

People-Centered Justice

AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

*MINISTRIES OF JUSTICE**



* It is important to note that different jurisdictions may have different terms for the agency or department that has the mandate to handle matters of law and justice. These terms include ministry of justice/legal affairs/law, department of justice, or office of the Attorney General. This note, for ease of reference, will make reference to the Ministry of Justice as a generic term, interchangeable with other terms that may be used for similar functions in different jurisdictions.

Acknowledgements

This paper was commissioned by the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies (hosted by the NYU Center on International Cooperation), with funding from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Pathfinders is grateful to Djordje Djordjevic, Swati Mehta, Laura Ospina, Themba Mahleka, Nate Edwards and Leah Guyot; and to peer reviewers Eveline de Bruijn and Fernando Marani, whose feedback helped shape and enrich the paper. Pathfinders is also grateful to Justice Canada, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the US Agency for International Development, UNDP, and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI Global) for their feedback on earlier drafts of these practice notes.

Thanks also to Mark Weston for copyediting and Ben Brockbank for design, and Thibault Chareton and Symphony Chau for editorial support.

About this Publication

© New York University Center on International Cooperation, 2025. All Rights Reserved.

Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, “People-Centered Justice, An Approach to Strategy, Policy and Program Development—Practice Note 2, Ministries of Justice,” NYU Center on International Cooperation, November 2025, sdg16.plus/justice.

Getting Started: A Checklist for Ministries of Justice Interested in Pivoting to People-Centered Justice



CHECKLIST: Collect data and understand people's justice needs



- ☐ **Map existing justice data resources** including those collected by justice institutions (such as judiciaries or the police), administrative as well as other data (including data from ombuds offices or ministries such as labor, health or women or CSOs), both qualitative and quantitative.
- ☐ **Map and work closely with potential justice data stakeholders** including National Statistics Offices, other government departments, and civil society organizations.
- ☐ **Promote common methodologies and develop an integrated data collection system** across justice service providers to support strategy, policy, and program development as well as monitoring people's access to justice at all levels.
- ☐ **Encourage and support disaggregated data collection** to ensure nuanced understanding of justice problems and needs across diverse populations to tailor justice interventions accordingly.
- ☐ **Identify prevalent justice problems** based on analysis of the findings of legal/justice needs surveys and other people-focused data including qualitative studies and **explore cross-sectoral responses** aimed at prevention and remedy.



CHECKLIST: Adopt an evidence-based approach to strategy, policy, and program development



- ☐ **Adopt evidence-based strategic planning**—informed by legal/justice needs surveys and other data—to identify objectives for justice reform and ensure long-term sustainability. Develop mechanisms to identify and scale successful pilots and local level initiatives.
- ☐ **Identify entry-points for pursuing people-centered justice reforms** in national and local contexts. Create a list of potential challenges and barriers that may need to be overcome, including regulatory reform.
- ☐ **Organize workshops and training** for staff and facilitate public discussions on people-centered justice.
- ☐ **Create incentives**—through legislation, policy or regulations—for justice providers **to use data in policy and program** development.



CHECKLIST: Align actions of relevant ministries and justice actors



- ☐ **Promote awareness** of key principles and best practices for developing people-centered justice strategies, policies, programs, and services.
- ☐ **Work towards a joint vision and financing plan to deliver justice reform.** Establish and support a national coalition for promoting people-centered justice. Enhance coordination and collaboration among national, local and where relevant, international actors. Develop a national cross-sectoral strategic reform and investment plan.
- ☐ **Engage and partner with other ministries** to ensure plans are based on realistic assessment of resources available and promote cross- sectoral approaches at national and local levels.
- ☐ **Engage with external funders, if any, to ensure they align assistance** with the joint national vision.



