectors more effectively.

A renewed rule of law community should bring together core rule of law organizations and experts with those working on economic growth and competitiveness, private sector development, poverty reduction, health, education, and the environment. These connections matter because challenges related to rule of law strengthening are embedded in many of the problems other sector specialists are trying to solve. The community therefore needs a stronger coordination strategy and a more practical way to connect its expertise to those agendas.

A concrete place to start would be a mapping exercise that identifies who remains active, who is missing, and who is entering adjacent spaces. It should also inventory what rule of law activities remain, what new activities are emerging, and how they might be changing in response to funding and other dynamics. The results should support targeted engagements on digital justice, justice financing, customary justice, and cross-sectoral integration, including medical-legal partnerships and links between rule of law, investment, and SME growth.

Pathway

Re-engage Local Partnerships and Networks

The U.S. rule of law assistance community needs to re-engage former local partners, national staff, and country level and regional networks as strategic counterparts to carry the work forward.

The disruption in donor funding changed the operating environment for rule of law assistance and shifted power dynamics across it. This reflects both the long-standing push toward locally-led development and a practical reality: local justice leaders and actors often have the relationships, legitimacy, knowledge, and staying power needed to sustain reform through political uncertainty and tighter resource constraints.

Re-engaging them is not simply about staying in touch. Former national staff, local partners, justice institutions, legal professionals, civil society actors, women and young justice leaders, and regional coalitions are essential sources of situational awareness, technical expertise, and reform energy. They can help track backsliding, identify emerging needs and opportunities, surface innovations for scaling, and monitor local and international funding priorities.

But they are not only counterparts to re-engage when funding opportunities arise. They are part of the leadership for what comes next and a critical resource for the future readiness of the U.S. rule of law assistance community.

A concrete place to start would be for each organization to re-engage its former national staff and local partners through structured check-ins and small advisory groups. These efforts can help sustain relationships, support local leadership, and build more collaborative and durable partnerships for smaller and smarter forms of locally-led assistance.

Pathway

Recalibrate Design and Delivery for Results

The U.S. rule of law assistance community needs to recalibrate how it designs and delivers activities for an environment with fewer resources, stronger expectations for locally-led assistance, and greater pressure to show results and return on investment.

The old model of big budget, multi-year, donor-driven rule of law activities will not disappear entirely. But it will no longer be the default way to strengthen justice systems and services. What

comes next will most likely be smaller, smarter, more fit for purpose, and more closely aligned with local rule of law priorities and justice needs.

For design, this means using data to find the right entry points, thinking and working politically, and applying legal design thinking and co-creation to ideate solutions that can be tested and adapted. Activities will also need to show clearer returns on investment to funders and partners, such as faster dispute resolution, better use of public resources, and fewer economic losses from unresolved legal problems.

Delivery will need to become more flexible, diversified, and lower cost as well. Professional staff and consultants remain essential, but the field should also renew its tradition of pro bono support. Volunteer lawyers and pro bono law firm teams can help fill targeted gaps when local partners identify concrete legal and judicial reform needs but lack resources. They can be mobilized quickly to provide expertise and keep reform activity moving when funding is limited.

With USAID dismantled and no comparable successor in place, the U.S. rule of law assistance community should not wait for new rule of law policies or technical guidance. It has the expertise and experience to develop new design principles, delivery approaches, partnership structures, financing options, and practical tools that meet the moment.

This effort should also draw from learning by international donors, national justice actors, and rule of law implementers working outside the U.S. assistance space. Drawing from that wider experience will help the community stay connected, aligned, and future-ready.

Pathway 5

Advance People-Centered, Open, and Innovative Justice

The U.S. rule of law assistance community needs to keep people-centered, open, and innovative justice approaches at the forefront of future assistance design and delivery.

Despite the disruption, this is not the moment to retreat into traditional rule of law assistance approaches or re-define the agenda too narrowly. Independence, efficiency, and accountability will always matter. Security, stability, and conflict prevention always have. But future assistance should not lose sight of why rule of law and justice reform matter in the first place: helping people, communities, and businesses solve their justice problems.

People-centered justice has proven its value and resilience. Along with open justice, it is increasingly reflected in the policies and practices of justice institutions and actors around the world. The task now is to help make those approaches more tangible in how priorities are set, services are designed, resources are allocated, and results are measured.

Scalable innovation also needs to stay on the agenda as a way to make justice more people-centered and open. Digital tools, artificial intelligence, plain language, and financing for frontline justice services, for instance, are already changing how people access services, resolve problems, and experience justice.

Moving forward along this pathway requires drawing more deliberately on the toolkit now available. That includes the OECD Recommendation on people-centered justice, Justice Action

Coalition resources on justice financing and measurement, OGP open justice standards, and Pathfinders practice notes. It also means using data and diagnostic tools, such as the WJP Rule of Law Index, HiiL's Justice Needs and Satisfaction Survey, and the World Bank's JUPITER, to better understand performance, priorities, and reform needs.

Conclusion: Building What Comes Next

The disruption to U.S. rule of law assistance has changed the terrain, but it has not ended the work. Justice leaders around the world still need trusted partners, specialized expertise, and new ways to solve emerging as well as longstanding problems.

The question now is not whether the U.S. rule of law assistance community still has a role to play. It is how that role should be organized, adapted, and made useful in the new terrain.

The five pathways outlined in this Pathways Brief offer a starting point. They are not a substitute for U.S. funding, political leadership, or a new rule of law assistance framework. But they can help keep the community active, connected, and prepared for the future.

They can also help keep U.S. rule of law expertise connected to the wider international effort. As other donors and actors take on larger roles, locally led efforts will be stronger if they can draw on the knowledge, expertise, and good practices the U.S. community helped build.

Preserving knowledge, reconnecting experts, re-engaging local partners, recalibrating design and delivery, and advancing people-centered, open, and innovative justice are practical steps the community can take now. Together, they point toward a clearer value proposition for rule of law assistance.

Rule of law assistance should not be framed only as legal and judicial reform, institutional strengthening, or support for justice sector actors. It helps people solve problems, businesses operate with greater predictability, governments use resources more fairly, and other sectors such as health, education, economic growth, and the environment deliver better outcomes. That broader case will matter as a new U.S. development framework is debated and built.

Navigating the new terrain is the immediate task. Making the case that rule of law must figure prominently in this framework is what comes next.

About the Pathways Brief

This Pathways Brief draws on discussions at the Rule of Law Roundtable co-convened by the Rule of Law IDEAS CoLab and cylindr on June 18, 2026 at Georgetown University Law Center. The roundtable brought together approximately 30 rule of law practitioners, experts, and partners to consider how the U.S. rule of law assistance community might navigate disruption and position itself for what comes next. The Brief also reflects subsequent consultations and exchanges with members of the broader rule of law community.

The convenors thank Achieng Akumu, Golnoosh Hakimdavar, Jenny Willier Murphy, and Shibani Shah for helping facilitate the roundtable discussions and contributing to the exchange of ideas that informed this Brief.

Rule of Law IDEAS CoLab

The Rule of Law IDEAS CoLab is a platform for learning, exchange, and collaboration focused on the future of rule of law and justice reform. It connects justice innovators and rule of law influencers, curates practical tools and ideas, and helps advance more people-centered, open, and innovative approaches to justice.

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Published jointly by the Rule of Law IDEAS CoLab and cylindr.