

People-Centered Justice

AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

GETTING STARTED



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About this Publication

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Introducing the Approach

Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Task Force on Justice's *Justice for All* report.¹ People-centered justice has gained significant traction around the world. To date, over 60 countries have endorsed the principles of people-centered justice.² The global and regional multistakeholder coalitions and alliances such as the Justice Action Coalition, the Ibero-American Alliance for Access to Justice, and the African Alliance for People-Centered Justice—along with multilateral organizations like the OECD and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are all very strong proponents of the approach.

People-centered justice stands for a collectively identified, fit-for-purpose approach to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general and SDG16.3 specifically on ensuring equal access to justice for all. In essence, people-centered justice is a commitment to put people and their needs at the center of justice system policies and initiatives.

While a 'one-size-fits-all' methodology for delivering people-centered justice is not possible, this series of practice notes seek to support interested key justice stakeholders in implementing the approach. **The first four practice notes target the actors that often lead justice reforms in a country:** judiciary, ministry of justice, external funders, and international (large) program implementers. While these four play a central role, many other actors including lawyers, bar associations, civil society and ministries such as finance, planning, labor, health, women and children, are also integral to the justice ecosystem.

Recognizing that justice reform traditionally focuses on institutional change, **Practice Note 5 targets all actors engaged in institutional reform** whether they are legislators, judiciaries, ministries of justice, external funders, civil society, or other national or international actors. While civil society indubitably plays a huge role in catalyzing or implementing reform within a country, but the process is led by the state actors through either the judiciary or the ministry of law/justice. By making a choice about what they decide to fund, in many contexts, external funders—bilateral or multilateral donors, philanthropies, private donors or multilateral development banks—disproportionately influence justice reform processes. International program implementers working across contexts similarly play a key role in designing and implementing justice reform programs.

This Introductory Note serves as an 'umbrella' document for the series. It unpacks the concept of people-centered justice and highlights key interventions that are needed to support and sustain people-centered justice strategies, policies and programs. It is intended as a helpful preface to be read in conjunction with the other practice notes.

Readers may find that some of the recommendations put forth in this series are repeated across several practice notes. This is because a people-centered approach to justice requires collaborative actions be taken-up collectively among key stakeholders. For example, the judiciary and the ministry of justice both need to collect data and it is best that they collaborate among themselves as well as with other justice actors such as the police, prisons, and possibly others including the ministries of planning, health, labor, etc.

A People-Centered Approach to Rule of Law and Access to Justice: Where We Are Today

“The 2030 Agenda promises equal access to justice for all by 2030, but we live in a world where justice systems only deliver justice for the few. Closing the justice gap requires a fresh vision, a transformation in ambition, and strategies that take seriously the scale of the problem.”

The adoption of SDG16.3 on equal access to justice for all in 2015 was a significant breakthrough for the global justice movement. It formally opened the door for the development of a people-centered approach to justice. The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies' Task Force on Justice produced the seminal Justice for All report in 2019, which estimated that 5.1 billion people across the world lacked meaningful access to justice.

This huge global justice gap is a matter of grave concern. Injustice is costly: data shows that legal problems cost countries between 0.5 percent to 3 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP). Individuals facing justice problems lose income and may suffer from mental health issues. Unresolved disputes may cause conflict or violence in communities. People's perception of injustice makes them lose trust in institutions and the state. Equal access to justice for all is central to responding to climate change or gender inequality as well as ensuring improved health outcomes, reduced inequality, and political, economic, and social inclusion. In short, justice is critical for sustainable development and a strengthened social contract. Moving from a system of justice that serves the few to a system that provides equal access to justice for all, therefore, requires urgent and transformative action.

The traditional approach to justice policymaking, which focuses primarily on the institutional development of the formal justice sector rather than on the needs of the people, has been unsuccessful in closing the large justice gap. There are many reasons for this failure, including the fact this approach completely ignores swathes of people facing justice problems who never approach institutions for various reasons (cost, time, distance, language, complexity, or distrust). Second, there will never be enough lawyers, judges or other formal actors to address justice problems of everyone—particularly those who are poor or otherwise in situations of vulnerability. Last, but not the least, current justice policies, services and systems tend to focus much more on processes, often failing to prioritize fair outcomes or solutions for people. **Access to justice cannot be limited to providing access to justice institutions but must be understood broadly as the ability of people to resolve and prevent their justice problems, and to use justice as a platform to participate in their economies and societies.**

We need a new approach to rule of law and justice, one that allows justice systems to be more effective and transparent in addressing injustices and grievances, tackling inequalities and building resilient societies. **A people-centered approach focuses on the needs and habits of people within a given jurisdiction, resulting in a broader set of interventions that include formal sector institutions as part of the solution, but which also incorporate alternative means of preventing and resolving of justice problems,** including approaches used by the informal justice actors. A people-centered approach reaches more people with meaningful solutions and fair outcomes, which improve the quality of their lives.