CHECKLIST: Simplify processes, use technology, decentralize and partner with local service providers



- ☐ **Simplify justice procedures** (participation, process, and cost) based on user feedback to improve people's trust in systems and their experiences of seeking justice.
- ☐ **Review potential for regulatory reform** (such as allowing non-lawyers to provide basic advice and services at the community level) to reduce costs and increase reach of justice services.
- ☐ **Provide relevant information and services online** and offer them at community level as well, to improve transparency, accessibility and delivery of justice services. Remember online resources complement, but do not completely replace community-level, in-person approaches.
- ☐ **Explore opportunities to collaborate with community-based justice service providers.** Empower and improve the quality of service provided by informal and community-based justice actors. Include these stakeholders in discussions and strategic planning sessions with formal justice actors and consider the (evidence-based) case for financing the scaling up of their services.
- ☐ **Increase language accessibility** by providing translated documents and using interpretation services to improve transparency, accessibility, and delivery of justice services for everyone.

Introduction and Objectives

This Practice Note is part of a series developed for different justice actors and service providers to support the transition to a people-centered approach to justice and reduce the justice gap. Such a transition is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 16.3 which seeks to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.

People-centered justice is a context-specific approach, prioritizing the prevention and effective resolution of people's justice problems by putting people and their needs at the center of justice systems, priorities, policies and interventions. While a 'one-size-fits-all' methodology for delivering people-centered justice is not possible, we have developed a series of practice notes to support key justice stakeholders in implementing the approach.

This note serves as a guide for **civil servants** working in **Ministries of Justice (MoJs)** as well as other government employees in the line ministries and agencies supporting justice service delivery who are interested in transitioning to a people-centered approach to justice. It is designed to be read in conjunction with the series' introductory note, which discusses the concept of people-centered justice and outlines key interventions needed for its implementation. Other practice notes respectively target: (1) judiciaries, (3) external funders, (4) international program implementers, and (5) any actors interested in institutional reforms specifically.

The Role of the Judiciary in Pursuing a People-Centered Approach to Justice

MoJs perform a variety of mandates related to legal system policy formulation and oversight, access to justice, crime prevention and rehabilitation, as well as international legal affairs. Depending on the context, their functions concern institutional aspects of protection of citizens' rights, administration of criminal and civil justice systems, provision of legal aid, and correctional and probation services. Therefore, MoJs are central to any justice sector reform efforts.

MoJs can play a critical role in advancing people-centered justice by taking into account people's needs when designing and implementing policies.¹ Pivoting to people-centered justice means moving beyond focusing only on formal institutions to look specifically at how people experience justice problems, who they approach to access justice, and how the justice system can be most responsive to their lived experiences.²

The Justice Action Coalition³ proposes **four key actions** that can be taken to further people-centered justice:

1. *Gathering data on the justice people want and need and how they experience their justice journey.*
2. *Co-creating strategies to become better at resolving and preventing people's most common justice problems, ensuring gender equality of all responses.*
3. *Setting shared goals for a range of justice actors and implementing strategies to achieve these goals.*
4. *Investing at scale to transform justice as it is delivered to and experienced by people, reducing the number of unresolved justice problems, and creating fair outcomes.*

MoJs have a key role to play in pursuing these four actions and in recent years, they have led a broad range of innovative initiatives focused on improving access to justice, while ensuring coherent, coordinated, and complementary strategies and interventions.

Entry Points for Action

MoJs can be instrumental in leading and mobilizing transformative ideas, finances and other actors towards a people-centered approach to justice service delivery. Recognizing that each context is different, below is a suggested list of potential entry points for action.



Collect data and understand people's justice needs

The key principle of people-centered justice is that any justice policy, strategy, or program is based on a thorough understanding of people's justice needs. Based on this understanding, pathways or mechanisms can be created to address those needs.

Legal/justice needs surveys are a key tool to “investigate the experience of [resolving] legal problems from the perspective of those who face them, rather than the professionals and institutions that may play a role in their resolution.”⁴ They enable MoJs to obtain data on people's most common justice problems, what percentage of those who sought to solve them through available services, and their experiences in trying to resolve them.⁵ This data—along with other available quantitative and/or qualitative data—can inform the design of targeted interventions including improving service delivery at the community level or the simplification of justice procedures. It can also support a better understanding of the socio-economic context in which problems arise, the contributing factors, and means of preventing them, which can inform cross-sectoral interventions.

