

African Regional Forum on People-Centered Justice

“Advancing People-Centered Justice in Africa: Building Just Societies for All”

Session Concept Note

From Vulnerability to Voice: Realizing Justice for Children in Africa

Date: 28 October 2025

Time: 13:30 – 14:45 GMT (UTC+0)

Location: Banjul, The Gambia

Venue: **Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara International Conference Center – Thematic Room.**
(alongside the 85th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights)

African Alliance 
FOR PEOPLE-CENTERED JUSTICE
Co-organizers:



Introduction

This plenary session will explore the growing movement for **child-centred justice in Africa** and what it means to build judicial systems that are inclusive, participatory, rights-based, and empowering for children. Beyond protecting children within the justice system, a child-centred approach enables them to actively participate and shape it, placing their experiences, needs, and voices at the heart of policies and practices, whether in community-based services or national legal frameworks.

This discussion is particularly crucial for **children in conflict with the law** who remain among the most vulnerable and often invisible within justice systems. They must be protected from systemic violence and recognized as active agents in their own justice journey.

Anchored in the **African Union's Agenda 2040** and the **2025 Global Declaration on Advancing Child-Centred Justice**, the session will focus on **diversion** and **restorative justice** as key approaches for advancing child-centred justice systems and ending the detention of children in conflict with the law. Child and youth advocates, decision makers and practitioners will examine emerging trends and innovations, identify persistent challenges, and highlight both the transformative potential and the systemic barriers shaping access to child-sensitive, participatory and reintegrative justice systems.

Examples from countries such as Kenya, South Africa, and Burkina Faso will highlight how ambitious policy reforms and community-based restorative practices have successfully reduced child detention. These experiences will help identify the key levers and game changers needed to scale up effective models and inspire a continental coalition for substantive action.

Designed as an interactive dialogue, the session will promote the exchange of good practices and practical strategies adaptable across diverse African contexts. Its goal is to foster knowledge sharing and build a collective commitment to justice systems that move from punishment to reintegration, from vulnerability to voice, and from detention to dignity for every child and youth in Africa.

Background and Rationale

In recent years, the world has witnessed children and young people stepping to the forefront of justice movements. From demanding action against climate change, to denouncing gender-based violence, to calling out structural racism and discrimination in law enforcement, young people have not only shifted public debates but also shaped policy outcomes and driven legal innovation. These developments underline a critical reality: children are not passive, vulnerable recipients of justice but active rights-holders, innovators, and agents of change capable of shaping more protective, inclusive, and responsive justice systems.

The **2025 Global Declaration on Advancing Child-Centred Justice** reflects this momentum with a clear and urgent message: **justice systems must undergo a paradigm shift. Children must be recognised as rights-holders with agency, entitled to meaningful participation, access to remedies, and protection from violence.** A truly child-centred justice system entails transitioning from justice systems and services

that simply accommodate children and moves beyond accommodating children in adult-designed frameworks; to systems and effective remedies inherently designed around their rights, experiences, and well-being. It requires empowering children to prevent challenges before they arise, and to resolve them in age-appropriate, inclusive, and accessible ways.

This global call resonates strongly across Africa. Leaders such as Ms. Anne Mushiwa, Rapporteur for the ACERWC, and Mr. Kwesi Quartey, Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, have explicitly urged for child-centred justice and child-friendly systems. Ten years after the adoption of the **African Union's Agenda 2040**, it is time to deliver on the continental promise that every African child will have access to justice that is adapted, protective, inclusive, and restorative. The challenge now is to transform that vision into reality.

Yet, in practice, African children especially those in conflict with the law, still face inaccessible justice systems designed for adults. Punitive responses dominate, while systemic drivers of offending are overlooked and rehabilitative and participatory approaches remain underfunded and under-implemented. Many children continue to suffer arbitrary arrests, pre-trial detention, and custodial sentences, sometimes for petty crimes or acts that should not be criminalized, exposing them to violence, stigma, and long-term exclusion. Children who have lived experience of detention know very well the negative impact that it can create in their lives over the short-, medium- and long- term, especially when their voices, their rights and holistic rehabilitative services are not at the heart of reintegration process within the justice systems. Children in conflict with the law are among the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in society, and the lack of reliable data contributes to their invisibility.