The following principles towards achieving people-centered justice have received recognition and support from many UN member states, including in [The Hague Declaration](#), [the Joint Action Plan of the G7+ countries](#), and subsequent [declarations and statements](#):

1. **Put people and their justice needs at the center of justice systems.** Understand what people need and want when they seek justice, and the justice they receive. Make better use of data (including the new indicator SDG 16.3.3) to map and understand the context and tailor actions to groups that are more likely to suffer injustice.
2. **Resolve justice problems.** Transform justice institutions and broaden the range of formal and informal justice actors to provide people with fair, inclusive, relevant and timely justice solutions that respect human rights. Promote open justice and embrace high-tech as well as low-tech innovations based on data, digitalization, evidence and learning.
3. **Improve justice journeys.** Empower people and communities to understand, use and shape the law, increase meaningful participation in justice, and provide people-centered justice services that help them achieve fair outcomes.
4. **Use justice for prevention and to promote reconciliation.** Take measures to reduce violence and de-escalate conflicts and disputes, build trustworthy and legitimate justice systems, prevent recurrence of grave human rights violations, tackle the root causes of injustice and use the law to reduce risks.
5. **Empower people to access services and opportunities.** Eliminate legal, administrative, financial and practical barriers that people face to obtain documents, access public services, including for mental health, and participate fully in society and the economy, while promoting gender equality.

Building on these principles, the OECD has developed recommendations on access to justice and people-centered justice system, which have also been endorsed by the European Union (EU). **When designing and implementing reforms, it is important to consider the following:**

Initiatives that focus on people-centered justice are not new. Much has been achieved at the local level through the use of innovation, piloting, and testing. Often, there may be no need to “reinvent the wheel.” Focus on identifying initiatives that work and are cost-effective, and scale them nationally to accelerate the pace of reform and impact. Include strategies and paths to sustainability in the design of any new initiatives from the very inception.

These strategies should introduce necessary incentives and create an enabling environment at the national level to chart pathways for bringing services to scale and ensuring sustainability.

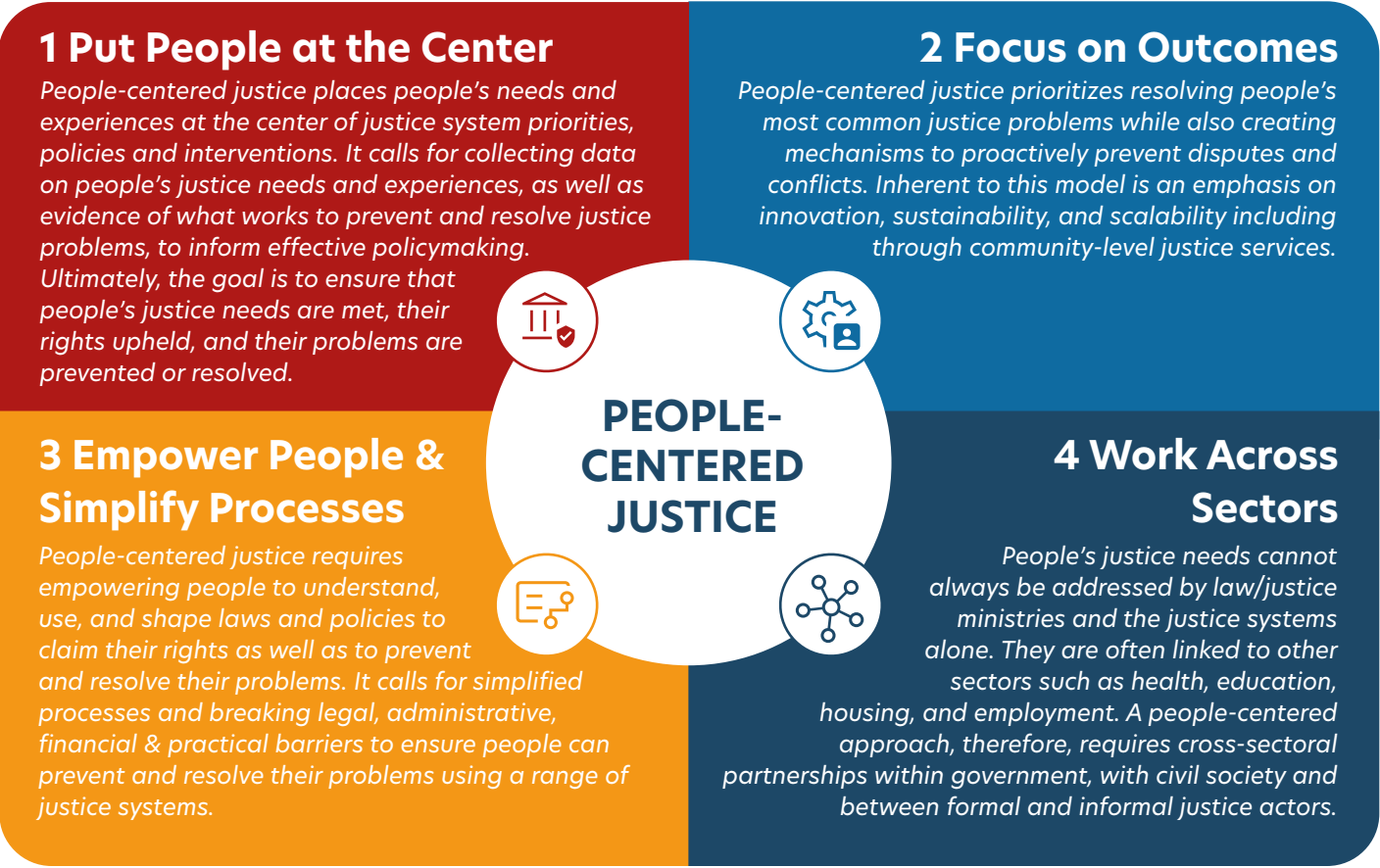
Learnings from successful cases in other countries and sectors that are using people-centered approaches (i.e. health and education) can support justice actors to identify entry points for reform within their own sector. As with other sectors, the bulk of effective rule of law and access to justice interventions may not come from top-down reforms to the formal system. Successful programming often comes from bottom-up interventions at the local and community level. This requires us to look at front line services, legal aid and legal empowerment, alternative dispute resolution and informal justice mechanisms or local Justice institutions as starting points for the adoption of people-centered justice.

