

People-Centered Justice

AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

*External Funders**



*Although targeted at primarily bilateral and multilateral donors, this note may be useful for other external funders including philanthropic and private donors—as well as multilateral development banks, who ‘fund’ justice programming through loans.

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Getting started: a checklist for external funders interested in pivoting to people-centered justice



CHECKLIST: Ensure awareness and understanding on what people-centered justice means



- ☐ **Understand the key principles and best practices** for developing people-centered justice strategies, policies and programs.
- ☐ **Engage with like-minded partners and networks** such as the Justice Action Coalition, to expand your understanding on people-centered justice
- ☐ **Develop a context-specific business case** for promoting people-centered justice with government ministries and agencies, community service organizations (CSOs), the private sector, academia, and other international stakeholders.



CHECKLIST: Move beyond fragmented funding



- ☐ Engage with other external funders, including within your government to **ensure collaboration around common goals** and coherence with host government's national priorities.
- ☐ **Develop joint justice service delivery analyses** with other external funders and members of the international community, to arrive at a holistic assessment of existing justice systems and providers as well as the gap in justice service provision.
- ☐ **Reduce fragmentation** and develop more funding channels as well as common compliance, monitoring and reporting requirements in consultation with other external funders, host government, and other key stakeholders including local CSOs.



CHECKLIST: Facilitate and support collective action



- ☐ **Encourage and support collective action** at the national level to set up or strengthen justice sector coordination structures or mechanisms and create a joint vision, strategy and plans.
- ☐ **Support and incentivize partnerships** and improve inter-operationally between key stakeholders.
- ☐ Develop new joint initiatives and improved capacity for **integrated data collection** on justice service delivery, conducting **legal/justice needs assessments** and progress monitoring as well as **data usage** in strategy, policy, and program development.
- ☐ Encourage and support collective impact measurement over fragmented project-based monitoring and evaluation efforts.



CHECKLIST: Support sustainability and scalability



- ☐ In addition to institutional and regulatory reforms, fund and support **innovative, cost-effective, and scalable solutions** and services including community-based ones for improving access to justice for all.
- ☐ **Enhance local and community-based program capacities** to gather data, monitor progress, adapt to new challenges, meet compliance demands of donors, and report on impact and lessons learned for program iteration and potential scaling.



CHECKLIST: Advocate transition to people-centered justice



- ☐ Support national and international actors to collaborate on advancing people-centered justice.
- ☐ Create and support platforms for global, regional and national actors to share good practices and engage on people-centered justice.



CHECKLIST: Assess funding proposals for people-centered approaches to justice



When calling for examining proposals on rule of law or access to justice, check whether:

- ☐ Program objectives and theories of change prioritize the needs of the users of formal justice institutions and informal justice services and are based on evidence-based analysis of those needs. If data on justice needs and gaps in justice services provision is not readily available, allow for this to be collected and fed into program re-design, as needed.
- ☐ There are additional opportunities for supporting local and community-level access to justice services, including front line workers and informal justice providers.
- ☐ Whether programs or program components aimed at institutional reform are designed to include—and their designated outcomes can be measured against—tangible improvements in justice service delivery.
- ☐ Whether proposed initiatives are data-driven, focused on viable problem-solving solutions, participatory and collaborative in their approach, and set up adequate expectations in terms of the timeline of delivery, range of impact and sustainability plan.
- ☐ Whether programs contain innovative and cost-effective solutions that can be tested and potentially scaled up, or include a post-program cycle sustainability plan.

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 reduces the justice gap. Such a transition is in line with SDG 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 **external funders** who are interested in supporting 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, (2) Ministries of Justice, (4) international program implementers, and (5) any actors interested in institutional reforms specifically.

