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The Principles and Opportunities for People-Centered Justice in Africa

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About the African Alliance for People-Centered Justice

The African Alliance for People-Centered Justice Alliance is an innovative initiative aimed at promoting people-centered approaches to addressing the justice needs of Africa's diverse and fast-growing population. This new coalition is designed to support governments, civil society, and justice actors across the continent by promoting and advancing people-centered justice, to ensure justice systems are accessible, fair, and responsive to the real needs of individuals and communities. More at sdg16.plus/african-alliance-for-people-centered-justice/.

About Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies

In an era of rapid global change, the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies is a cross regional and member state-led, multistakeholder coalition committed to advancing action on peace, justice, equality, and inclusive institutions through the Sustainable Development Goals and beyond (SDG16+). It is convened by forty-six governments, works with over one hundred partners across civil society, the United Nations (UN), and regional and international organizations, and is hosted by the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. More at sdg16.plus.

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- Reformar
- Terres de Hommes (TdH)
- The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiiL)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Regional Service Centre for Africa

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Glossary

AAPCJ African Alliance for People-Centered Justice

ADR Alternative Dispute Resolution

AI Artificial Intelligence

CAO Community Advice Offices

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

CHR Centre for Human Rights

CJC Community Justice Clinic

CJCs Community Justice Centers

CIJ Customary and Informal Justice

CLC Chiefdom Land Committees

CSO Civil Society Organization

DSVCMS Domestic and Sexual Violence Case Management System

GBV Gender-Based Violence

HiIL The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law

IDLO International Development Law Organization

IDPs Internally Displaced Persons

IOSC Isange One Stop Centre

IPV Intimate Partner Violence

JAC Justice Action Coalition

JFF Justice Financing Framework

JIL Justice Innovation Lab

JNS Justice Needs and Satisfaction Surveys

JLOS Justice, Law, and Order Sector

JUPITER Justice Pillars Towards Evidence-Based Reform

LCCs Local Council Courts

VMP Village Mediation Programme

M&E Monitoring and Evaluation

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

NULAI Network of University Legal Aid Institutions

N-VSL Virtual Street Law

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PCJ People-Centered Justice

PPPs Public-Private Partnerships

RLP Refugee Law Project

RODRA Repository on Disability Rights in Africa

RWCs Refugee Welfare Councils

SCC Small Claims Court

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

TDH Terre des hommes Lausanne Foundation

UN United Nations

UNCRPD United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

URPRP Unified Response Protocol and Referral Pathway

WILDAF Women in Law and Development in Africa

Introduction

This report by the African Alliance for People-Centered Justice (AAPCJ) sets out the principles and practices of people-centered justice within the African context. Building on the Task Force on Justice's *Justice for All* report,¹ which called for a global shift toward justice systems that put people's needs at the center, it shows how this approach is already taking root in Africa. **This report highlights both long-standing traditions, such as customary mechanisms and community-based innovations, and contemporary practices demonstrating promise and potential for scale, all aimed at meeting the diverse needs of people, especially those furthest behind.**

Justice lies at the heart of Africa's development aspirations. Yet for millions across the continent, it remains distant, inaccessible, or ineffective. Barriers such as high costs, complex procedures, limited legal awareness, and geographic inaccessibility persist. Addressing these challenges requires more than strengthening institutions alone.

It calls for a paradigm shift: from justice systems designed primarily around institutional needs to those built around the lived realities and priorities of people.

A people-centered approach to justice means ensuring that no one is left behind. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits to inclusion for all people, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, wealth, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other status. As highlighted by the Task Force on Justice, justice problems are not randomly distributed; some groups are more likely to suffer injustice or have distinct needs when seeking justice. By empowering those at a disadvantage and finding innovative ways to solve the most difficult justice problems, countries can begin to reach the furthest behind first.

Importantly, **people-centered justice does not replace or diminish the role of formal courts and state institutions.** On the contrary, it reframes them as an integral part of a broader justice ecosystem alongside informal, community-based, and innovative approaches. It emphasizes fairness, accessibility, prevention, and solutions that work in people's daily lives. By combining the authority and protections of formal systems with flexible, locally grounded approaches, people-centered justice offers a holistic vision of justice that is inclusive, effective, and resilient.

Financing is also essential to making this vision a reality. Within the constraints of tight budgets and declining aid, resources must be directed to people's frontline justice needs. This report explores funding priorities as articulated in the Justice Action Coalition (JAC)'s² Justice Financing Framework (JFF)³, a tool providing practical guidance to help governments and justice sector leaders align spending with these priorities, drawing lessons from the health and education sectors that have successfully scaled up basic services.

Finally, the report examines key themes shaping people-centered justice in Africa today:

- Advancing justice for those furthest behind.
- Fostering diverse pathways to justice.
- Strengthening the role of data and evidence.
- Preventing justice problems before they escalate.
- Investing in frontline services and innovative delivery models.

Taken together, these themes reveal the untapped potential of people-centered justice to strengthen resilience, restore trust in institutions, and renew the social contract between African states and their citizens.

Recommendations by the African Alliance for People-Centered Justice

Based on the findings and lessons highlighted in this report, the African Alliance for People-Centered Justice urges governments and the wider community of stakeholders including civil society, development partners, and funders to:



Strengthen diverse pathways to justice by integrating formal, customary, and community-based mechanisms into coherent justice ecosystems, ensuring accessibility, fairness, and accountability across all systems.



Invest in legal empowerment by expanding community advice offices, paralegal networks, and legal aid services so that individuals—especially those furthest behind— can understand, use, and shape the law.



Leverage research, data, and evidence to guide policy and reform by identifying barriers, measuring impact, and ensuring accountability in justice delivery. Countries should adopt common indicators in line with initiatives such as the Justice Action Coalition Workstream on Data and Evidence.



Prioritize preventive justice approaches that address disputes and grievances before they escalate, which reduces costs, eases burdens on courts, and enhances societal resilience.



Foster innovation and technology in justice systems, including e-filing, mobile courts, artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted case management, and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) platforms, ensuring that these tools are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities.



Mobilize and allocate sustainable financing for justice by applying frameworks such as the Justice Financing Framework to align resources with frontline needs and make justice delivery more effective, efficient, and people-centered.



Anchor people-centered justice within continental and global development agendas, particularly Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, to ensure that justice is recognized as a driver of sustainable peace, development, and inclusive governance.

About the African Alliance for People-Centered Justice¹

The African Alliance for People-Centered Justice was established in 2024 to mainstream the concept of people-centered justice, supporting local and national actors in implementing justice-focused policies and fostering a shared understanding of its principles. It is a high-ambition coalition of governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations dedicated to advancing people-centered approaches to justice across Africa. By promoting these approaches, the Alliance seeks to reduce the justice gap and foster equal access to justice for all.

The Alliance envisions a just, inclusive, and equitable Africa where every individual has access to transparent and effective justice systems both formal and informal that respect human rights, uphold the rule of law, and are grounded in people-centered principles.

Its mission is to promote people-centered justice and ensure equal access to justice across the continent by:

- Bridging gaps in knowledge, data, evidence, and communication between practices within Africa and globally.
- Strengthening the enabling environment for the adoption of people-centered justice initiatives by building consensus around shared goals, priorities, and agendas, and leveraging open government and interdisciplinary approaches to transform justice systems.
- Advancing progress toward the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 and Goal 11 of Agenda 2063 by empowering justice leaders and partners to design, implement, and scale innovative solutions to justice challenges.



1. Access to Justice in Africa and the Opportunity for a People-Centered Approach

1.1 The Challenges

The global justice gap leaves an estimated 5.1 billion people without meaningful access to justice, encompassing those unable to resolve everyday legal issues, those excluded from legal protection such as land rights or formal identity, and individuals facing extreme conditions such as statelessness or forced labor.²

There is a disparity between the legal needs of the population and the availability and accessibility of legal services to meet those needs. In Africa, this gap is characterized by a lack of access to justice for many individuals, particularly those from marginalized and impoverished communities. Factors such as poverty, limited legal awareness, inadequate legal infrastructure, and corruption contribute to this pervasive issue.³

Addressing the justice gap in Africa is vital for sustainable development. Both the African Union (AU)'s Agenda 2063 (Goal 11) and the United Nations' SDG16 emphasize the need for peace, justice, and strong institutions. Ensuring equal access to justice for all promotes social inclusion, reduces inequalities, and builds more resilient societies across the continent. This alignment with broader development goals underscores the significance of addressing the justice gap as part of a comprehensive strategy for achieving long-term prosperity and stability in the region. Further, an equitable and efficient justice system is fundamental to economic growth. It provides the stability and predictability necessary for businesses to thrive, encourages investment, and protects property rights. When individuals and businesses can rely on the legal system to enforce contracts and resolve disputes, it fosters an environment conducive to economic development.⁴

While access to justice is the cornerstone of a fair and equitable society, in many parts of Africa, significant barriers prevent individuals from accessing the justice system, perpetuating the justice gap.



Poverty is one of the most significant barriers to accessing justice across Africa. In 2024, Sub-Saharan Africa was home to just 16 percent of the world's population, yet it accounted for 67 percent of those living in extreme poverty, according to the World Bank. Two-thirds of the world's extreme poor lives in Sub-Saharan Africa, rising to three-quarters when fragile and conflict-affected countries are included.⁴ Financial constraints such as the inability to afford legal representation, court fees, and transportation to judicial institutions, particularly in rural areas, significantly hinder individuals' ability to seek legal remedies. As such, many are compelled to forgo formal justice mechanisms, increasing their vulnerability to rights violations and, in some cases, leading them to pursue informal or extrajudicial avenues to solve their justice problems.



A stark **digital divide** continues to impede equitable development and access to opportunity across Africa. While mobile networks are the primary internet gateway for many, only a minority of households enjoy fixed broadband or reliable connectivity, and many citizens, particularly in rural, poor, or marginalized communities, remain offline. According to recent Afrobarometer data covering 39 countries, four in ten Africans report never using the Internet, a disparity magnified among less-educated and lower-income groups.⁵ Structural constraints such as limited electricity, high costs for devices and data, and weak infrastructure further deepen the divide. Efforts to close this gap are essential not only for economic inclusion and digital citizenship, but for ensuring that justice, services, and participation are accessible to all in an increasingly digital age.



Lack of legal awareness is another critical barrier. Many individuals are unaware of their legal rights and the mechanisms available to protect those rights. This lack of knowledge can be attributed to low levels of education, limited access to information, and the complexity of legal language and procedures. Without a clear understanding of their rights and the legal processes, individuals are less likely to seek justice or challenge injustices they face.



Inadequate legal infrastructure also plays a significant role in the justice gap in many African countries. Challenges such as a shortage of courts, judges, and legal professionals lead to delays in the administration of justice. Overburdened courts and lengthy legal processes can discourage individuals from pursuing legal action. Furthermore, the lack of modern facilities and technology in numerous courts hampers the efficiency and effectiveness of the justice system.

The justice gap is especially glaring especially in light of Africa's rapidly growing and predominantly young population. The continent remains the youngest globally, with over 60 percent of its population under the age of 25. Projections indicate that by 2050, one in every three young people worldwide will reside in Africa, as its population is expected to rise from 1.4 billion to 2.5 billion.⁶ This demographic transformation is accompanied by massive demographic shifts. The working-age population (ages 20–64) is expected to increase from 883 million in 2024 to 1.6 billion in 2050, representing nearly a quarter of the global labor force.⁷

Addressing these barriers is essential for closing the justice gap and ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status, have access to justice. Efforts to pivot toward a people-centered approach to justice include improving legal awareness through education and outreach, using data and evidence to better understand people's justice needs and guide interventions, and focusing on prevention so problems do not escalate. They also involve diversifying pathways to justice through customary and informal mechanisms, increasing and innovating funding for legal aid services, helping people know, use, and shape the law, expanding access to alternative dispute resolution, and investing in modernizing legal and paralegal infrastructure. These are all crucial steps toward achieving this goal. By addressing these challenges, African countries can create a more just and equitable society, fostering economic growth and sustainable development.

1.2 The Relationship Between Access to Justice and Sustainable Development

Access to justice is inextricably linked to social cohesion, resilience, and to positive economic outcomes for individuals, businesses, and economies. It builds trust in institutions, reduces inequalities, and strengthens the social contract between governments and citizens.⁸ Access to justice is essential for reducing social inequalities. A fair justice system ensures that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status, can seek redress and protect their rights. This access helps to level the playing field, allowing those furthest behind to challenge injustices and discrimination. By addressing grievances and providing legal remedies, the justice system can help to reduce disparities in wealth, education, and opportunities. This reduction in inequalities fosters inclusive growth, where the benefits of development are shared more equitably across society.⁹

Access to justice also plays a crucial role in creating an environment where businesses can thrive, investments are secure, and economic inequalities are reduced. A reliable justice system provides the stability and predictability necessary for economic activities. When businesses and investors have confidence that their rights will be protected and disputes will be resolved fairly and promptly, they are more likely to invest in the economy.¹⁰ Property rights are also fundamental to economic development. A fair and efficient justice system ensures that property rights are clearly defined, protected, and enforced. This protection is vital for individuals and businesses to invest in property, whether it be land, buildings, or intellectual property.¹¹

1.3 The African Union's Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goal 16

Addressing the justice gap in Africa is not only a matter of ensuring accessibility and equality but also a strategic imperative for achieving the continent's broader development goals. Goal 11 of the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the UN's SDG16 both emphasize the importance of peace, justice, and strong institutions as foundational elements for sustainable development.