Ultimately, insights gained through data will provide public policymakers with a basis for designing effective services, including alternative and informal justice mechanisms.⁶ Ideally, where possible, legal/justice needs surveys should be conducted on an ongoing basis (every three years or so) to build a continuous loop which includes the establishment of baselines, the creation and implementation of interventions, and assessment of the efficacy of said interventions. Where survey costs are a concern, relevant questions can be added to existing population surveys conducted by planning or statistics departments.



Adopt an evidence-based approach to strategy, policy, and program development

People-centered justice requires data collection on people's justice problems and justice journeys. MoJs play a leading role in developing IT infrastructures and integrated data systems as well as in promoting data usage in strategic planning, policy, and program development. Integrated data systems aggregate data from many different institutions and actors across the justice system, ensuring optimum (financial and human) resource utilization—avoiding duplication of efforts and addressing data gaps.

Data and evidence support MoJs in measuring justice actors and services' performance. Some government agencies have already developed evidence-based guidelines for identifying best practices.⁷ In many countries, research institutions have become repositories of justice data. They

also provide training on evidence-based analytical tools. Where such institutes do not exist the MoJ may want to consider the case for strengthening effective monitoring, evaluation and learning in the sector, including the case for institutionalizing these processes (i.e., through a cross-sector coordination office, a one-off national review, and/or a national justice learning institute to identify the most cost-effective approaches). Beyond the national level, engaging with regional⁸ and international⁹ networks can help to facilitate the exchange of information, methodology and training for policy research and development.

To effectively implement data strategies, MoJs must invest in staff development, establish rules and regulations regarding access to data and privacy safeguards, and ensure a link between data collection and improved justice outcomes.¹⁰



Align actions of relevant ministries and justice actors

The MoJ is central to aligning stakeholders under an overarching justice vision, strategy and plan. MoJs can do this in several ways.

Cross-sectoral initiatives have been identified by many justice ministries as a successful and innovative way to advance access to justice.¹¹ This requires collaboration and negotiation with relevant line ministries such as the ministries of planning and finance to effectively budget and operationalize access to justice strategies. MoJs can consider creating a cross-sectoral platform¹² for promoting people-centered justice. They should collaborate across the spectrum of stakeholders to create a shared vision on equal access to justice for all. Collaboration can be achieved through activities such as joint analyses, joint data collection, and collective monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes.

MoJs should lead strategic planning to identify objectives for cross-sectoral responses to justice problems, with a focus on sustainability and scaling up pilot and local programs that have proven successful in improving access, quality, and/or cost-effectiveness of justice services. They must improve inter-operationality between government justice institutions at both the national and local levels. Additionally, efforts must be made to support partnerships among government agencies, community service and community-based organizations; between formal as well as customary and informal justice service providers; and with other supporting services across sectors.

When engaging with external funders, MoJs should require them to align their support with national and local people-centered justice strategies, with a focus on local ownership, sustainability, and scalability.

To bring these efforts together MoJs might consider leading the development of a **national cross-sectoral strategic reform and investment plan** for people-centered justice. This plan should seek to maximize financing efforts while being realistic about total available resources when planning. It would require the MoJ to review the justice budgetary allocation in light of cross-country benchmarks, consider the potential for the sector to raise its own income through court or user fees, and work with external partners to assess the level of their support and measures to improve the effectiveness of justice funding. Based on this, the plan should set out a few costed, measurable, time-bound people-centered justice objectives that are achievable in the light of available finance. The plan should also set out initiatives to maximize effectiveness and efficiency to deliver people-centered justice and include detailed finance and spending actions, including steps and processes needed for implementation.¹³



Simplify processes, use technology, decentralize, and partner with local service providers

The scale of the justice gap is a challenge for many MoJs to resolve alone. Bridging this gap is unlikely to be achieved with a mere extension of traditional (formal) institutional approaches, given that justice institutions often face case overloads, limited capacity, and budgetary constraints, as they seek to maintain the quality of existing services. Providing quality justice services to vulnerable people who are most at risk of being left behind (including those living in geographically remote areas) is a persistent challenge for MoJs. Simplifying processes and partnering with local service providers that sit outside formal justice institutions can help address this challenge.