What Is the Role of External Funders in Pursuing a People-Centered Approach to Justice?¹

Research demonstrates that **top-down efforts by donors to impact rule-of-law norms**, such as judicial independence and human rights standards, do not often result in improved access to justice for people on the ground.² In order to demonstrate impact and increase access to justice for the highest number of people, **external funders should also fund local justice services that prevent and resolve people's justice problems at the community level**. Within this, **priority should be given to funding interventions with strong evidence** of value for money, impact, scalability and sustainability.

Beginning with an understanding of people's justice needs, greater investment should be made in people-centered justice services through local justice services providers, non-state justice institutions including civil society and customary and informal justice providers (i.e., paralegals, elders, chiefs), and other civil law and dispute resolution mechanisms alongside criminal justice ones. Recent evaluations suggest that investing in community-based services delivers results, even where there is weak institutional capacity and other adverse conditions.³ In comparison, recent evaluations also indicated limited success of donor programming focused on top-down institutional reform and capacity building.⁴

A pivot to people-centered justice requires policy coherence, program coordination, and strategic alignment among a broad range of local, national, and international stakeholders. External funders can create incentives for a variety of actors, whether through diplomatic channels, thought leadership, or funding policies, to support this pivot. In practice, this kind of coordination in the justice sector had been achieved through strong national leadership, supported by new institutional structures for cross-sectoral coordination and monitoring and evaluation. There are several examples of external funders supporting in-country justice sector coordination, which can be critical to supporting a transition to a people-centered justice in approach but only if they have the buy-in of and are led by national actors.⁵

Entry Points for Action

Recognizing that each context is different, below is a suggested list of potential entry points for action by external funders.



Ensure awareness and understanding of what people-centered justice means

To promote and implement a people-centered justice approach, it is important to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the approach, its relevance, and its implications for local contexts.⁶ Such understanding should be promoted among external funders themselves at all levels, including in capitals, host countries (embassies), and at the permanent missions to the United Nations (UN). The term “people-centered justice” is not always well understood.

Some programs, even while purporting to enact people-centered justice, still proceed with business as usual. They often concentrate their support on institutional reform and coordination within the justice sector but lack a focus on people’s actual justice needs and experiences of seeking justice. Such top-down interventions may often operate under the implicit assumption that they will result in improved service delivery for the people. Evaluations and programming over the past 20 years have, however, concluded that this assumption does not hold and that the top down approach to justice reform has not resulted in significant impact for the system’s users.⁷ It is important for funders to ensure people-centered justice principles are understood and upheld within their policies and practices.



Move beyond fragmented funding

Much of the funding for rule of law and access to justice programs comes from an array of external funders supporting separate programs and projects.⁸ Therefore, access to justice programs are often misaligned and fail to reflect a shared understanding of what the key justice challenges are and how they should be addressed. A people-centered approach to justice requires collaboration across external funders and local actors to maximize the impact of investments.

For bilateral donors, coherence and coordination should start with an effort to align assistance initiatives among the various donor ministries and agencies within their own governments.⁹ At the host country level, this means developing effective mechanisms to support host country-led, people-centered justice reform efforts.

To ensure a long-term impact on justice service provision, external funders should commit to long-term assistance and align around common goals and strategies for programming within the national context.¹⁰ Engaging with a novel approach to supporting justice sector reform and investment is likely to be more effective if done through joint planning, analyses, advocacy, and (where possible) pooled funds by multiple external funders.

Further, this also calls upon national and international justice actors to work together towards shared data collection and needs analysis to arrive at an understanding of common justice problems and gaps in services. Ultimately, there must be a shared vision of what actions are to be prioritized to ensure people’s justice needs are met at the local level. The most effective coordination mechanisms bring together external funders and a broad range of local, national and international funding strategies. These create enabling environment for complementary interventions and integrated funding.¹¹



Facilitate collective action

Local ownership is the key to success in justice sector reform, but external funders have an important role in supporting local initiatives to facilitate collaboration and alignment of objectives across an array of key stakeholders.