Agenda 2063 is the African Union's strategic framework for transforming Africa into a global powerhouse of the future. It envisions a prosperous, peaceful, and integrated continent, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena. One of the key aspirations of Agenda 2063 is "An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights,

justice, and the rule of law” (Aspiration 3), and one of its goals is “Democratic values, practices, universal principles of human rights, justice and the rule of law entrenched” (Goal 11).¹²

Addressing the justice gap aligns with this vision by ensuring that all individuals have access to justice, which is essential for upholding human rights and entrenching the rule of law. An effective justice system promotes good governance by holding individuals and institutions accountable, reducing corruption, and ensuring that laws are applied consistently and impartially. By closing the justice gap, African countries can create a more just and equitable society, which is fundamental to achieving the aspirations of Agenda 2063.

Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG16) aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.” This goal recognizes that peace, justice, and strong institutions are essential for sustainable development.¹³ Addressing the justice gap is directly relevant to SDG16 in several ways.

First, an effective and accessible justice system helps to resolve conflicts peacefully and prevent violence. When individuals have confidence in the legal system, they are more likely to seek legal remedies rather than resort to violence or other extrajudicial means. Second, ensuring access to justice for all, particularly those furthest behind, promotes social inclusion and reduces inequalities. This inclusivity is essential for building cohesive and resilient societies. Third, strong institutions thrive in robust justice systems. A robust justice system ensures that laws are enforced, rights are protected, and governance is transparent and accountable. Strong institutions are critical for sustainable development, as they provide the framework within which economic and social activities can flourish.

In this regard, the Justice Action Coalition (JAC) issued the Justice Appeal 2023 in May 2022, which laid out the need for bold action to transform justice systems and called for a pivot to people-centered justice as part of efforts aimed at re-establishing trust between people, communities and governments and renew the social contract in countries around the globe.¹⁴ Since the launch of the 2023 Justice Appeal, the Justice Action Coalition has consolidated into a permanent structure and advanced dedicated workstreams on data and evidence, strategy and innovation, communications, and justice financing. It has supported countries to co-create people-centered justice strategies, encouraged the collection and use of justice data, and produced a justice financing framework. The JAC has also amplified global advocacy, ensuring that people-centered justice remains anchored in international agendas and donor priorities.

1.4 The Opportunity

People-centered justice focuses on ensuring that justice systems are responsive to the needs and realities of the people they serve. This approach presents significant prospects for legal reforms, leveraging innovation, and exploring community-based justice systems to improve access to justice and strengthen the rule of law in Africa.

People-centered justice also emphasizes the need for evidence-based, data-driven legal reforms that prioritize the needs of individuals, especially those furthest behind. These reforms can include **simplifying legal procedures, diversifying pathways to justice, legally empowering those furthest behind, expanding alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, offering free legal aid services, and implementing measures to proactively prevent justice problems.** By making the legal system more accessible and user-friendly, these reforms can help bridge the justice gap and ensure that everyone can seek redress and protect their rights. Additionally, legal reforms can focus on enhancing the independence and accountability of the judiciary, reducing corruption, and ensuring that laws are applied consistently.

Technology has the potential to revolutionize the justice system and make it more accessible to all. **Technological innovations** such as online dispute resolution mechanisms and legal information can help overcome some of the barriers to accessing justice. They can help to remotely resolve disputes more quickly or to provide individuals with information about their legal rights and the steps they need to take to seek justice.

Key Takeaways

Closing the justice gap in Africa is not just a matter of upholding rights and equity; it is an urgent necessity for the continent's sustainable development and economic growth. An accessible and efficient justice system is the bedrock upon which economic stability, investment, and inclusive growth are built. By ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status, have access to justice, African countries can create an environment where businesses thrive, investments are secure, and social and economic inequalities are reduced.

The alignment of efforts to close the justice gap with Goal 11 of the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the SDG16 underscores the importance of this endeavor. These frameworks emphasize the need for peace, justice, and strong institutions as foundational elements for a prosperous and peaceful Africa. By addressing the barriers to justice, such as poverty, lack of legal awareness, and inadequate legal infrastructure, and by leveraging opportunities for legal reforms, technological innovations, and community-based justice systems, African countries can make significant strides towards achieving these goals.

The urgency of closing the justice gap cannot be overstated. It is a critical step towards building a more just, equitable, and prosperous future for all Africans. By prioritizing people-centered justice and ensuring that the justice system is responsive to the needs of the most those furthest behind, African countries can create a more inclusive society where everyone can seek redress and protect their rights. This in turn will foster economic growth, reduce inequalities, and contribute to the sustainable development of the continent.



2. Unpacking the People-Centered Approach to Justice

These innovations hold enormous promise for expanding access to justice, but they must be approached with caution. Depending on the jurisdiction and circumstances, technology can inadvertently create new barriers, for example, limited access to hardware, software, or reliable internet, or even discomfort with digital tools, as has been observed among some elderly users. There is also the risk of simply transferring existing obstacles, such as dense legal jargon or cumbersome procedures, into the digital space. This is why justice innovation must be understood more broadly: not only in terms of technology, but also through low-tech and no-tech solutions, as well as procedural and service delivery innovations including mobile legal aid clinics and mobile courts. These innovations can bring legal services to remote and underserved areas, reducing the need for individuals to travel long distances to access justice. By leveraging innovation, African countries can create a more responsive and efficient justice system that meets the needs of all individuals.

People-centered justice places a strong emphasis on **ensuring that those furthest behind have access to justice**. This includes women, children, persons living with disabilities, displaced populations, and those living in poverty. Legal reforms and innovation can be tailored to address the specific needs of these groups. **Legal aid services** can be expanded to provide specialized support for women and children, and mobile courts can be deployed to reach remote and underserved communities. Additionally, **awareness campaigns** can be conducted to educate vulnerable populations about their legal rights and the resources available to them. By focusing on the needs of these groups, people-centered justice can help to reduce inequalities and ensure that everyone can seek justice.

Additionally, **community-based justice systems** complement the formal legal systems and play a crucial role in providing accessible and culturally relevant justice. These systems are often rooted in local traditions and customs and can be more responsive to the needs of the community. Involving community leaders and members in the justice processes can help resolve disputes in a way that is transparent, and acceptable to all parties involved. Community-based justice systems also support the formal legal systems by handling minor disputes and reducing the burden on courts. By recognizing and integrating these systems into the broader justice framework policies, African countries can create a more inclusive and effective justice system.

People-centered justice is an approach that places individuals and their needs at the heart of the justice system.

It emphasizes the importance of making justice accessible, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs of the population. It is a holistic approach that seeks to ensure that justice systems are designed and operated in a way that prioritizes the needs and rights of individuals. It is grounded in the belief that justice should be accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic status, gender, age, or other characteristics. This approach recognizes that justice is not just about the formal legal system but also about the broader social, economic, and cultural contexts in which people live.¹⁵ People-centered justice is significant for several reasons:



Promoting Social Inclusion: By making justice accessible and equitable, people-centered justice promotes social inclusion and reduces inequalities. It ensures that everyone, regardless of their background, can seek redress and protect their rights.



Strengthening the Rule of Law: A people-centered approach strengthens the rule of law by ensuring that justice systems are equitable, transparent, and accountable. This, in turn, builds public trust and confidence in the legal system.



Fostering Sustainable Development: Access to justice is essential for sustainable development. An equitable and efficient justice system provides the stability and predictability necessary for businesses to thrive and for investments to be secure. It also protects property rights and enforces contracts, which are crucial for economic activities.



Enhancing Peace and Stability: People-centered justice contributes to peace and stability by providing mechanisms for resolving disputes and addressing grievances in a timely manner. When individuals have confidence in the justice system, they are more likely to seek legal remedies rather than resorting to violence or other extrajudicial means.

2.1 Key Principles of People-Centered Justice¹⁶

2.1.1 People at the Center

People-centered justice begins with placing individuals at the heart of the justice system. This means actively involving people, data, and evidence in identifying the justice problems they face. By listening to the experiences and needs of the community, justice systems can better understand the specific issues that need to be addressed. This approach ensures that the justice system is responsive to the real-life challenges people encounter, rather than being driven solely by institutional priorities. Engaging with the community through surveys, focus groups, and public consultations can help to identify the most pressing justice problems and develop solutions that are tailored to the needs of the people.

2.1.2 Solving Justice Problems

Once justice problems have been identified, the next step is to develop and implement solutions that effectively address these issues. People-centered justice emphasizes the importance of problem-solving approaches that are practical, innovative, and focused on achieving tangible outcomes. This can involve a range of strategies, from legal reforms and policy changes to the introduction of new services and support mechanisms. The goal is to create solutions that are accessible, efficient, and effective in resolving justice problems. Collaboration with various stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector, is essential for developing comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

2.1.3 Improving the Journey or Process

The journey or process of seeking justice can often be complex, lengthy, and intimidating. People-centered justice aims to improve this journey by making it more user-friendly and supportive. This involves simplifying legal procedures, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, and providing clear and accessible information about the justice process. Additionally, it includes offering support services such as legal aid, counseling, and assistance with navigating the legal system. By improving the journey, people-centered justice ensures that individuals feel supported and empowered throughout their interaction with the justice system, making it easier for them to seek and obtain justice.

2.1.4 Prevention and Reconciliation

Prevention and reconciliation are key components of a people-centered approach. Prevention involves addressing the root causes of justice problems to reduce the likelihood of their occurrence. This can include measures such as public education campaigns, community outreach programs, and initiatives to address social and economic inequalities. Reconciliation focuses on resolving conflicts and repairing relationships, rather than simply punishing offenders. This approach can involve restorative justice practices, mediation, and other forms of alternative dispute resolution. By prioritizing prevention and reconciliation, people-centered justice seeks to create a more harmonious and just society.

2.1.5 Legal Empowerment

Legal empowerment is a fundamental value of people-centered justice. It involves providing individuals with the knowledge, skills, and resources they need to understand and exercise their legal rights. This can include legal education programs, awareness campaigns, and access to legal aid and support services. Legal empowerment ensures that individuals are not only aware of their rights but also have the capacity to assert and defend them. By empowering people legally, justice systems can help to reduce inequalities, promote social inclusion, and ensure that everyone can seek and obtain justice. Legal empowerment is therefore a powerful tool for addressing the plight of the legally disadvantaged, such as those furthest behind.¹⁷

Box 1: People-Centered Justice vs. Customary and Informal Justice

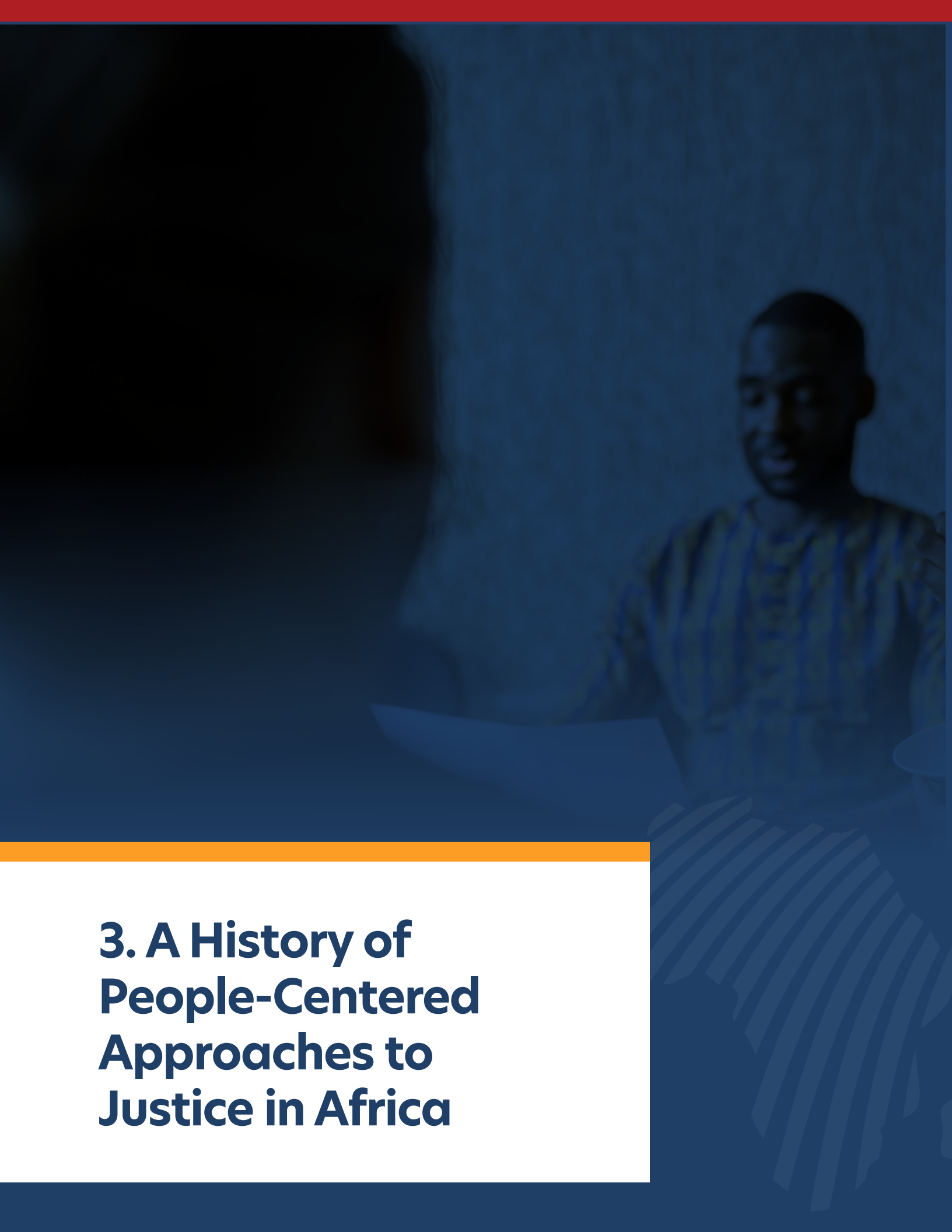


People-Centered Justice is a modern framework that places people's needs, rights, and lived experiences at the center of justice systems. It is not confined to any single type of mechanism but instead encompasses both formal and informal justice processes. The emphasis is on accessibility, equitability, prevention, and solutions that respond effectively to people's daily realities. People-centered justice is evidence-driven, encouraging the collection and use of data and innovation to design policies and services that improve justice outcomes. Inclusivity, gender equality, and non-discrimination are central to this approach.