Taking a holistic approach to justice service delivery will likely create valuable linkages and referrals with better outcomes for people. Community justice service providers such as civil society organizations, community-based organizations, customary justice providers, paralegals, community mediators, and traditional leaders can link informal justice providers with local courts and service providers such as social workers, psychologists, and municipal human rights officers. Promoting local ownership and targeting people in remote areas via paralegals, mobile legal aid services or mobile courts can support community-level development initiatives.¹⁴

Mindful and equitable use of technology can also increase access to justice services. Online platforms that offer legal information and services can reach new justice seekers, especially younger users, and enhance legal assistance. However, the use of technology and its potential benefits must be contextualized because in certain instances and jurisdictions, due to limited access, technology may present an additional barrier as opposed to being a solution.

MoJs can play a critical role in identifying existing effective responses to justice problems including customary justice providers, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, community paralegals or local NGO initiatives, use of technology, and assess their (cost) effectiveness alongside traditional approaches led by formal justice institutions. This will help identify programs which need additional support (e.g., to improve quality) and where a strong case can be made to scale up localized solutions.

Examples of Effective Policy Interventions



Community Mediation Boards: Sri Lanka

In 1990, Sri Lanka established the first Community Mediation Boards, seeking to provide access to justice to marginalized communities, by ensuring a free, fast, and locally available alternative to formal litigation. Currently, there are 329 Boards, comprising more than 8,500 volunteer mediators, 20 percent of whom are women. On average, they deal with more than 200,000 disputes per year with a settlement rate of over 65 percent.

It is mandatory for certain types of disputes to be referred to the Mediation Boards before they can be presented to a formal court. However, participation in the mediation process is entirely voluntary. The disputes brought before the Boards include minor criminal offenses, civil, land, and debt issues.

The Boards are regulated and administered by the Ministry of Justice and an independent Mediation Boards Commission. The Commission appoints and supervises all volunteer mediators.

Additional Source: [Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution Program](#)



Local Justice Systems: Colombia

In 2001, the Ministry of Justice and the Law introduced a National Justice Program to foster coordination within the justice sector. A significant aspect of this program was the creation of Local Justice Systems (LJS), a strategy and a platform that aimed to foster institutional collaboration among diverse justice actors and to harmonize efforts to effectively serve communities in their territories.

The fundamental element of the LJSs is the coordinated provision of solutions to uphold rights and manage conflicts. Through established pathways, each stakeholder contributes to a collective effort aimed at delivering comprehensive, relevant, and timely responses in the local context. This approach relies not only on the response of state entities but also on the contributions of non-state justice actors, particularly community leaders.

Starting as local programs, LJSs have evolved into a national strategy championed by the Ministry of Justice in collaboration with various justice stakeholders, communities, and international donors—rolling out across more than 100 municipalities. The framework for these pathways is provided by local and departmental (subnational level) justice committees, National Development Plans and the Ten-Year Justice Plan (2017-2027).