External funders can play a critical role in supporting local actors to develop justice sector coordinating structures and mechanisms.¹² They can, for example, support country-led efforts to develop a national cross-sectoral strategic reform and investment plan for people-centered justice seeking to maximize financing efforts while being realistic about total available finance when planning.¹³ Where it is not possible to engage a broad coalition of stakeholders to develop a shared long-term national strategy, external funders can focus on specific joint initiatives that create an enabling environment for collaboration in the future. They can support and incentivize partnerships and improve inter-operationality between host government justice institutions at the national and at the local level; between government agencies, civil society and community-based organizations; between formal and informal justice service providers; and between justice system service providers and other supporting services across different sectors.

Collective action can also be incentivized and encouraged around collecting and using data on people's justice needs as well as on the quality and reach of service delivery. This constitutes the backbone of people-centered justice. External funders should support and promote capacity development for conducting regular justice needs surveys and qualitative data collection, harmonizing data collection methodologies and integrating existing justice data, monitoring progress and reporting on programmatic impact, as well as using data for policy and programming development.¹⁴ External funders must strive to develop a shared vision, joint analyses and joint monitoring, evaluation and learning practices. Collective impact measurement should be encouraged over fragmented project-based measurement and evaluation efforts.



Support sustainability and scalability

There is still a gap between assistance and attention to top-down reform of justice institutions and national-level justice processes on the one hand and providing direct support for community justice services on the other. Both are important and they are mutually reinforcing. External funders can use their assistance to bridge this gap, by focusing on ensuring the sustainability and scalability of initiatives to support and test innovative and context-specific local justice services.¹⁵

External funders play a critical role in incentivizing and facilitating greater portfolios of interventions for access to justice at national and local levels, which can later be scaled, depending on their cost-effectiveness. Funders can support the use of successful pilots delivering justice services at the community level to inform national level justice planning. An example of such a scalable pilot is the joint initiative by Namati and the Open Society Justice Initiative which is being conducted in Kenya, Bangladesh, and Jordan. The project trains community-based paralegals within historically stateless communities, which continue to struggle with ineffective citizenship, to help people acquire and use identity documents, and to track each case to monitor the implementation of laws in this field.¹⁶ External funders can play a key role in supporting advocacy for these types of local programs to gain more support at the national level, or to be replicated in other contexts.

Another example of local justice initiative turned sustainable and expanded at the national level is the **Sierra Leone Legal Aid Board**, initially funded by the United Kingdom in a legal aid pilot scheme. The

Board is now funded almost entirely by the Sierra Leone government, and provides cost-effective, scaled-up, community-based justice advice, support and mediation services through a network of community-based paralegals at a scalable cost of USD 22 per case.¹⁷

Access to justice initiatives should also be linked with the current global localization agenda.¹⁸ Localization implies that aid work should be locally led and supported through direct investment, enabling communities to be the drivers behind programs and empowered to support their own needs. At present, most donor funding for local projects is disbursed through international organizations, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other implementers based in the Global North.¹⁹ External funders should support local organizations to meet their programmatic and compliance demands instead of redistributing those resources to international NGOs when those demands cannot be met. It is important that external funders continue to increase their accountability to recipient communities, explore more effective modalities for sharing responsibility among all stakeholders, and improve transparency around contracting and sub-contracting.



Advocate transition to people-centered justice at global, regional, and national level

External funders can play a key role in mobilizing and supporting national and international actors to collaborate on advancing people-centered justice. Political capital enables external funders to create platforms for learning exchange and collective action. These platforms can sit at the regional or international level, drawing national engagement through key activities and linking national priorities to the global agenda on equal access to justice for all. One key example of a donor supported global mobilization platform for access to justice is the [Justice Action Coalition](#).