Customary and Informal Justice, by contrast, refers to locally rooted, traditional, and community-based mechanisms for resolving disputes. These systems often emphasize dialogue, consensus, and restorative outcomes rather than punitive measures. While many such practices embody elements of people-centered justice, it is important to recognize that customary and informal justice and people-centered justice are not the same.

People-centered justice is a broader, contemporary approach that encompasses customary and informal justice but is not synonymous with it. Its goal is to combine the strengths of both formal and informal justice while ensuring that all systems prioritize equity, accessibility, and rights for all people.

The background of the slide features a dark blue, semi-transparent image of two individuals in conversation. On the left, a person's profile is visible in deep shadow. On the right, a man with short dark hair, wearing a patterned shirt, is looking towards the other person. A light blue map of the African continent is overlaid on the lower right portion of the image. A solid orange horizontal bar is positioned above the white text box.

3. A History of People-Centered Approaches to Justice in Africa

In Africa today, people access justice through a variety of pathways. The formal legal system, inherited and adapted over time, plays a critical role in upholding rights and enforcing the rule of law. Yet like any system, it requires continual reform and improvement if it is to truly embody a people-centered approach. Some of the barriers already discussed such as high costs, complexity, delays, and limited reach must be broken down to make the formal system more accessible, inclusive, and responsive to people's needs.

Before the establishment of a so-called “formal” system, African societies had already developed their own approaches to governance and dispute resolution. Rooted in community values, traditions, and customs, these systems often emphasized restorative justice, consensus-building, and collective well-being. They were not without shortcomings: in some contexts, discriminatory practices against women and marginalized groups were reinforced. At the same time, many of these justice systems also recognized the rights of women and promoted equity in ways that were progressive for their era.

Today, these traditional mechanisms are more commonly referred to as customary and informal justice (CIJ), and they continue to form a big part of the continent's broader justice ecosystem. Alongside the formal system, they illustrate the diverse pathways through which Africans seek justice and resolve disputes and much like the formal systems, customary and informal mechanisms also require continual reform and improvement to be truly people-centered. By reflecting on these origins, we can better understand how African traditions have contributed to the ethos of people-centered justice and how they remain relevant in shaping inclusive and culturally resonant approaches today.

Palaver Huts in Liberia



In Liberia, the use of Palaver huts (also known as “talking huts”) was a common practice for resolving disputes. These huts served as informal courts where community members would gather to discuss and resolve conflicts. The process was led by respected elders or chiefs who acted as mediators and facilitators. The emphasis was on open dialogue, consensus-building, and finding solutions that were acceptable to all parties involved. This approach ensured that justice was accessible and that the voices of all community members were heard.⁷⁹

The Akan Traditional Justice System in Ghana



Among the Akan people of Ghana, the concept of justice was deeply rooted in the idea of communal harmony and fairness. The Akan traditional justice system was centered around the “Mpanyinfo” (elders) and the “Omanhene” (paramount chief), who acted as mediators and arbitrators in disputes. The system emphasized restorative justice, where the goal was not merely to punish but to restore relationships and ensure that the community remained cohesive. The Akan people believed in the principle of “Sankofa,” which means “go back and fetch it,” symbolizing the importance of learning from the past to build a better future. This approach ensured justice was accessible to all—including the vulnerable—and decisions were made with the community's best interests in mind.¹⁸

The “Ohemaa” (Queen Mother) was a powerful figure who played a crucial role in governance and justice. The Queen Mother was not just a ceremonial figure, she had real political power and was often involved in the selection of chiefs, including the Omanhene. She also served as a mediator in disputes, particularly those involving women, and had the authority to influence decisions that affected the community. The Queen Mother was seen as the mother of the nation, and her role ensured that women's voices were heard in governance and justice systems.¹⁹

The Gikuyu Council of Elders (Kiama) in Kenya



In pre-colonial Kenya, the Gikuyu people had a well-established system of governance and justice known as the “Kiama” (Council of Elders). The Kiama was responsible for resolving disputes, enforcing laws, and maintaining social order. The elders, who were highly respected for their wisdom and experience, would listen to all parties involved in a dispute and make decisions based on the principles of fairness, equity, and reconciliation. The Gikuyu justice system was deeply participatory, involving the entire community in the process of justice delivery. This ensured that justice was not only done but seen to be done, fostering trust and legitimacy in the system.²⁰

Ubuntu and Restorative Justice in South Africa



The concept of “Ubuntu” (often translated as “I am because we are”) has been a foundational philosophy in many Southern African societies, particularly among the Zulu and Xhosa people. Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness of all people and the importance of compassion, empathy, and mutual respect. In the context of justice, Ubuntu has historically informed restorative justice practices, where the focus is on healing and reconciliation rather than retribution.

For example, in traditional Zulu society, disputes were often resolved through "Indaba" (community meetings), where all parties would come together to discuss the issue and find a mutually acceptable solution. This approach ensured that justice was people-centered, focusing on the needs of the community and the individuals involved.²¹

The Yoruba Traditional Justice System in Nigeria



The Yoruba people of Nigeria had a sophisticated system of governance and justice that was deeply rooted in the principles of fairness and inclusivity. The "Oba" (king) and the "Ogboni" (council of elders) played a central role in administering justice. The Yoruba traditional justice system emphasized the importance of "Omoluabi" (a person of good character), which was a guiding principle for both the rulers and the ruled. Disputes were resolved through a process of mediation and arbitration, with the goal of restoring harmony and balance in the community. The Yoruba also had a system of "Ase" (divine authority), which ensured that justice was not only fair but also aligned with the spiritual and moral values of the community.²²

The Igbo Women's Councils in Nigeria



Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, women had a strong voice through the "Umuada" (daughters of the lineage) and "Otu Odu" (women's councils). The Umuada were a group of married and unmarried women who had the power to influence decisions within the community, particularly those affecting women. They could intervene in disputes, especially domestic issues, and had the authority to sanction men who mistreated women. In some cases, women could even depose a male chief if he was deemed unfit to rule. The Otu Odu was a women's council that played a significant role in enforcing social norms and ensuring that women's rights were protected.²³

The Chagga People's Customary Courts in Tanzania



Among the Chagga people of Tanzania, customary courts known as "Njama" were responsible for resolving disputes and maintaining social order. The Njama was composed of elders who were chosen for their wisdom, integrity, and knowledge of customary law. The Chagga justice system was highly participatory, with all members of the community having the opportunity to voice their opinions and contribute to the decision-making process. The emphasis was on finding solutions that would restore peace and harmony in the community, rather than imposing punitive measures. This approach ensured that justice was accessible, fair, and people-centered.²⁴

The Gadaa System of the Oromo People in Ethiopia



The Oromo people of Ethiopia have a long-standing tradition of governance and justice known as the "Gadaa" system. The Gadaa system is a democratic and egalitarian system that rotates leadership and decision-making responsibilities among different age groups. Justice was administered through a council of elders, which was responsible for resolving disputes, enforcing laws, and maintaining social order. The Gadaa system emphasized the principles of fairness, inclusivity, and accountability—ensuring that justice was accessible to all members of the community. The system also placed a strong emphasis on restorative justice, with the goal of healing and reconciliation rather than punishment.²⁵

Among the Oromo, women had a strong voice through the "Siqqee" (women's council). The Siqqee was a traditional institution that allowed women to organize and advocate for their rights. Women in the Siqqee had the power to influence decisions that affected their welfare and could intervene in disputes, particularly those involving domestic issues. The Oromo also had a tradition of "Gadaa" (a democratic system of governance), where women had a say in the selection of leaders and the administration of justice. The Siqqee ensured that women's voices were heard in governance and justice systems.²⁶

The Shona People's Traditional Courts in Zimbabwe



The Shona people of Zimbabwe had a well-established system of traditional courts known as "Dare." These courts were presided over by chiefs and elders who were respected for their wisdom and knowledge of customary law. The Shona justice system was deeply rooted in the principles of fairness, equity, and restorative justice. Disputes were resolved through a process of mediation and arbitration, with the goal of restoring harmony and balance in the community.²⁷ In Shona society, women also had a voice through the "Vatete" (senior women in the family or aunts). The Vatete was a group of respected women who played a key role in resolving domestic disputes and ensuring that women's rights were protected. They had the authority to intervene in cases of domestic violence and could impose sanctions on men who mistreated their wives.²⁸

These historical examples provide valuable insights into the beginnings of people-centered justice in Africa and offer lessons for contemporary justice systems seeking to become more inclusive and responsive to the needs of their communities.



4. People-Centered Justice in Contemporary Africa

In contemporary Africa, people-centered justice entails strengthening the formal judicial systems, which is vitally important for guaranteeing rights and upholding the rule of law. Yet these systems often face significant challenges including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, case backlogs, and barriers such as cost, complexity, and geographic inaccessibility. Addressing these shortcomings is essential for formal systems to become more accessible, inclusive, and genuinely people-centered.

At the same time, Africa's rich cultural diversity, strong community ties, and long-standing traditions shape the broader justice ecosystem. Customary and informal justice mechanisms remain important pathways to justice for many, particularly in remote areas where formal systems may not be easily accessible. These mechanisms are encompassed by a people-centered approach to justice as they offer valuable insights and practices that inform more responsive, culturally relevant solutions.

Therefore, people-centered justice in Africa seeks to integrate the strengths of both formal and informal systems while remaining grounded in the principle that justice is not a one-size-fits-all concept.

By tailoring solutions to the diverse needs and realities of different communities, and by ensuring that all approaches uphold equity, inclusivity, and non-discrimination, Africa can build justice systems that are both effective and truly people-centered.

One of the major challenges facing justice systems in Africa is the lack of resources. Many African countries face severe underfunding of their justice systems, leading to overburdened courts, inadequate legal aid, a shortage of trained legal professionals, and limited access to justice for the poor and marginalized. This resource constraint hampers the ability of justice systems to provide timely and effective services to the population. The formal justice system is often inaccessible to rural populations due to the high cost of legal representation and the long distances to courts. This lack of resources disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including women, children, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. For example, despite progressive laws protecting women's rights in some African countries, many women in rural areas still face barriers to accessing justice due to poverty, illiteracy, and cultural norms that discourage them from seeking legal redress.²⁹ People-centered justice emphasizes the need for innovative solutions to overcome these resource limitations, such as leveraging technology to improve access to justice, providing legal aid services, and investing in capacity-building for legal professionals.

Africa's societies are characterized by their diversity, communalism, and pluralism. Traditional African justice systems have historically resorted to people-centered components, emphasizing restorative justice, community involvement, and reconciliation.

However, the colonial legacy introduced formal legal systems that often coexist uneasily with customary and religious legal systems. This legal pluralism is both a strength and a challenge. While it allows for familiarity, flexibility, and cultural relevance, it can also lead to inconsistencies, confusion, and the marginalization of certain groups, particularly women and vulnerable populations.

Africa has many those furthest behind, including women, children, persons with disabilities, displaced populations, and those living in poverty. These groups often face significant barriers to accessing justice, such as discrimination, lack of legal awareness, and financial constraints. In many African societies, customary laws and practices perpetuate gender inequality, particularly in areas such as land ownership, inheritance, and marriage. People-centered justice places a strong emphasis on ensuring that these populations have access to justice and are empowered to exercise their rights. This includes providing legal aid services, conducting awareness campaigns, and implementing policies that address the specific needs of those furthest behind.

4.1 Core Elements

Looking forward, people-centered justice in Africa, therefore, needs to address several key issues:



Enabling Environments: Creating an enabling environment for people-centered justice to thrive is essential for ensuring that justice systems are responsive, accessible, and equitable. This involves addressing systemic barriers, such as a rigid institution-based mindset, inadequate funding, lack of legal infrastructure, and insufficient training for legal professionals. Fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and community involvement is crucial for building public trust and confidence in the justice system. Legal reforms that simplify procedures, reduce costs, and promote equitable outcomes are also necessary to make justice more accessible to all individuals, particularly those furthest behind. ³⁰



Technological Innovations: Leveraging technology to provide online legal services, mobile courts, accessible legal awareness resources, and digital case management systems can help overcome barriers to accessing justice. ³¹



Community-Based Justice Systems: Recognizing and integrating community-based justice systems into the broader legal framework can provide accessible and culturally relevant justice.³²



Prevention and Restorative Justice: Integrating preventive measures and restorative justice practices into the formal justice system, which prioritizes punitive measures over prevention and restorative justice, can help reduce conflict and promote reconciliation and community healing.