Endnotes

1. Sam Muller, "Global week for justice: An emerging minister of justice movement," *Global Dashboard*, 2020, <https://globaldashboard.org/2020/10/28/an-emerging-ministers-of-justice-movement/>.
2. For example, embracing the reality that most Kenyans do not seek justice in the courts, in 2016, the judiciary established the Taskforce on Traditional, Informal and Other Mechanisms Used to Access Justice in Kenya. Its mandate was to examine existing practices of dispute resolution taking place outside the courts and to formulate an appropriate judicial policy in response. Many ministries across the world including Colombia and South Africa are conducting legal needs surveys to understand people's legal problems and their justice journeys to better design their policies. See examples of some legal needs surveys here: Dashboard, "Atlas of Legal Needs Survey," *World Justice Project*, n.d., <https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/atlas-legal-needs-surveys>.
3. The Justice Action Coalition (JAC) is a multi-stakeholder alliance of countries and organizations that is working to achieve measurable progress in justice outcomes for people and communities by the third SDG summit in 2027 and beyond. In 2022, the JAC called on countries to come to make 2023 a turning point for people-centered justice in the 2023 Justice Appeal. <https://www.sdg16.plus/justice-action-coalition/>.
4. The OECD/OSF Guide provides a framework for the design, implementation and analysis of legal needs surveys based on 25 years of experience in a range of countries. OECD/OSF, "Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice," OECD, 2019, 25, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/05/legal-needs-surveys-and-access-to-justice_g1g9a36c/g2g9a36c-en.pdf.
5. For an Atlas of Legal Needs Surveys containing some 230 studies from 108 countries and jurisdictions, see Dashboard, "Atlas of Legal Needs Survey."
6. See, the Indonesian case study: Webpage, "Increasing Quality and Accessible Legal Aid (ID0146)," *Open Government Partnership*, n.d., www.opengovpartnership.org/members/indonesia/commitments/ID0146/.
7. See, for example, "Guide on the Implementation of Evidence-Based Programs: What Do We Know So Far?," *Public Safety Canada*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/gd-mplmntn-vdnc-prgrms/index-en.aspx>; Webpage, "Institutes of the UN Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Programme Network (PNI)," UNODC, n.d., www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CCPCJ/PNI/institutes.html.
8. News Release, "Platform for Effective Security and Justice Solutions," *Inter-American Development Bank*, April 2023, www.iadb.org/en/news/idb-launches-platform-effective-security-and-justice-solutions.
9. Webpage, "Institutes of the UN Crime Prevention."
10. Peter Chapman, "Grasping the Justice Gap: Opportunities and Challenges for People-Centered Justice Data," *World Justice Project/Pathfinders/OECD*, 2021, worldjusticeproject.org/news/grasping-justice-gap-opportunities-and-challenges-people-centered-justice-data.
11. Examples of this can be seen in Montenegro: Roxana Irimia et al., "Analysis of the Cross-Sector System for Children with Disabilities in Montenegro," *Plur Consult, Government of Montenegro, UNICEF*, November 2019, www.unicef.org/montenegro/media/15866/file/MNE-media-1963publication.pdf;
12. Vanuatu: "Strategy for the Justice and Community Services Sector (2014-2017)," *Ministry of Justice and Community Services*, n.d., [https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/policy/Strategy for the Justice and Community Services Sector 2014-2017.pdf](https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/policy/Strategy%20for%20the%20Justice%20and%20Community%20Services%20Sector%202014-2017.pdf); Norway: Webpage, "Youth Policy Governance," *European Commission*, last updated March 21, 2024, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/norway/15-cross-sectoral-approach-with-other-ministries>; Albania: "Annual Monitorial Report," *Government of Albania*, May 2023, <https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Annual-Monitoring-Report-2022.pdf>.
13. Early examples include multistakeholder platforms in East Africa, such as the Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS) in Uganda: <https://judiciary.go.ug/data/smenu/104/Justice%20Law%20and%20Order%20Sector.html> and the Justice, Reconciliation, Law and Order Sector (JRLO Sector)" in Rwanda (founded in 2010), "Justice, Reconciliation, Law & Order Sector," *Ministry of Justice Rwanda*, 2022-2023, <https://e-ihuriro.rcsprwanda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Justice-Reconciliation-Law-Order-Sector.pdf>.
14. For further guidance on these issues, see the Justice Action Coalition Workstream IV's "Justice Financing Framework," *Justice Action Coalition*, November 2025, <https://www.sdg16.plus/justice-financing-framework>.
15. See examples from the Maldives: Webpage, "Mobile Legal Aid Clinic (MLAC)," *PLIC*, n.d., <https://www.pilcmv.org/projects-mobile-legal-aid>; Georgia: Press Release, "Legal Aid on Wheels Reaches Remote Communities in Georgia," *UNDP*, October 18, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/georgia/press-releases/mobile-legal-clinic>; and Webpage, "Community-Based Justice Research (CBJR)," *CFCJ FCJC*, n.d., <https://cfcj-fcjc.org/our-projects/community-based-justice-research-cbjr/> for other examples.