Justice Action Coalition: Cross-Regional and Multistakeholder Global Advocacy Platform Supported by External Funders

Launched in 2021, with initial support from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Justice Action Coalition is a multi-stakeholder alliance of countries and international organizations working to achieve measurable progress in justice outcomes for people and communities. The Coalition, now supported by multiple external funders, serves as a platform for peer-to-peer learning and exchange on domestic experience, lessons learned and coordinating support for national justice programs. Through its Workstream 2 (Strategy, Programming & Innovation), coordinated by UNDP, the Coalition operates a catalytic fund that provides financial support ranging from USD 50,000 to USD 200,000 per proposal to support countries in co-creating and implementing innovative people-centered justice strategies at the national level.

Following a Joint Letter to the UN Secretary-General in 2021, the United Nations' Secretary-General report on Our Common Agenda as well as his new vision on rule of law puts people at the center of justice systems. The Coalition's Justice Appeal²⁰ urged countries to arrive at the 2023 SDG Summit with data and evidence to demonstrate their contribution to closing the global justice gap. It continues to support and call for action at national and regional level, better data on the justice gap, evidence on innovations that work, and an emphasis to focus on those most at risk of being left behind.

Source: Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies, "Justice Action Coalition."²¹



Kenya's Blueprint for Social Transformation through Access to Justice

Kenya's Blueprint for Social Transformation through Access to Justice is a strong example of what locally led, people-centered justice reform can look like in practice. Spearheaded by the Kenyan Judiciary, the Blueprint sets out a bold, long-term vision to make justice more accessible, responsive, and inclusive—particularly for marginalized communities. While the process was nationally owned and driven, it benefited from the expertise and facilitation of technical partners such as the Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiIL), the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). These organizations were able to provide this support through funding made available by international donors. These investments, in capable and trusted technical partners, created the conditions for this kind of meaningful collaboration. This example demonstrates how external funders can play a catalytic role by resourcing ecosystem actors that are well-positioned to support national institutions in designing and delivering people-centered justice solutions.

Source: A Blueprint for Social Transformation through Access to Justice²²

Endnotes

1. The capacity of external funders to contribute to pivoting to people-centered justice at the country level depends on a number of factors such as the bilateral interests and reasons for engagement, the degree of independence of those working in the field; strategic, policy, and programming support from the capitals; opportunities for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the country context; and resources at hand and funding channels available, among others.
2. Clare Manuel, Marcus Manuel, "Justice Aid Update and Lessons from Latest Evaluations of Donor Programming," ODI, 2022, 23, <https://odi.org/en/publications/justice-aid-update-and-lessons-from-latest-evaluations-of-donor-programming/>.
3. Ibid, 20.
4. Adam Day and Jessica Caus, "Overarching Paper, Rule of Law and Sustaining Peace: Towards More Impactful, Effective Conflict," *United Nations University*, 2021, http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8342/RuleofLaw_Overarching.pdf; Special Report, "EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist," European Court of Auditors, 2022, https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/sr22_01/sr_rol-balkans_en.pdf.
5. Early examples include multistakeholder platforms in East Africa, such as the Webpage, "Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS) in Uganda," *Government of Uganda*, n.d., <https://judiciary.go.ug/data/smenu/104/Justice%20Law%20and%20Order%20Sector.html>; Webpage, "Government, Justice, Law and Order (GJLOS)," *Government of Kenya*, n.d., <https://www.statelaw.go.ke/government-services/governance-justice-law-and-order/>; Webpage, "Justice, Reconciliation, Law and Order Sector (JRLO Sector) in Rwanda (founded in 2010)," *Government of Rwanda*, n.d., <https://www.minijust.gov.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=87508&token=6b3dace0df5d32d4eee8e806fca5a9cec8c0ab03>; Webpage, "Uganda's Justice, Law & Order Services," *Government of Uganda*, n.d., <https://www.jsc.go.ug/jsc/justice-law-and-order-sector-overview>.
6. This series is intended to provide initial information and guidance to resources on people-centered justice. See also Further Readings section in the Introductory Note.
7. Manuel and Manuel, "Justice Aid Update and Lessons from Latest Evaluations of Donor Programming," 23.
8. UNDP, "From Fragmentation to Integration: Embedding Social Issues in Sustainable Finance," *UNDP*, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/publications/fragmentation-integration-embedding-social-issues-sustainable-finance>.
9. For an example of an initiative to enhance coherence and strategic focus of the US government's international assistance on rule of law at the central level, see the 2020 report of the US Government Accountability Office, "Rule of Law Assistance: Agency Efforts Are Guided by Various Strategies, and Overseas Missions Should Ensure that Programming Is Fully Coordinated," *US GAO*, 2020, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-393>. The assessment includes funding by the US State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, which allocated more than USD 2.7 billion for rule of law assistance in FY 2014–2018, and focuses on countries with the largest expenditures at the time: Afghanistan, Colombia, and Mexico.
10. See, for example, DIE, "Donor Coordination: Basic Requirement for More Efficient and Effective Development Cooperation," *German Development Institute*, 2004, www.files.ethz.ch/isn/27605/2004-07e.pdf; Webpage, "Justice and the Rule of Law," *European Commission*, n.d., https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/peace-and-governance/justice-and-rule-law_en.
11. For lessons on emerging modalities of multilateral cooperation at domestic, regional and global level see, EBRD Evaluation Department, "The Art of Multilateral Cooperation: Selected Insights from Evaluation," *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, 2023, <https://www.ebrd.com/home/news-and-events/publications/evaluation/art-of-multilateral-cooperation.html>.
12. Examples of platforms to support justice sector coordinating platforms and mechanisms include: Executive Summary, "Centers for Access to Justice in Argentina," *INECIP*, December 2012, <https://inecip.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ACIJ-CELS-INECIP-Centers-for-the-access-to-justice-in-Argentina-Executive-summary.pdf>; Webpage, "Justice Sector Coordinating Council (JSCC) in the Philippines," *Government of the Philippines*, n.d., <https://www.doj.gov.ph/justice-sector-coordinating-council.html>; and the "CANADA'S JUSTICE DEVELOPMENT GOALS 2022 PROGRESS," *Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters*, 2023, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60804beaba3bc03016513a59/t/6482abf082b56d1eb2da2b5e/1686285297622/2022+JDGs+Progress+Report.pdf>; Also see endnote 5.

