



Understanding the Arab Forum and asset recovery: questions answered by Jean Pesme, Coordinator of StAR

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The Second Arab Forum on Asset Recovery (AFAR II) has been taking place in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh. Bringing together approximately two hundred participants from over forty countries, AFAR II gathers policy makers, legal practitioners, financial investigators and senior government officials to find solutions to the challenges of recovering stolen assets for the benefit of transition countries. AFAR II has been hosted by the Kingdom of Morocco and co-organized with the United Kingdom in its role as 2013 President of the G-8.

The first Arab Forum took place a year ago in Doha, Qatar and in the intervening period, a range of activities including hands-on assistance to the transition countries, regional trainings and engagement with civil society have been carried out to support asset recovery in the Arab World.

Jean Pesme the coordinator of StAR – the Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative of the World Bank and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) addresses below a number of issues and questions on the Arab Forum.

-Why is AFAR important?

The Arab Forum embodies collective action and a partnership between a growing number of financial centers and countries in transition to return stolen assets to their rightful owners. Its aim is to spur practical action – legal, institutional and case related – both in requesting and requested states, to tackle the various challenges related to asset recovery.

The Arab Forum's uniqueness lies in its ability to bring together policy makers as well as practitioners to deal with this complicated issue. By sharing their day-to-day challenges, they are able to identify obstacles and find practical solutions. The Forum also provides a unique venue for face-to-face engagement between participants. As a result, AFAR is able to address the overarching policy issues – both domestic and international - while at the same time dealing with the details of specific cases.

Bilateral meetings between different national delegations dealing with these issues are a critical component of the Forum. They allow representatives from the various participating countries to agree on concrete steps to move asset recovery cases forward. These meetings are vital in building relationships and trust between practitioners, which are essential to resolve the complicated and intricate nature of asset recovery.

The case related work of the Forum is by its nature confidential. The Forum as a whole is accountable: for instance, G8 countries have published 'roadmaps' on their implementation of [action plans on asset recovery](#), which take stock how they have fared in relation to their commitments and also sets out how to address the remaining issues.

The engagement of the members of the Arab Forum – including the StAR Initiative - with the press reflects the conviction that the media can play an important role in raising awareness of issue as a whole, highlighting progress achieved and can - along with the contribution of civil society organizations - help uncover stolen assets.

- What is the estimate of the assets stolen

We, in StAR and the World Bank, do not know how much has been stolen over the last years. The very nature of the theft and how stolen funds have been hidden, make it impossible to measure what has been taken.

In 2007 in a [report published during the launch of the StAR Initiative](#), we looked at the various estimates of money stolen and found that figure of US\$20 - \$40 billion annually represented the most conservative and the closest to our understanding of the scale of the amounts stolen from developing countries.

- How much money do we know has been recovered since the Arab Forum was established?

In the past two years, approximately US\$100 million in financial and physical assets related to the transition countries have been returned or frozen. This represents a strong signal that the asset recovery process can and does work.

What is particularly noteworthy is that these results were achieved in such a comparatively short timescale. There is clearly more money out there to be frozen, seized, and ultimately recovered. The progress so far should be a further incentive to push current efforts both in the Arab World and the financial centers.

- Why is asset recovery important?

Asset recovery is important in a multitude of ways. Primarily, it embodies the principle that there can be no impunity for such crimes. Asset recovery stands for accountability and the rule of law in the face of corruption and abuse of public office for private gains. More broadly, bad governance, lack of accountability and corruption have a negative impact on development, stability, and economic development both for the private and public sector.

-Is asset recovery working? What have been achieved so far?

Yes, it is working. We have had some notable achievements: the return of US\$29m from a bank account in Lebanon to Tunisia; Tunisia's recovery of planes and yachts from France, Italy and Spain. Tunisia's request for mutual legal assistance was accepted to Switzerland and 60 Million Swiss francs allegedly stolen by the Ben Ali family were frozen, and procedures are underway for their confiscation and return to Tunisia. Additionally, requests for mutual legal assistance in domestic cases for money laundering in several financial centers are moving forward. International cooperation has also borne fruit; [the UK announced at the Forum](#) that it has agreed with Egypt a list of priority cases to be pursued, with the UK mobilizing a range of domestic tools to trace these assets.

- The amount of recovered asset is small, is it worth it?

We all work actively to increase the amount of stolen assets returned. What we heard at the Forum is a constructive and practical approach to bolster international cooperation and domestic proceedings.

It is important to emphasize that each successful asset recovery case, irrespective of the amount recovered, has a strong deterrent effect – you cannot put a price on justice. Each successful case sends a powerful message to corrupt officials everywhere that their ill-gotten gains will be pursued and that there can be no impunity. We are also fixing the past to prevent the same actions occurring in the future.