Legal Empowerment: Providing legal education and awareness programs to empower individuals, particularly those furthest behind, to understand and exercise their rights.³³



Addressing Discrimination: Implementing policies and programs to address discriminatory practices, particularly against women and marginalized groups, and promoting gender equality in the justice system.

4.2 The Future

Achieving people-centered justice in Africa requires a holistic approach that addresses the unique challenges of the continent's diverse societies, legal pluralism, and resource constraints. By strengthening legal pluralism, improving access to justice for vulnerable groups, addressing gender inequality, and promoting restorative justice, African countries can build justice systems that are truly inclusive and responsive to the needs of all. By prioritizing people-centered justice, Africa can take a significant step towards achieving social justice, equality, and sustainable development for all its citizens.



5. Justice for Those Furthest Behind

As a transformative approach, people-centered justice seeks to extend access to justice services to women, children, those furthest behind, ensuring that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, can exercise their legal rights and seek redress. This approach is particularly crucial in Africa, where many individuals face significant barriers to accessing justice due to socio-economic, cultural, and systemic factors. These barriers include poverty, illiteracy, discriminatory laws and practices, geographical isolation, and cultural norms that perpetuate inequality. For example:

- Women often face discrimination in areas such as land ownership, inheritance, and domestic violence, with customary laws and practices frequently undermining their rights.
- Children are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect, yet many lack access to legal protections or child-friendly justice systems.
- Persons with disabilities encounter physical, social, and institutional barriers that prevent them from accessing justice services.
- Displaced populations, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), often face legal exclusion and discrimination, leaving them without recourse to justice.
- Persons living in poverty are frequently unable to afford legal representation or navigate complex legal systems, leaving them at the mercy of exploitative practices.

People-centered justice offers a framework to address these barriers or bridge these gaps. It seeks to address the barriers by prioritizing and contextualizing the needs of the most vulnerable and ensuring that justice systems are accessible, inclusive, and responsive. This approach emphasizes community involvement, restorative justice, and legal empowerment, with a focus on addressing the root causes of injustice. Below are examples of how people-centered justice is being utilized to extend access to justice services to those furthest behind across Africa.

5.1 Justice for Women

In many countries, women face systemic discrimination in accessing justice, particularly in rural areas where some harmful customary practices remain prevalent, even despite formal legal protections. Across the continent, women still encounter gender-based discrimination and violence, which can prevent them from seeking justice. People-centered justice addresses these issues by implementing legal reforms that protect women's rights, providing specialized support services for survivors of gender-based violence, and raising awareness about gender equality. By creating a supportive and empowering environment, women are better able to access justice and challenge discriminatory practices.

In **Ghana**, the Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) embarked on a project to empower rural women to access and control land. WiLDAF's approach focused on educating the women on legal rights related to land ownership through training programs and community-based dispute resolution mechanisms. The initiative was found to have led to increased awareness and empowerment of women, allowing them to claim land rights, with resultant increases in their income and more equitable economic distribution of wealth.³⁴ In another study carried out in the Morogoro

Rural and Kongwa Districts of **Tanzania**, it was found that women who benefited from legal aid service interventions showed higher empowerment levels compared to non-beneficiaries and that involvement in legal aid service and awareness of legal rights were strong determinants of empowerment.³⁵

Box 2: The Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency of Lagos State



The Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency of Lagos State, **Nigeria**, exemplifies a successful people-centered justice initiative founded in 2014 as the Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team. It was established to address the rising reports of gender-based violence (GBV) in media outlets and official petitions, which highlighted systemic challenges such as delayed justice, survivor stigmatization, and lack of awareness of the limited support services that were available. Initially led by the attorney-general of the state and a dedicated coordinator, the agency adopted a multi-disciplinary, multi-agency model that brought together law enforcement, healthcare service providers, psychosocial experts, civil society organizations, legal professionals, and media personnel into a cohesive team.

The agency is responsible for providing a coordinated survivor response, including case management, medical care, rescue, counselling, referrals, and social welfare support for survivors. It engages in public-private partnerships, awareness campaigns, and advocacy to address the access to justice needs of survivors. To ensure consistent response to cases of domestic and gender-based violence, the agency developed the Unified Response Protocol and Referral Pathway (URPRP), ensuring collaboration among police, healthcare, legal, and welfare agencies.

Since its inception, the agency has achieved remarkable progress, including the conviction of over 500 GBV offenders, the creation of a sex offenders' register, and the expansion of specialized GBV units known as family support units, judiciary, and prosecution services. It has also facilitated the establishment of additional sexual assault referral centers and upgraded primary healthcare facilities to provide sexual assault management.

DSVA has also embraced technology to ensure that its services have a wider reach. In this regard, the agency introduced a mobile USSD platform and a toll-free line in 2017 and 2020, respectively, to improve case reporting and access to support services. The agency has also launched the Domestic and Sexual Violence Case Management System (DSVCMS), the Ask INU WhatsApp chatbot, and a self-reporting portal. These digital tools enable survivors and mandated reporters to safely submit cases, share evidence, and access support.

In 2023, the agency established Eko Haven, a designated shelter offering accommodation to survivors of domestic and gender-based violence and has empowered over 200 survivors through a business grant program aimed at providing intensive entrepreneurship training.

Over the past few years, the agency has been handling around 9,400 GBV complaints annually. Its efforts have not only improved service delivery and justice for survivors but also expanded its model to six other Nigerian states. Legally institutionalized as a nimble government agency in September 2021, it continues to grow and adapt, demonstrating the power of a people-centered approach to advancing justice, protection, and empowerment for survivors of GBV. Its use of technology, community engagement, and stakeholders' collaboration reflects a sustainable model of public service that continues to gain recognition and save lives.

Source: DSVa, <https://lagosdsva.org/>.

5.2 Justice for Children

Children also require special protection within the justice system. People-centered justice ensures that children's rights are safeguarded by providing child-friendly legal services, appointing specialized professionals to handle cases involving children, and promoting restorative justice practices that prioritize the best interests of the child. This approach helps to create a justice system that is sensitive to the unique needs of children and ensures their voices are heard.

In **South Africa**, the Child Justice Act, which is one of the most progressive child-friendly legislation on the continent, provides for specialized courts and procedures that are designed to protect the rights of children in conflict with the law. Remarkably, the law benefited from the input of children who were actively consulted as stakeholders during the law-making process.³⁶ The Act also emphasizes restorative justice, ensuring that children are rehabilitated rather than punished. In Uganda, UNICEF's Justice for Children Program has succeeded in reducing detention periods for children from five to three months and is helping to standardize child-friendly legal aid and institutionalize diversion standards.³⁷

Box 3: Criminal Mediation by Customary Mediators in Burkina Faso



The criminal mediation project successfully developed and implemented a community-based diversion system for children in conflict with the law in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. Launched in 2017 through a collaboration between Terre des hommes Lausanne Foundation (Tdh), the Ministry of Justice, and the Public Prosecutor's Offices of the High Courts of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, the initiative aimed to make criminal mediation a practical alternative to detention, grounded in local customary practices and participatory governance.

Key activities included training a network of customary mediators from local authorities, designing a system based on inclusive stakeholder engagement, and establishing a collaborative framework involving government, community leaders, and juvenile justice professionals. The project employed an action-research approach, continuously observing, documenting, and evaluating mediation sessions and gathering stakeholder feedback through satisfaction surveys and monitoring committees to refine the process.

The achievements of the project are significant: it led to a reduction in pre-trial detention by up to 40 percent, facilitated 437 successful mediations involving 731 children (mostly boys) over a period of six years, and achieved a remarkably low recidivism rate of just 2 percent. Recognized by the government, UNICEF, and the European Union, the initiative has been integrated into Burkina Faso's draft Child Protection Code, supporting the formal institutionalization of community-based mediation nationwide. The project's sustainable approach, strong local roots, and ongoing expansion plans aim to embed traditional conflict resolution into the national judicial system, fostering a more humane, restorative, and child-centered justice practice.

Source: Terre des hommes Lausanne Foundation. See also, "Practical Guide to Customary Criminal Mediation," Terre des hommes, March 19, 2020, <https://tdh.org/fr/mediatheque/documents/guide-pratique-de-la-mediation-penale-pour-mineurs>.

5.3 Justice for Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities often face physical, communication, and attitudinal barriers that hinder their access to justice. People-centered justice seeks to remove these barriers by ensuring that legal services and facilities are accessible by ensuring disability-friendly accommodations and providing disability-sensitive training for justice actors. By promoting inclusivity and accessibility, people-centered justice empowers persons with disabilities to seek justice and protect their rights.

An initiative led by the Disability Rights Unit at the Centre for Human Rights (CHR) of the University of Pretoria in South Africa is helping to advance disability rights across Africa by fostering a deeper understanding of disability as a human rights issue and supporting legal and policy reforms. Established in 2012, the unit's work encompasses research, advocacy, capacity building, and policy promotion. Its active participation in drafting key regional instruments, such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, highlights its influence in shaping continental disability policies. Importantly, the unit manages the Repository on Disability Rights in Africa (RODRA), the first of its kind in Africa. RODRA serves as a comprehensive, open-access platform that tracks developments in disability rights, including legislation, court decisions, policies, and research. This repository is instrumental in preserving and disseminating up-to-date, evidence-based information, thereby enhancing transparency, knowledge sharing, and advocacy efforts.³⁸

Box 4: Comprehensive Research on Barriers to Access to Criminal Justice in Botswana, South Africa, and Zambia



The research conducted by the Disability Rights Unit at the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, aimed to identify barriers faced by persons with disabilities in accessing the criminal justice systems of Botswana, South Africa, and Zambia—countries that ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and are bound to uphold the right to access justice on an equal basis. The study is highly relevant as it identifies the justice needs of persons with disabilities and underscores the ongoing challenges they face, particularly in navigating legal processes, despite commitments in international and regional treaties, such as the 2021 African Disability Protocol.



Key findings reveal significant barriers, especially communication challenges for individuals with hearing and speech impairments, a lack of coordinated responses across justice sectors, and legislative provisions that hinder access to justice. For instance, procedural issues like the assessment of testimonial competence, fitness to plead, and the narrow interpretation of 'language' create systemic obstacles. The study highlights that denial of reasonable accommodations amounts to discrimination and impedes the social model of disability, which emphasizes environmental and attitudinal barriers rather than medical limitations.

The outcomes of the study are both analytical and practical:

- It provides detailed evidence of the gaps in legislative and procedural frameworks that hinder justice for persons with disabilities.
- It advocates for reforms such as training justice personnel on disability rights and accommodations, revising legal assessments, and including accessible formats for summons and evidence.

The relevance of this research lies in its contribution to advancing disability-inclusive justice reforms across Africa, emphasizing the importance of embedding the social model of disability into legal practices to promote equality, dignity, and participation in justice processes. It offers a concrete, evidence-based framework for countries to align their legal systems with international obligations, ensuring that persons with disabilities can access justice on an equal footing with others.

Source: Centre for Human Rights (University of Pretoria), "Barriers to equal access to justice: A study of the criminal justice system in Botswana, South Africa and Zambia," 2022, <https://www.rodra.co.za/news/311-persons-with-disabilities-and-barriers-to-equal-access-to-justice-a-study-of-the-criminal-justice-system-in-botswana-south-africa-and-zambia>.

5.4 Justice for Displaced Populations

Displaced populations, including migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, often lack legal documentation and face significant challenges in accessing justice. People-centered justice addresses these challenges by highlighting the need for accessible legal aid services and ensuring that displaced individuals are aware of their rights and the available legal resources. This approach helps to protect the rights of displaced populations and ensures that they have access to justice despite their circumstances.

In Uganda, which hosts the third-largest refugee population in the world, the Refugee Law Project (RLP) provides legal aid and advocacy for refugees, helping them navigate the justice system and assert their rights in a wide range of cases, including cases of discrimination, land disputes, and gender-based violence. The RLP also provides human rights awareness and community empowerment and conducts studies on access to justice and uses findings to seek solutions by engaging with decision-makers in the police, directorate of public prosecutions, the judiciary, prisons, and others.³⁹

In 2019, **South Sudan's** Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons Act was enacted to domesticate international standards like the 2009 Kampala Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa and the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, establishing a normative basis for IDP protection aligned with regional and global commitments. The law was developed through inclusive consultations involving IDPs, government ministries, UN agencies, civil society, regional bodies, and communities, ensuring that the legislation responded to local needs, especially for women and vulnerable groups. It incorporates international protection benchmarks, focusing on solutions such as return, local integration, and resettlement, alongside innovative measures like establishing a dedicated fund to support implementation using 30 percent of national oil revenues. The law reflects a holistic approach—whole-of-government and whole-of-society—necessary for sustainable displacement management and peacebuilding, addressing human rights and access to justice, land, housing, and community resilience comprehensively.⁴⁰

Box 5: Informal Justice Structures in Refugee Settlements in Uganda



This research project was aimed at mapping and analyzing informal justice structures within refugee communities in six districts of Uganda, focusing on understanding their processes, challenges, and community perceptions. The study identified key problems faced by refugees, such as domestic violence, rape, theft, and child neglect, with criminal cases like defilement and domestic violence being most prevalent. It examined community-led structures—including Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs), community elders, family heads, and “Nyumba Kumi” committees—that resolve disputes outside the formal justice structure. A few of the important insights gained from the project include:

- Confirmation of the existence and functioning of multiple informal justice systems and their generally positive community acceptance.
- Identification of the strengths of these structures, such as timely resolution, community familiarity, and language compatibility.
- Recognition of issues like corruption, partiality, and bribery within some systems, particularly RWCs.
- Development of recommendations to formalize RWCs' operations, improve support and capacity building, and regulate their functions, which could bolster their effectiveness and integrity.