These systemic shortcomings reflect the flawed assumptions underlying traditional juvenile justice policies, which rely heavily on detention and punitive sanctions to “neutralize” or “correct” children. Yet, in a region where half the population is under 18, projected to reach 1.2 billion children and youth by 2050, the way states respond to these children is crucial. Emphasizing child-centred justice, rather than traditional punitive juvenile justice, ensures that children are recognized as rights-holders, actively included, and empowered to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Shifting toward systems that prioritize prevention, protection, and rehabilitation is not merely a matter of legal reform; it is essential to recognize justice as a driver of opportunities, for breaking cycles of violence, promoting social cohesion, and laying the foundation for peace and sustainable development.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated that governments can act swiftly to release children from detention when faced with compelling reasons, demonstrating that alternatives to detention are both feasible and scalable. This experience underscores the urgent need to invest in child-centred approaches and move beyond punitive models. Africa, with its rich traditions rooted in restorative justice and alternatives to justice proceedings (such as diversion), is well-positioned to lead this shift. Evidence increasingly shows that non-custodial measures, diversion programs, and restorative justice approaches are far more effective than detention in breaking cycles of violence, reducing recidivism, and supporting the reintegration of children. Diversion and restorative justice offer direct benefits for children in conflict

with the law. They not only reduce exposure to detention, which often leads to stigma and vulnerability, but also promote accountability, reintegration, and the development of constructive conflict-resolution skills. While non-judicial avenues may be more accessible and preferable for children, states retain the fundamental responsibility to ensure access to these programs.

Promising models are already being developed and implemented across the continent. In Kenya and South Africa, legislation mandates that judges consider diversion for all offences, while Tanzania's Community Rehabilitation Program engages both children in conflict with the law and those at risk of offending in community-based restorative programs. In West Africa, experimental approaches within local and hybrid justice systems are showing promise by combining diversion with restorative justice. These approaches are not new; they are deeply rooted in African traditions of justice and concepts such as *Ubuntu*, which emphasize solidarity, reconciliation, and community-based conflict resolution.

By building on both African traditions and contemporary innovations in diversion and restorative justice, African states can drive a true continental paradigm shift and realize the child-centred vision outlined in Agenda 2040 and the 2025 Global Declaration: creating judicial systems that genuinely protect children's rights, foster their empowerment, and invest in their full potential.

Session Objectives

- Gain an understanding of emerging trends, good practices, and innovations in diversion and restorative justice across Africa, identifying what enables or hinders their effective implementation for children in conflict with the law.
- Showcase and learn from promising initiatives, local and national examples, that demonstrate how restorative justice and diversion approaches advance child-centred justice systems, reduce child detention, promote accountability, and support holistic reintegration, offering actionable lessons and replicable models for wider adoption and scale-up.
- Foster a shared vision and commitment among policymakers, practitioners, civil society and child and youth advocates to move from punitive, adult-oriented responses toward inclusive, restorative, and participatory justice systems that uphold children's rights, break cycles of violence, and strengthen social cohesion.
- Shape key messages and recommendations to guide continental and national efforts toward realizing the objectives of Agenda 2040 and the 2025 Global Declaration on Advancing Child-Centred Justice.

Agenda

Time	Topic	Speaker(s)/Format
13:30 –13:35	Welcoming remarks and framing of the discussion <i>Switching the paradigm: building child-centred, participatory and reintegrative justice systems</i>	Moderator. Laura Jacques, Regional Programme Manager of Access to Justice Program - Africa region, Terre des hommes Lausanne.
13:35 –13:55	Round 1: Emerging trends and challenges <i>Diversion and restorative justice as pathways to advance access to child-centred justice and end child detention: exploring barriers and opportunities</i>	Moderated Q&A with one targeted question for each of the speakers. Hermine Kembo Takam Gatsing, Member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). Patricia Peace Ejang, Young Justice Leader.
13:55 –14:00	Video presentation: Child Human Rights Defender.	Tara.
14:00 –14:20	Round 2: Success models and best practices <i>Highlighting good practices from national policy reforms to community-based practices: identifying key levers and gamechangers for replication and scale-up across Africa</i>	Thematic questions posed to the entire panel followed by cross-cutting discussions Hermine Kembo Takam Gatsing, Member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). Patricia Peace Ejang, Young Justice Leader.
14:20 –14:40	Audience Q&A	Moderated open discussion with speakers and audience.
14:45	Key takeaways and closing remarks <i>Summary of key messages, commitments, and next steps toward advancing child-centred justice in Africa.</i>	Closing statement by speakers, followed by the moderator's summary.