13. For more information on what a cross-sectoral strategic reform and investment plan might involve, see Practice Note 3 for Ministry of Justice and Justice Action Coalition's forthcoming Justice Financing Framework (October 2025).
14. Peter Chapmen, "Grasping the Justice Gap: Opportunities and Challenges for People-Centered Justice Data," *World Justice Project/Pathfinders/OECD*, 2021, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/news/grasping-justice-gap-opportunities-and-challenges-people-centered-justice-data>.
15. Manuel and Manuel, "Justice Aid Update and Lessons from Latest Evaluations of Donor Programming," 26.
16. See more about Securing Citizenship Rights in Kenya: Webpage, "Citizenship," *Namati*, n.d., <https://namati.org/ourwork/citizenship/>.
17. Manuel and Manuel, "Justice Aid Update and Lessons from Latest Evaluations of Donor Programming," 25.
18. To learn more about the Localization Agenda, see: Sabina Robillard, Teddy Atim, Daniel Maxwell. "Localization: A 'Landscape' Report," *Feinstein International Center, Tufts University*, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/localization-landscape-report>; and Devex, "The need for localization," Devex, 2022, <https://devex.shorthandstories.com/the-localization-agenda/index.html>.
19. Devex, "The need for localization."
20. Justice Action Coalition, "Justice 2023: Pivoting to People-centered justice," *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, 2022, <https://www.sdg16.plus/resources/pivoting-to-people-centered-justice/>.
21. Webpage, "Justice Action Coalition," *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.sdg16.plus/justice-action-coalition/>.
22. "Kenya is changing the face of Justice, A Blueprint for Social Transformation through Access to Justice 2023-2033, A People-Centred Justice Approach," *Government of Kenya*, 2023, <https://judiciary.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/STAJ-Blueprint-1.pdf>.