The findings are highly relevant for policymakers, humanitarian agencies, and justice sector stakeholders, providing insights into diverse pathways to justice and how informal systems function, their benefits, and their limitations. They highlight the critical role these structures play in delivering timely dispute resolution and emphasize the need for integrating and formalizing these community-based systems to enhance justice access for refugees.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of informal justice mechanisms in refugee settings and advocates for integrating them into formal systems through regulation and support, ensuring justice is accessible, timely, and community-centered.

Source: Alauterio Ntegyerize and Charity Ahumuza Onyoin, "Courts can never solve problems in the community! A study of informal justice structures in refugee settlements in Uganda," *Refugee Law Project*, 2016, https://www.refugeelawproject.org/files/others/courts_can_never_solve_problems_in_the_community.pdf.

5.5 Justice for Persons Living in Poverty

Persons living in poverty are often unable to afford legal representation and may lack awareness of their legal rights. People-centered justice seeks to bridge this gap by providing community-based justice mechanisms and free or low-cost legal aid services, including with paralegal support services, conducting legal awareness campaigns, and simplifying legal procedures to make them more accessible. By addressing the financial and informational barriers to justice, people-centered justice ensures that individuals living in poverty can seek redress and protect their rights.

In **Nigeria**, the Lagos State Citizens' Mediation Bureau (formerly known as the Citizens' Mediation Centre) provides accessible and free ADR services to the public. Established by state law, the Bureau resolves tens of thousands of disputes annually. Despite being set up in almost every local government area of the state, the Bureau has now adopted digital platforms to enable online mediation sessions and further expand its reach. The model is now being adopted in other states in Nigeria.⁴¹ In **Malawi**, the Legal Aid Bureau partners with paralegals to provide free legal aid to persons living in poverty, ensuring that they have access to justice in cases of land disputes, labor rights violations, and criminal defence.⁴²

Box 6: Conflict Resolution through Community Participation in Rwanda



The Abunzi system, which is fully integrated into Rwanda's justice system, emphasizes community involvement and traditional dispute resolution, tailored to local customs and cultural norms. Mandated by national laws and the constitution, the Abunzi system utilizes trained local mediators—residing within the community—who mediate civil and criminal disputes. The process is transparent, conducted publicly, and encourages amicable reconciliation to preserve social cohesion and unity. The mediators consider local culture when evaluating testimonies and making decisions, provided these customs align with national laws.

The Abunzi system is a community-based system, reducing barriers related to distance, cost, and formal legal procedures often faced by impoverished and rural populations. Resolving disputes locally saves economic costs, making justice more affordable for the poor. The system significantly reduces the time taken to settle cases—by up to 86.7 percent—compared to formal courts. Its focus on reconciliation and mediation fosters social harmony, which is vital for vulnerable groups facing social exclusion. The Abunzi law mandates that at least 30 percent of committee members are women, promoting gender-sensitive decision-making.

Overall, the Abunzi system provides a people-centered, culturally appropriate, and accessible justice mechanism that effectively reduces the burden on formal courts, promotes social stability, and enhances access to justice for economically disadvantaged populations.

Source: Nokukhanya Ntuli, "Africa: Alternative Dispute Resolution in a Comparative Perspective," *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, Issue 22 (2018): 36–61, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/bbaf/fd3d417ee00da7b78aab81b22d76cd973101.pdf>.

People-centered justice offers a powerful framework for extending access to justice services to those furthest behind. By addressing the unique challenges faced by women, children, persons with disabilities, displaced populations, and persons living in poverty—people-centered justice creates a more inclusive and equitable justice system. This approach not only empowers individuals to seek justice but also contributes to the broader goals of social inclusion, equality, and sustainable development.

However, as some of the highlighted good practices have shown, achieving people-centered justice requires out-of-the-box thinking and sustained commitment from governments, civil society, and international partners. This includes prioritizing research, data, and evidence in the justice sector, ensuring sustainable funding to the sector, investing in legal aid and paralegal services, promoting legal literacy, reforming discriminatory laws, and strengthening community-based justice mechanisms.



6. Diverse Pathways to People-Centered Justice

Justice is not a one-size-fits-all concept, especially in a continent as diverse as Africa. **In many African countries, the concept of justice is multifaceted and deeply rooted in the continent's diverse cultural, social, and legal landscapes.** Many countries operate under plural legal systems, where formal state laws coexist with customary and religious laws. Customary laws are deeply rooted in local traditions and are often the primary means of resolving disputes in rural areas. Diverse pathways to justice, which include formal state systems, customary and religious systems, and community-based mechanisms, offer unique opportunities to create inclusive and accountable systems.

Focusing on diverse pathways acknowledges and respects these plural systems, ensuring that justice is accessible and relevant to all citizens, regardless of their cultural or religious background. Different communities have different ways of understanding and administering justice. For example, restorative justice practices, which focus on reconciliation and community harmony, are prevalent in many African countries. By incorporating these practices into the broader justice system, governments can ensure that justice is culturally relevant and more likely to be accepted and respected by the people.

The formal justice system is usually concentrated in urban areas, making it difficult for people in rural and remote regions to access justice. Customary courts and community-based justice mechanisms often serve as the primary means of dispute resolution in these areas. Also, while formal justice institutions are essential for delivering justice, most people rely on a diverse range of providers outside of national statutory courts or formal systems. For a customary or an informal pathway to justice to offer a meaningful alternative to the traditional justice system, it should be inclusive and accountable.

6.1 Inclusivity in Diverse Pathways to Justice

Inclusivity is an important principle of people-centered justice. It ensures that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, age, or other characteristics, have access to justice. Diverse pathways to justice can enhance inclusivity by providing multiple avenues for individuals to seek redress and protect their rights. Inclusivity also aims to ensure that harmful customary or community-based practices do not detract from constitutionally guaranteed freedoms or undermine gender equality.

In **Kenya**, the integration of customary law into the formal legal system has been instrumental in promoting inclusivity. In 2020, an Afrobarometer survey found that only 2 percent of Kenyans resort to the courts when faced with a justice problem and that 25 percent use arbitration involving a trusted person, while 19 percent use a traditional leader or community-based mechanism.⁴³ The Kenyan Constitution recognizes the role of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, allowing communities to resolve disputes according to their customs and traditions. This approach ensures that justice is accessible to individuals in rural and remote areas who may not have easy access to formal courts. By recognizing and incorporating customary law, Kenya has created a more inclusive justice system that respects and values the cultural diversity of its people.⁴⁴

In **South Africa**, the use of community advice offices has been a key strategy for promoting inclusivity. These offices provide free legal advice and support to individuals who cannot afford legal representation. They are often staffed by paralegals who are trained to assist with a wide range of legal issues, from housing and employment disputes to family law matters. Community advice offices play a crucial role in bridging the justice gap and ensuring that those furthest behind have access to justice.⁴⁵

6.2 Accountability in Diverse Pathways to Justice

Two of the principles of people-centered justice are the values of solving justice problems and improving justice journeys. Accountability in diverse pathways to justice helps to focus on procedures as well as people-centered outcomes, thereby ensuring that the system is accountable to the people it intends to serve. It is essential for building trust and confidence in the justice system. Diverse pathways to justice can also enhance accountability by ensuring that justice institutions are transparent, responsive, and answerable to the people they serve.

Somalia's Alternative Dispute Resolution Policy and Centres provide an inclusive justice pathway by integrating Xeer customary law, Islamic shari'a, Italian civil law, and British common law into a cohesive system that enhances access to justice with a focus on human rights and gender equality. Established with the support of International Development Law Organization (IDLO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the ADR Centres use a hybrid model that emphasizes consensus-building and procedural safeguards. These Centres address civil disputes and minor crimes, incorporating diverse representation with adjudicators from different clans and requiring at least two women per panel. Mobile services broaden access to marginalized communities and IDPs, resulting in approximately 11,000 people accessing justice annually. A user survey highlighted improved community justice, with 93 percent satisfaction on procedural impartiality and resolutions, and nearly half of the cases initiated by women, showcasing empowered participation. This initiative ensures that justice is delivered in a manner that is accountable to the community and reflective of its values.⁴⁶

6.3 Equity in Diverse Pathways to Justice

Equity in diverse pathways to justice is essential for ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their cultural, social, or economic backgrounds, have equal access to equitable and respectful resolutions. It involves respecting local traditions and customary practices while upholding fundamental human rights and principles of non-discrimination. An equitable justice system recognizes the importance of inclusivity, transparency, and impartiality, ensuring that community-based, formal, and hybrid mechanisms work collaboratively to deliver just outcomes that are culturally sensitive yet aligned with national and international standards.

Sierra Leone's Chiefdom Land Committees (CLC) adopt a people-centered approach to dispute resolution by integrating state and customary systems to equitably address land disputes. Rooted in the National Land Policy of 2015 and enhanced by the Customary Land Rights Act of 2022, the CLCs empower local communities by ensuring representation of women and ethnic minorities in land dispute resolutions, thereby enabling a level-playing field for disputants and reducing the unilateral influence of paramount chiefs. This approach mitigates the issues endemic to Local Courts, such as financial extortion and gender discrimination, and provides communities with a more accessible and culturally sensitive justice mechanism. By acting as bridges between informal community-based dispute resolution and the formal court system, the CLCs have increased the justiciability of land cases and facilitated greater demand for equitable land justice, making the process inherently sustainable and community-driven.⁴⁷

6.4 Forms of Diverse Pathways to Justice

Access to justice goes beyond the doors of the courtroom. It means that people can recognize and understand their rights, seek remedies when those rights are violated, and receive timely and effective responses. On this path, individuals may turn to a wide range of justice service providers. Formal institutions such as courts, legal aid services, and statutory bodies remain essential pillars of justice delivery, yet in practice many people rely on customary or informal systems that are closer to their daily lives. Taken together, these diverse pathways, formal and informal alike, make up the broader justice ecosystem through which people pursue solutions to their problems.

6.4.1 Judicial Interventions

Within Africa's diverse pathways to justice, formal courts remain indispensable, but they too must adapt to meet people's needs. In Liberia, the judiciary has embraced this challenge by using the JUPITER (Justice Pillars Towards Evidence-Based Reform) tool to assess how well the courts serve ordinary people. The assessment went beyond institutional performance to measure access, efficiency, and quality from the perspective of users. It revealed barriers such as high costs and long delays, which have driven many citizens to turn instead to customary systems. By collecting and acting on this data, the judiciary acknowledged that the courts themselves must be strengthened if they are to remain a trusted and effective pathway to justice. This initiative illustrates how formal judicial systems can embody people-centered justice by grounding reforms in evidence and in the lived realities of the communities they serve.⁴⁸

6.4.2 Legal Aid

Among the diverse pathways to justice in Africa, legal aid institutions are a critical component of the formal system that make justice more accessible and inclusive. In Sierra Leone, the Legal Aid Board has become one of the most extensive legal aid providers on the continent, operating at both national and community levels. Through a network of lawyers and paralegals, the Board offers representation and advice to those who would otherwise be excluded from the formal justice system due to cost or lack of awareness. Its presence across the country has reduced reliance on informal actors for basic justice needs and brought formal legal services closer to marginalized populations. By embedding affordability, outreach, and community engagement within a statutory body, Sierra Leone's Legal Aid Board demonstrates how the formal justice system itself can evolve into a more people-centered pathway ensuring that courts and laws are not only available in principle but also truly accessible in practice.⁴⁹

6.4.3 Harmonizing Formal and Informal Justice Systems

Africa's legal landscape is characterized by legal pluralism, where formal legal systems coexist with customary and religious legal systems. While this pluralism can create challenges, it also offers opportunities to create diverse pathways to justice that are inclusive and culturally relevant.

The **Ugandan** Local Council Courts (LCCs) exemplify a good example of harmonizing formal and informal justice systems by providing accessible, community-driven dispute resolution that is tailored to local cultural contexts. Established under the 2006 Local Council Courts Act and integrated into local government structures, these courts are designed to deliver speedy,

user-friendly justice in local languages, primarily resolving civil disputes and customary matters like land, family, and minor criminal cases. They foster community participation and reconciliation, making justice more approachable for the rural and marginalized populations who often find the formal court system complex, costly, and intimidating. Their widespread use, serving around 80 percent of Ugandans, demonstrates their relevance, especially in remote areas.⁵⁰

LCCs, however, face notable shortcomings, such as lack of standardization, insufficient training of adjudicators, biases against women and vulnerable groups, and limited mechanisms for monitoring and ensuring equitable outcomes. Funding is sporadic, and a lack of official status has hindered their formal institutionalization, which affects decision enforcement and overall legitimacy. Despite these challenges, the Courts have contributed to a broader paradigm shift at the international level by showcasing grassroots justice delivery rooted in local values, emphasizing reconciliation and community participation as key pillars of people-centered justice. They offer promising pathways for accessible, inclusive justice, but require stronger support, regulation, and outcome-based monitoring to fully realize their potential.⁵¹

6.4.4 Community-Based Mechanisms

Community-based justice mechanisms, such as mediation, arbitration, and restorative justice, offer accessible and participatory pathways to justice. These mechanisms are often more culturally appropriate and less costly than formal legal mechanisms, making them particularly effective in rural and marginalized communities. In **Kenya**, the “Nyumba Kumi” (ten households) initiative promotes community-based policing and conflict resolution at the grassroots level. The initiative encourages neighbors to resolve disputes through dialogue and mediation, reducing the burden on formal courts and fostering a sense of community ownership over justice.⁵²

Box 7: Mozambique's Community Courts



Through its community courts, Mozambique effectively addresses key justice needs by providing accessible, culturally relevant, and restorative conflict resolution mechanisms. These courts, which fall outside the formal justice system, resolve a substantial 80 percent of conflicts, predominantly handling simple civil and criminal cases, thus alleviating pressure on overburdened state courts and prisons. Community courts have been operating for over 50 years and served both rural and urban populations, often in areas lacking formal judicial infrastructure. In 2004 they gained constitutional recognition through Article 4 of the 2004 Mozambiquan Constitution.

Rooted in local traditions, their decisions are based on community customs and consensus, fostering trust and relevance among local populations. They are sustainable, cost-effective, and inclusive, with ongoing efforts to improve gender balance among judges. Their long history, resilience through political

changes, and widespread community acceptance demonstrate their vital role in expanding access to justice, reducing systemic inefficiencies, and preventing justice problems like prison overcrowding and delayed case resolution.

Source: Tina Lorrizzo, "Non-State Forms of Conflict Resolution: Opportunities for Improving Criminal Justice – A Case Study of Community Courts in Mozambique," Thesis presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Public Law, University of Cape Town, 2021, https://reformar.co.mz/thesis_law_2022_lorizzo-concetta.pdf.

6.5 Legal Empowerment

Legal empowerment initiatives aim to build the capacity of individuals and communities to understand and assert their rights. These initiatives are particularly important for those furthest behind, who often lack the knowledge or resources to navigate formal legal systems.

Paralegals are usually individuals without a law degree but with some legal training, who can provide a range of services considered to be part of a broader definition of legal aid, such as legal assistance, legal advice, legal education, and legal information. They play an important role in alternative dispute resolution (ADR).⁵³

Paralegals support legal empowerment initiatives by serving as accessible, community-based facilitators who bridge the gap between marginalized populations and formal justice systems. Through their knowledge of laws and procedures, paralegals provide vital legal education, advise individuals on their rights, and assist with navigating complex bureaucratic processes. Their presence helps demystify legal processes, reduce barriers to access, and foster trust in diverse justice pathways, including customary, community-based, and formal mechanisms.

Box 8: Paralegalism at Wema Justice Centre in Kenya



The Wema Justice Centre, established by ex-convicts in Mombasa, Kenya, exemplifies how supporting ex-offenders as paralegals can create more sustainable pathways to justice. Many ex-offenders carry out community service at Wema Justice Centre, utilizing technical skills they learned while incarcerated such as plumbing, tailoring, masonry, and electrical wiring. To rebuild their reputations, the trained ex-convict paralegals offer legal aid services at the Centre. These paralegals, all of whom are ex-convicts, assist the community by providing legal counsel on issues such as domestic disputes, labor and employment, child support, land, and succession. They also create court documents and draft appeals for inmates.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, paralegals played a crucial role in resolving disputes, including assisting detained children and addressing substance abuse issues. Additionally, the Justice Centre generates income through tree

planting, offering various tree seedlings to the community as part of their climate change advocacy efforts. Their peer-led approach fosters community trust, contributes to income generation through climate advocacy, and enhances social reintegration, making legal support more ongoing, locally rooted, and sustainable—while serving as a model for institutionalizing social and financial sustainability of paralegal services across the region.

Source: Kituo cha Sheria – Legal Advice Centre, “Challenges and Opportunities for Community Paralegals: An Analysis of Legal Recognition, State Regulation and Financing in Kenya and Zambia – Full Report,” 2024, <https://kituochasheria.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/PARALEGAL-Full-Report.pdf>.

Young people also have a role to play. In **Morocco**, youth-led local women’s rights non-governmental organization (NGO) embarked on an initiative to provide concrete legal assistance to unwed mothers, such as child registration, court accompaniment, and rights education, enabling beneficiaries to navigate often hostile bureaucratic systems. These targeted actions helped to overcome legal voids, discriminatory laws, and societal stigma, creating accessible and inclusive pathways to justice for marginalized women. The initiative demonstrates that legal empowerment involves not only knowledge of rights but practical support that transforms legal awareness into tangible access, fostering social change and expanding justice avenues for disadvantaged populations.⁵⁴

6.6 Technology and Innovation

Technology offers innovative pathways to justice, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Mobile technology, online platforms, and virtual courts can help bridge the gap between justice systems and marginalized populations. In **South Africa**, legal advice chatbots are emerging to provide free, accessible legal information to the public. These chatbots use artificial intelligence to answer legal questions and guide users through the justice system, making legal information more accessible to marginalized communities.⁵⁵

Also in South Africa, the Court Online platform, an end-to-end e-filing and case management system for the High Courts, allows legal representatives to file documents and manage cases digitally, reducing costs, delays, and administrative burdens.⁵⁶ By simplifying processes and cutting through inefficiencies, such platforms bring courts closer to the people they serve. While the streamlining of usability is welcome, it still remains important to ensure that breaking down the other barriers like onerous and overly complicated justice journeys are addressed so as to not transpose the same challenges to the digital domain.

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence hold significant potential for justice systems, from supporting legal research to streamlining case management. However, to ensure these tools do not reinforce existing inequalities, they must be designed and deployed with equity, inclusivity, and accountability at their core. When used responsibly, technology can help bridge gaps in access to justice and create systems that are more responsive to people's needs.⁵⁷

6.7 Restorative Justice

Restorative justice emphasizes healing and reconciliation rather than punishment, offering a people-centered approach to justice that is particularly relevant in post-conflict and fragile states. In **Rwanda**, the Gacaca courts are a notable example of a restorative justice mechanism in the aftermath of a conflict. After the 1994 genocide, Rwanda faced the challenge of addressing a massive backlog of genocide-related cases. The Gacaca courts, which were based on traditional community justice mechanisms, were revived to address this challenge. These courts involved the participation of community members in the resolution of cases, with a focus on reconciliation and restorative justice. The Gacaca courts provided a culturally relevant and people-centered approach to justice that helped to promote healing and reconciliation within Rwandan society.⁵⁸

Key Takeaways

Diverse pathways to justice in Africa offer unique opportunities to create inclusive, accountable, and equitable justice systems. By recognizing and integrating customary and community-based justice mechanisms, providing legal support through community advice offices and paralegals, and implementing innovative solutions such as mobile courts, African countries can ensure that justice is accessible to all individuals. These diverse pathways not only enhance inclusivity and accountability but also ensure that justice systems are responsive to the needs and realities of the people they serve. By harnessing the strengths of these diverse pathways, African countries can create more just, equitable, and inclusive societies.



7. People-Centered Justice Research, Data, and Evidence

In the pursuit of people-centered justice, research, data, and evidence play a pivotal role in shaping policies, improving service delivery, and ensuring that justice systems are responsive to the needs of the people. Across the continent, where justice systems often face challenges of limited resources, inequitable access, and systemic inefficiencies, the use of data-influenced approaches has emerged as a powerful tool for transforming justice delivery.

The Justice Action Coalition's work on Data and Evidence plays a central role in advancing people-centered justice. One of its key objectives is to identify and build consensus around the core data required to evaluate the impact of people-centered justice initiatives. By agreeing on common indicators and standards, this workstream helps countries and partners move beyond anecdotal evidence and measure progress in a systematic, comparable way. Establishing a shared foundation of data is essential not only for tracking outcomes, but also for informing smarter investments, guiding reforms, and ensuring accountability in delivering justice that truly responds to people's needs.

Data-influenced decision-making involves the systematic collection, analysis, and use of data to inform policies, practices, and resource allocation within the justice system. This approach enhances transparency, accountability, and effectiveness, leading to better outcomes for individuals and communities. To achieve this, it is essential to understand the barriers that people face in accessing justice, the effectiveness of existing interventions, and the areas where improvements are needed. This is where research, data, and evidence come into play. These elements provide the foundation for informed decision-making, enabling justice systems to be more responsive, efficient, and equitable.

The lack of justice data is a challenge not only across the continent but around the world. Increasingly, justice leaders are beginning to understand that data is a critical tool for implementing effective policies and that without justice data, one cannot fully understand or address the justice problems at hand. Despite these challenges, there has been significant progress across the region in the gathering of justice data and evidence. National surveys, justice needs and satisfaction surveys (JNS), country case studies, and several other types of research have been conducted in recent times to better understand the justice needs of the people on the continent.⁵⁹

Research plays a crucial role in people-centered justice by providing a deeper understanding of the issues and challenges faced by individuals within the justice system. It involves the systematic investigation of justice-related topics, such as access to justice, legal empowerment, and the impact of legal reforms. Research findings can inform the development of policies and interventions that are grounded in evidence and tailored to the specific needs of the population.

Research, data, and evidence are critical components of a people-centered approach to justice. They provide insights into the challenges and needs of the population, identify gaps in the justice system, and inform the development of effective policies and interventions. By grounding decisions in empirical evidence, justice systems can ensure that their actions are aligned with the realities of the people they serve, and by continuing to prioritize research, data, and evidence, African countries can create more just, inclusive, and people-centered justice systems.

This section explores the link between people-centered justice and research, data, and evidence. It also provides examples of people-centered justice initiatives on the continent that illustrate the key role data, research, and evidence plays in.

This includes:



Identifying barriers: Research helps identify the specific barriers that different groups face in accessing justice, such as poverty, discrimination, or lack of legal awareness.



Measuring impact: Data allows policymakers to measure the impact of justice interventions, ensuring that resources are allocated effectively and that programs achieve their intended outcomes.



Informing policy: Evidence-based research informs the development of policies and programs that are tailored to the needs of the people, ensuring that justice systems are inclusive and equitable.



Promoting accountability: Data can be used to monitor the performance of justice actors and institutions, promoting transparency and accountability in the delivery of justice.

Box 9: The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiIL)'s Justice Needs and Satisfaction Survey (2025) in Nigeria



The Justice Needs and Satisfaction Survey (2025), conducted by HiIL in Nigeria, reveals critical insights into the justice landscape of the country. The survey identifies land disputes, family conflicts, crime, and employment issues as the most prevalent justice problems faced by Nigerians. Land disputes are particularly common in rural areas, while family-related issues, such as divorce and inheritance, disproportionately affect women. Crime and safety concerns, including theft and assault, are widespread, with many people feeling unsafe in their communities. Employment disputes, such as unpaid wages and unfair dismissals, are also significant, especially among working-age individuals. These issues highlight the diverse and pressing justice needs across different segments of the population.

The survey found that access to justice remains a significant challenge, with many Nigerians turning to informal justice mechanisms, such as community leaders or religious authorities, rather than formal courts. This reliance on informal systems is driven by perceived inefficiency, corruption, and high costs associated with the formal justice system. Barriers such as lengthy processes, lack of trust, and financial constraints further hinder access to formal justice. Satisfaction with justice outcomes is generally low, with many feeling that their issues were not adequately resolved. There is also a widespread perception of bias, particularly against the poor and marginalized groups, which undermines confidence in the justice system.

The survey further highlights significant disparities based on gender, age, and region. Women face unique justice challenges, particularly in family-related matters, and report lower satisfaction with outcomes compared to men. Youth are more likely to encounter employment and education-related justice issues but are less engaged with formal justice mechanisms due to lack of awareness or trust. Regional variations are evident, with land disputes more common in the north and employment disputes in the south. Urban areas have better access to formal justice institutions, while rural areas rely more on informal mechanisms.

The survey concludes with recommendations of targeted reforms aimed at addressing these disparities, such as strengthening informal justice systems, reducing barriers to the formal justice system, initiating targeted support for vulnerable groups, and increasing public awareness of legal rights and available mechanisms.

Source: HiIL, "Justice Needs and Satisfaction in Nigeria 2025 - Legal problems in daily life," HiIL, 2025, <https://www.hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-in-nigeria/>.

7.1 Examples of People-Centered Justice Research, Data, and Evidence in Africa

Uganda: The Justice, Law, and Order Sector Monitoring & Evaluation Framework

This framework introduced a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework to track the performance of justice institutions and assess the impact of justice sector reforms. The JLOS framework offers valuable lessons for developing effective justice sector programs. Key achievements include the development of sophisticated M&E arrangements incorporating routine monitoring, periodic reviews, and impact indicators for the sector and its institutions. Over time, JLOS evolved from basic, institution-specific reports to a sector-wide approach with integrated indicators and policies. Critical lessons learned highlight that effective indicators should be high-level and cross-sectoral to promote holistic assessment and should be combined carefully to avoid perverse incentives. The data collected by JLOS is used to inform policy decisions, allocate resources, and monitor progress towards achieving the sector's goals.⁶⁰

West and Central Africa: Governance Statistics on Discrimination and Inequality.

This Praia City Group and UN Women study highlights significant gaps in the region's ability to gather comprehensive and reliable statistics on discrimination and inequality. Despite most countries having ratified key human rights treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, data availability remains limited, and existing data systems focus predominantly on gender-related discrimination, with insufficient coverage of other grounds such as ethnicity, disability, or socio-economic status. It found that data collection practices are often manual, and administrative systems are underdeveloped, resulting in inadequate monitoring, weak analysis, and limited use of data for policymaking and accountability. The study emphasizes the critical need for strengthening institutional capacities, modernizing data collection practices, and fostering coordination across government agencies and national statistical offices. Building political will and revising legal frameworks are essential for integrating discrimination and inequality metrics into existing systems. Overall, the report underscores that institutionalizing and expanding administrative data on discrimination and inequality is fundamental for advancing human rights, promoting equality, and ensuring evidence-based policy interventions across the region.⁶¹

Nigeria and Uganda: Measuring the Justice Outcomes that Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence Seek.

This HiiL policy brief discusses a survivor-centered outcomes measurement tool that was developed to help practitioners understand and address the diverse needs of intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors. The underlying data was collected through interviews and focus groups in Uganda, Nigeria, and The Netherlands. The tool reconciles the professionalized, short-term perspective of practitioners with the lived experiences of survivors, enabling more holistic and responsive justice care. It is designed to be integrated into existing service delivery processes, empowering survivors by giving them a voice in the resolution process and allowing practitioners to tailor interventions or make referrals based on the survivor's needs. By collecting data on justice outcomes, practitioners can monitor and evaluate the impact of their services, identifying gaps in service delivery and allocating resources more efficiently.

Over time, this data can inform systemic changes in how justice services are evaluated and funded, contributing to a more effective and equitable justice system. Despite some identified challenges, the policy brief calls for pilot testing of the outcomes measurement tool, developing frameworks for other legal problems, and promoting holistic justice systems to create a more responsive and effective justice sector.⁶²

Key Takeaways

Research, data, and evidence are essential tools for achieving people-centered justice. By identifying barriers, measuring impact, informing policy, and promoting accountability, data-influenced approaches will help to transform the delivery of justice across the continent. Leveraging the power of research, data, and evidence will ensure that Africa can build justice systems that truly serve the people and leave no one behind in the pursuit of justice, equality, and dignity.



8. Preventing Justice Problems

In the pursuit of people-centered justice, the emphasis on preventing justice problems is a critical yet often overlooked aspect. Rather than merely reacting to injustices after they occur, a proactive approach that focuses on prevention can address the root causes of justice problems, reduce the burden on already overstretched justice systems, and ultimately create more equitable and inclusive societies. Preventing justice problems involves identifying and addressing potential issues before they escalate into more significant conflicts or legal disputes. This proactive approach prioritizes the well-being and rights of individuals. By preventing justice problems, communities can avoid the social, economic, and emotional costs associated with prolonged legal battles and unresolved conflicts.

People-centered justice is about ensuring that justice systems are accessible, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized. However, traditional justice systems often focus on reactive measures, such as adjudicating disputes or punishing offenders, rather than preventing the problems that lead to injustice in the first place. By shifting the focus to prevention, justice systems can:



Address Root Causes: Preventive strategies target the underlying causes of justice problems, such as poverty, inequality, and lack of legal awareness, rather than merely addressing their symptoms.



Promote Social Cohesion: Preventive justice fosters dialogue, reconciliation, and community engagement, which can help build trust and social cohesion, particularly in post-conflict or fragile states.



Empower Communities: Preventive approaches often involve community-based interventions that empower individuals and communities to resolve disputes amicably and prevent future conflicts.



Reduce Case Backlogs: By preventing disputes and conflicts, justice systems can reduce the number of cases that need to be adjudicated, thereby alleviating the burden on courts and legal institutions.

Box 10: Community Advice Offices in South Africa



Community Advice Offices (CAO) in **South Africa** play a crucial role in preventing justice problems by providing accessible, local support to individuals facing legal or social challenges. These offices serve as first points of contact for community members who seek guidance on issues such as housing, unemployment, social grants, domestic violence, and basic legal rights. By addressing these concerns early, the offices help prevent potential conflicts from escalating into more serious legal disputes, thereby reducing the burden on formal courts and justice institutions.

Additionally, CAO facilitate early intervention by offering information, counseling, and mediation services tailored to the specific needs of their communities. They educate individuals about their rights and available legal options, empowering them to take informed action before problems worsen. This proactive approach helps individuals resolve their issues amicably and swiftly, preventing prolonged disputes and social tensions that could otherwise lead to legal intervention or court proceedings.

Furthermore, advice offices foster stronger community-government linkages, promoting social cohesion and trust in local institutions. By functioning as accessible, trusted hubs for dispute prevention and resolution, they enable communities to manage conflicts internally with community-led solutions. This preventative work not only alleviates pressure on the formal justice system but also promotes a culture of early dispute resolution and community empowerment, ultimately contributing to a more just and harmonious society.

Source: Website of the Community Advice Offices South Africa, <https://caosasouthafrica.org.za/>.

8.1 Types and Examples of Initiatives to Prevent Justice Problems in Africa

8.1.2 Community-Based Justice Initiatives

One of the key strategies for preventing justice problems in Africa is the implementation of community-based justice initiatives. These initiatives empower local communities to proactively address justice issues through traditional and restorative justice mechanisms to forestall a deterioration with worse consequences. They are effective tools for preventing justice problems because these mechanisms are often more accessible, culturally appropriate, and less costly than formal legal systems, making them particularly effective in rural and marginalized communities.

- In **Rwanda**, the Abunzi provide a low-cost, accessible alternative to formal courts. The Abunzi system emphasizes restorative justice, focusing on mediation, reconciliation, and

community harmony rather than punishment. By resolving disputes at the local level, the Abunzi system has prevented many cases from escalating to formal courts, reducing the burden on the justice system and fostering social cohesion.⁶³

- In **Burkina Faso**, HiiL's Justice Innovation Lab helps communities develop local land charters, participatory documents that set clear rules for land access, use and management. Culturally adapted and accessible, these charters strengthen local leadership, promote fair decision-making and foster social cohesion. By engaging community members at every step, the initiative prevents land conflicts and supports the formal recognition of customary justice practices in rural areas.⁶⁴

8.1.3 Legal Empowerment and Education

Legal empowerment and education are critical components of preventing justice problems. By providing individuals with the knowledge and tools to understand their rights and navigate the legal system, communities can prevent injustices and ensure that justice is accessible to all. By increasing legal awareness, preventive justice can help individuals avoid disputes and resolve conflicts before they escalate.

- In **Niger**, HiiL is supporting justice actors to legally empower citizens through a people-centered approach. This involves the development and dissemination of comprehensive, evidence-based guidelines aimed at improving the quality and accessibility of justice services. *The Manual for the Prevention and Resolution of Land Conflicts in Niger* and the *Guideline on Women's Access to Rural Land in Niger*, integrate both proven methodologies and effective local practices. These resources provide clear, actionable recommendations for addressing complex issues like land conflicts. By promoting these best practices, the guidelines strengthen the capacity of justice actors, including traditional leaders, religious authorities and legal professionals, to deliver fair, informed and equitable services. Designed as living documents, the guidelines are intended to evolve over time, adapting to shifting needs to ensure continued progress in delivering effective justice.⁶⁵
- In **South Africa**, the Sonke Gender Justice Initiative works to prevent GBV through education and awareness campaigns. The initiative engages men and boys in discussions about gender equality and healthy relationships, challenging harmful stereotypes and promoting positive behavior change. By addressing the root causes of GBV, the initiative has helped prevent violence and create safer communities.⁶⁶

8.1.4 Access to Justice Services

Ensuring access to justice services is another vital aspect of preventing justice problems. In many African countries, geographical and financial barriers can prevent individuals from accessing legal services.

- In **Nigeria**, the Network of University Legal Aid Institutions' (NULAI) Virtual StreetLaw (N-VSL) is aimed at preventing justice problems by enhancing access to legal education. This globally recognized initiative simplifies legal concepts, thereby empowering

individuals with knowledge of their rights and responsibilities. Through a network of law clinics, NULAI Nigeria educates communities about legal issues, aiding informed decision-making. N-VSL utilizes digital advocacy to promote legal empowerment and public awareness. Law students creatively engage the public in understanding key Nigerian laws and their societal impact. The program specifically encourages law clinic students and youth to promote public legal knowledge, stimulate debate, and actively engage in public legal education.⁶⁷

- In **Kenya**, a project aimed at strengthening the Small Claims Court (SCC), is enhancing access to justice and helping to prevent gendered legal problems or barriers. Focusing on underserved populations in Mombasa County, including women, youth, and informal traders, the initiative simplifies legal processes and builds community legal awareness. Through collaboration with civil society and the Judiciary, and the use of mobile applications and justice hubs, the project offers more inclusive, affordable, and responsive justice services. In a short period, the project has shown significant results, with increased case uptake in the SCC, reflecting greater public trust and a proactive approach to justice-seeking. Women who previously lacked access to formal redress mechanisms are now reclaiming unpaid debts and engaging with the justice system. This initiative not only improves justice access but also redefines justice for historically underserved groups, serving as a model for community-based, people-focused justice reform.⁶⁸

8.1.5 One-Stop Justice Centers

One-stop justice centers are emerging on the continent not just to resolve justice problems in a holistic and timely manner, but also to prevent them. They are also well-positioned to address the root causes of systemic justice problems.

- In **Nigeria**, the Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency was established in Lagos State to provide sensitive services to victims of domestic and sexual violence, promote healthy relationships, safeguard and protect children, and enhance the coordinated community response to these issues. The agency collaborates with various community stakeholders and organizations to strengthen prevention efforts on domestic and sexual violence.⁶⁹
- In **Uganda**, the justice innovation lab convened by HiiL developed the Community Justice Clinic (CJC) to prevent and resolve justice problems by strengthening local community justice providers and connecting them with the formal justice system. Uganda's 2020 Justice Needs and Satisfaction Survey found that many people faced unresolved or unfairly resolved legal issues due to limited access to courts and mistrust in the formal system. It found that community justice providers, like local councils and traditional leaders, were already resolving common disputes, especially around land and family issues. The CJC standardizes and enhances these community services by providing evidence-based guidelines, a case management system focused on outcomes, and a centralized location in each sub-county for resolving disputes. It also offers an information portal that supplies clear, actionable legal advice and facilitates referrals, ensuring that justice seekers and their support networks can access relevant information and support.⁷⁰

8.1.6 Social and Economic Interventions

Poverty and inequality are root causes of many justice problems, including land disputes, labor exploitation, and access to basic services. Preventive justice strategies that address these underlying issues can help reduce the incidence of justice problems and create more equitable societies.

- In **Niger**, the justice innovation lab convened by HiiL developed the Hadin kai-bani fondo platform to prevent land disputes and promote conflict resolution at the community level. Recognizing that 23 percent of Nigeriens face land conflicts annually, the initiative created an accessible digital tool to strengthen traditional leaders' capacity to effectively and equitably manage disputes over shared resources. This solution includes an easy-to-use online platform providing legal guidance, mediation steps, and resources. An AI-driven voice service ensures that even those with limited literacy or internet access can seek support. Complemented by training caravans and awareness campaigns, traditional leaders are equipped with modern mediation tools, enhancing their legitimacy and effectiveness. By offering timely, easy-to-understand legal support, the platform helps prevent disputes from escalating, fostering social cohesion and peace.⁷¹
- Responding to community elders, widows, and youth in Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, **South Africa**, this initiative introduces a preventive legal education program aimed at reducing future property and marriage disputes by empowering youth and couples with essential knowledge. The program's key strategies include integrating legal modules on marriage and property rights into school curricula, hosting community workshops to clarify legal and customary implications of unions, and providing multilingual rights toolkits for traditional leaders, teachers, and marriage officers. By focusing on early education and awareness, the initiative seeks to foster a culture of legal literacy and informed decision-making, ultimately preventing disputes before they arise.⁷²

8.1.7 Technological Innovations

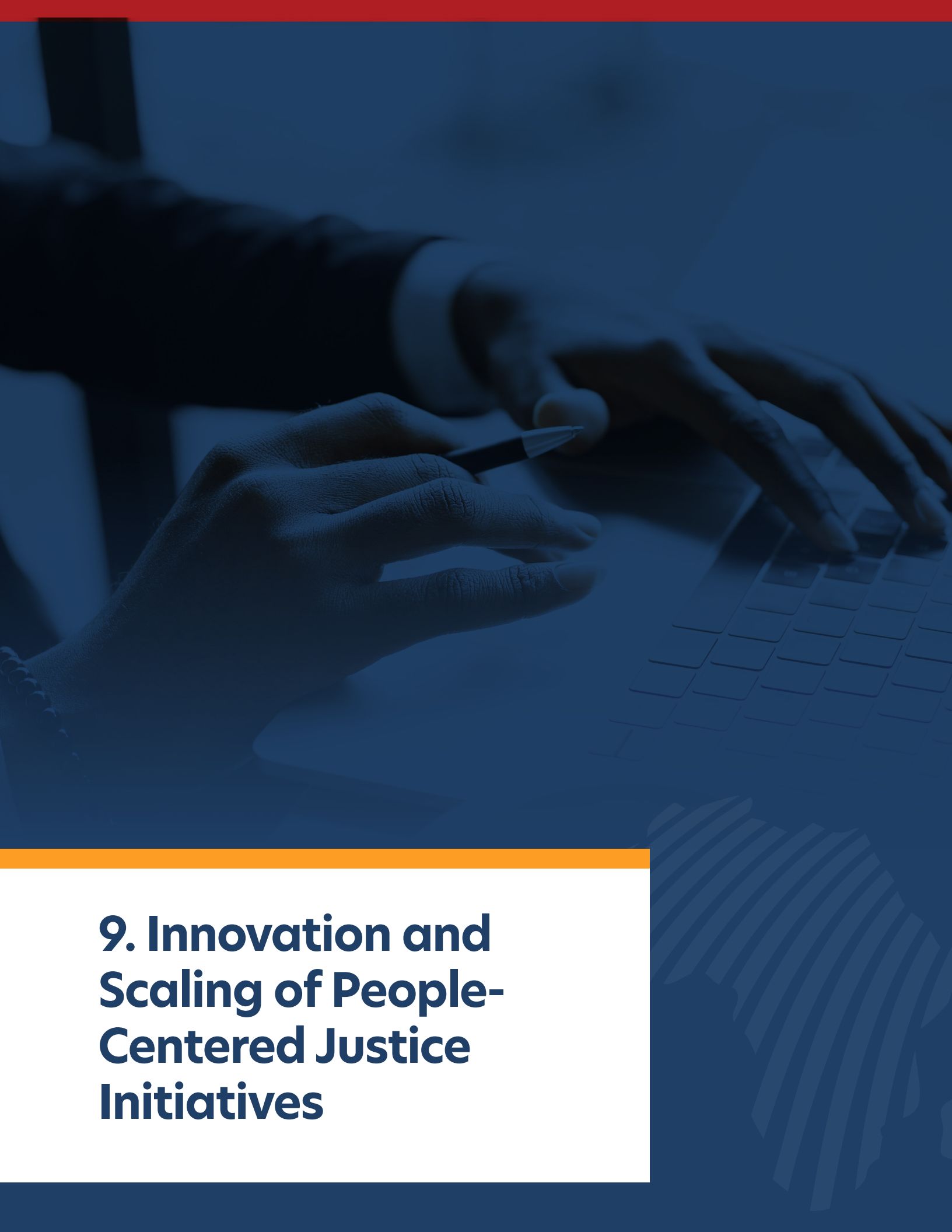
Technology is playing an increasingly important role in preventing justice problems, particularly in remote and underserved areas. By leveraging technology, African countries can expand access to legal information, early warning systems, and dispute resolution mechanisms.

- In **Kenya**, the Ushahidi platform has been used to map and prevent election-related violence. The platform allows citizens to report incidents of violence in real-time, enabling authorities to respond quickly and prevent escalation. By providing early warning of potential conflicts, the platform has helped prevent violence and promote peaceful elections.⁷³
- In **Tunisia**, the justice innovation lab convened by HiiL developed the Employment Justice Platform to prevent work-related justice problems by enabling timely, fair, and constructive resolution of disputes between employers and employees. Engaged from April to December 2023, a diverse group of 25 stakeholders, including government officials, unions, startups, and sociologists, co-created this accessible online system. Recognizing that many employment issues in Tunisia are unresolved or unfairly resolved—affecting youth and men—the platform provides tailored legal advice, step-by-step guidance, and referrals to legal and mediating services. It empowers users to understand their rights and resolve

disputes early, reducing the likelihood of escalation and prolonged conflicts. By offering credible, actionable information and pathways for resolution, the initiative helps prevent employment disputes from deepening, fostering fairer working conditions and a more accessible justice system.⁷⁴

Key Takeaways

An emphasis on preventing justice problems is essential to a people-centered approach to justice. The country examples noted above demonstrate the transformative potential of preventive justice in addressing the unique challenges of the African context. As African countries continue to embrace preventive justice strategies, it is essential to ensure that these approaches are inclusive, participatory, and responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized



9. Innovation and Scaling of People- Centered Justice Initiatives

In the pursuit of people-centered justice, innovation is not just a buzzword, it is a necessity. Across Africa, where justice systems often face challenges of limited resources, inequitable access, and systemic inefficiencies, there are immense opportunities for innovative approaches for scaling justice initiatives and ensuring that justice is accessible and effective for all. Innovation in the justice sector involves the development and implementation of new ideas, technologies, and practices that improve the delivery of justice services. It is crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by African communities, such as limited access to legal resources, geographical barriers, and socio-economic disparities. By embracing innovation, justice systems can become more responsive to the needs of the people they serve. Traditional justice systems, however, often struggle to scale their services due to:



Resource Constraints: Many countries face severe underfunding of their justice sector, limiting their ability to scale services.



Geographical Barriers: In rural and remote areas, access to justice services is often limited due to long distances and poor infrastructure.



Cultural and Linguistic Diversity: Africa's diverse cultures and languages require justice solutions that are culturally relevant and accessible to all.



Systemic Inefficiencies: Bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption can hinder the effective delivery of justice services.

9.1 Types of Innovative Solutions for Scaling People-Centered Justice Initiatives

9.1.1 The Justice Financing Framework (JFF)

Financing remains one of the greatest barriers to scaling people-centered justice initiatives. Across Africa and globally, justice systems often compete with other priorities such as security, health, and education for limited resources, leaving many frontline justice needs underfunded. The JFF provides a practical tool for addressing this challenge. It guides governments and partners in aligning

budgets with people's justice needs, helping decisionmakers identify revenue sources, set priorities, and increase the effectiveness of how resources are allocated and spent.

The JFF is grounded in political and economic realities: in many low- and middle-income countries, aid for justice is declining, and increases in government funding are incremental at best. Learning from the experience of the health and education sectors, the framework emphasizes how small but strategic increases in resources, directed toward frontline justice services, can have a transformative impact. This includes ensuring access to justice in everyday situations that matter most to people such as housing, work, family, land, and essential services which are foundational to stability, trust in government, and economic growth.

By providing practical guidance and a shared reference point for governments, donors, and justice sector leaders, the JFF helps make the case for smarter and more sustainable investment in justice. It enables countries to prioritize prevention, innovation, and cost-effective delivery models, while ensuring that financing strategies are tied directly to measurable outcomes. In this way, the Justice Financing Framework represents an innovative pathway to scaling people-centered justice, bridging the gap between ambition and implementation through sustainable resourcing.

9.1.2 Technology-Driven Solutions

One of the most significant areas of innovation in the justice sector is the use of technology. Technology offers powerful tools for scaling justice services, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Digital platforms, mobile applications, and online dispute resolution mechanisms can help bridge the gap between justice systems and marginalized populations.

In **Kenya**, the introduction of e-filing systems and virtual courts has significantly improved access to justice. These technological innovations allow citizens to file cases, access legal information, and attend court hearings online, reducing the need for physical court appearances. This has been particularly beneficial for rural populations, who can now access justice services without traveling long distances. The e-filing system was initially piloted in Nairobi and has since been rolled out nationwide.⁷⁵

9.1.3 Public-Private Partnerships

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are another innovative approach to scaling justice initiatives. By collaborating with private sector organizations and civil society, governments can leverage additional resources and expertise to enhance justice services, pool resources, share expertise, and ensure that justice initiatives are sustainable and impactful.

- The Isange One Stop Centre (IOSC) is **Rwanda's** integrated, one-stop service model for victims of gender-based violence and child abuse, providing free and timely medical, psychosocial, and legal support under one roof. The one-stop centers offer a holistic approach, combining services like medical treatment, counseling, and legal assistance from a multidisciplinary team, including police, medical professionals, and social workers, to ensure victims receive comprehensive care and access to justice.⁷⁶

- The **Ethiopian** justice system faces daily challenges, with approximately 7.4 million legal problems annually, over half of which remain unresolved. Common issues involve land, family disputes, and related conflicts, significantly impacting people's lives through income loss, time, and stress. In response, Ethiopia's Justice Innovation Lab (JIL), with support from HiIL, introduced a pioneering solution centered on community justice. Through collaborative efforts involving government, judiciary, civil society, and justice users, the JIL designed the Community Justice Centers (CJs), an innovative, accessible, and scalable one-stop solution for resolving land and family disputes. The CJs offer tailored, affordable advice, information, and dispute mediation aligned with traditional norms and best practices. The one-stop center approach consolidates legal advice, dispute resolution, and referral services into a single, community-based hub, an effective integration of informal and formal justice systems, aimed at increasing access, affordability, and quality of justice at the grassroots level.⁷⁷

9.1.4 Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Mechanisms

ADR mechanisms, such as mediation and arbitration, offer accessible and cost-effective pathways to justice. By scaling these mechanisms, countries can reduce the burden on formal courts and ensure that justice services are more inclusive and equitable.

- In **Rwanda**, the Abunzi provide a low-cost, accessible alternative to formal courts. The Abunzi system emphasizes restorative justice, focusing on reconciliation and community harmony rather than punishment. By resolving disputes at the local level, the Abunzi system has reduced the number of cases that reach formal courts and made justice more accessible to rural populations. The government has scaled this system by training thousands of community mediators and integrating the Abunzi into the formal justice system.⁷⁸

Box 11: The Malawi Village Mediation Programme



Since its launch in 1998, the Malawi Village Mediation Programme (VMP) has made significant strides in promoting social cohesion and protecting citizens' rights, particularly in rural communities where access to formal justice systems remains limited. The program empowers residents through training as mediators to resolve civil and minor criminal disputes in a manner that is accessible, culturally appropriate, and rooted in community trust. This approach not only ensures swift conflict resolution but also respects human rights principles, fostering a sense of ownership and legitimacy among community members.

The VMP has proven especially effective in addressing gender-related conflicts, with over 60 percent of mediators being women and a substantial portion of cases brought forward by women. By focusing on local languages and culturally sensitive mediation, it has increased women's confidence in accessing justice and has helped resolve over 1,400 disputes within a short period, significantly reducing the burden on formal courts. The program's success in resolving issues like domestic abuse, land disputes, and neighbor conflicts has contributed to greater social harmony and a strengthened fabric of community life.

Furthermore, the VMP has achieved broader systemic benefits by diverting many cases from overburdened judicial institutions, preventing court case backlog and prison overcrowding. This community-based model is increasingly recognized across Africa and beyond as a sustainable, low-cost alternative that enhances justice delivery, supports social stability, and inspires similar initiatives in other countries. Overall, Malawi's VMP demonstrates the power of innovative, localized justice mechanisms in fostering peace, inclusivity, and rights protection at the grassroots level.

Source: UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, "Malawi - The Malawi Village Mediation Programme: Promoting social cohesion and protecting rights," *Inclusive Cities Observatory*, 2010, https://www.uclg-cisd.org/sites/default/files/Malawi_2010_en_FINAL.pdf.

Key Takeaways

Innovation is the backbone of scaling people-centered justice initiatives, particularly in Africa, where justice systems often grapple with resource constraints, geographical barriers, and systemic inefficiencies. By embracing technological advancements, ADR mechanisms, and public-private partnerships, African countries can transcend traditional limitations and deliver justice services that are accessible, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all. The examples of innovations in this section not only expand the reach of justice but also ensure that it is delivered in a manner that is culturally relevant and inclusive, addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Conclusion



People-centered justice in Africa is not a distant aspiration it is already a living reality in many communities, where diverse and innovative practices provide equitable and practical solutions every day. The challenge and opportunity now lie in recognizing, strengthening, and scaling these efforts so that justice systems respond effectively to the needs of all, particularly those furthest behind.

This report has shown that people-centered justice cannot be confined to courts and legal professionals alone. It must be embedded in the daily lives of individuals and communities, through diverse pathways that encompass both formal and informal systems, supported by strong institutions and informed by the lived experiences of people. **It also requires confronting barriers that have too often made justice distant or inaccessible whether financial, geographical, procedural, or cultural and breaking them down so justice becomes tangible, relevant, and equitable.**

Central to this transformation is the use of data and evidence. Without reliable justice data, it is impossible to identify where the gaps lie, who is left behind, or whether interventions are truly working. **By prioritizing evidence-based reforms, African countries can design justice systems that are accountable and capable of responding to emerging needs.** Equally important is preventive justice intervening early to stop problems from escalating into crises alongside sustained investment in innovative, cost-effective solutions that can be scaled across borders.

Closing the justice gap must also be recognized as a development imperative. Justice is not just about rights, but about enabling peace, trust, stability, and inclusive growth. It is foundational to Agenda 2063's aspiration for "an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law" and central to achieving SDG16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Ultimately, embracing people-centered justice presents a transformative opportunity: to renew the social contract between African states and their citizens, to strengthen the resilience of both communities and institutions, and to build a more just, peaceful, and prosperous Africa. By investing in diverse pathways, scaling innovation, grounding reform in evidence, and securing sustainable financing, African countries can close the justice gap for millions and ensure that justice serves not as an abstract ideal, but as a daily lived reality for all.

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