Policymakers interested in people-centered justice must focus on evidence-based and demand-driven planning and programming. They should look holistically at service delivery and identify interventions that are true game changers to increase access to justice for all. By scaling up these evidence-based interventions, empowering people and ensuring coordination with other service-delivery mechanisms, they can catalyze participatory planning, coordination, and monitoring; match the supply with demand for justice; and ensure inclusive participation in society and the economy, thereby closing the justice gap and improving other development outcomes.

A growing number of countries have begun to address justice gaps within their borders by using people-centered approaches. For example, countries like **Colombia, Kenya, Malawi, and Sierra Leone** have all shown how advances can be made in providing justice for all when there is adequate leadership, collective and sustained commitment, and openness to innovation. Much more needs to be done to effectively close the justice gap. Ultimately, it is the sustained and collaborative work of judiciaries, lawyers, ministries of justice, external funders, civil society, other national and international providers, and people that leads to improvements in access to justice at national and local levels.

People-Centered Justice in Practice

The OECD [Recommendation of the Council on Access to Justice and People-Centered Justice Systems](#) states that “people-centricity refers to a human-centred approach that adopts the perspective of people as a starting point and places people at the core when designing, delivering, implementing and evaluating public policies, services and legal procedures within and beyond the justice system.”¹⁵ This practice note builds upon this definition and identifies four key components of people-centered justice:



How Can We Get There?

People-centered justice requires a systemic approach,¹⁶ implemented in an integrated and comprehensive fashion in partnership with local, national, and where relevant, international actors. There are various vehicles that could support the adoption of this approach such as multisectoral inter-governmental planning and budgeting;¹⁶ national, provincial, or local rule of law programming, justice and security sector strategies; and justice sector coordination mechanisms.

Transitioning to a comprehensive and systemic people-centered justice requires interventions at national and local levels, such as:

-  Center strategic planning and budgeting around people and their experiences by engaging a diverse array of national and provincial justice institutions in the process.¹⁸
-  Align justice reforms with national implementation plans for SDGs and other national and provincial development targets.
-  Engage key stakeholders including justice users and support their ownership over reform.¹⁹ People's participation in reform efforts must be meaningful to ensure their lived experience is reflected in decision-making at all steps.
-  Build and support a locally led national-level coalition that advocates for people-centered justice, similar to justice alliances forged at the global and regional levels. Find champions across stakeholders to support reform processes.
-  Pivot policy interventions towards an evidence-based approach including by allocating resources to collect and analyze data as well as ensuring that the data is linked to policymaking processes.

When designing and implementing reforms, it is important to consider the following:

Scaling

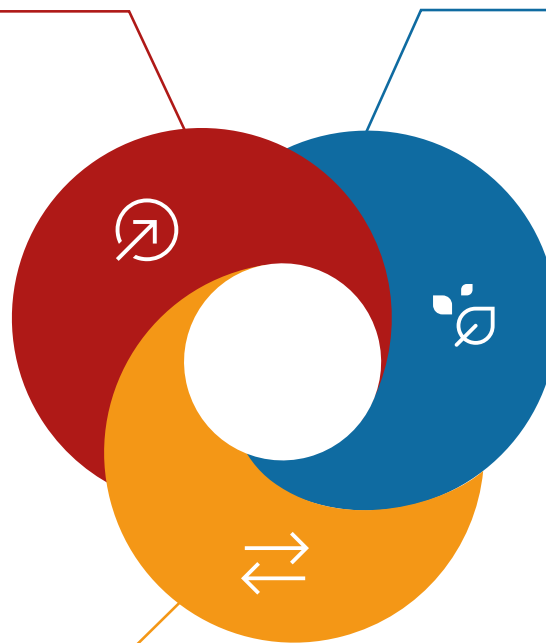
Initiatives that focus on people-centered justice are not new. Much has been achieved at the local level through the use of innovation, piloting, and testing. Often, there may be no need to “reinvent the wheel.” Identify initiatives that work and are cost-effective, and scale them nationally to accelerate the pace of reform and impact.

Sustainability

Include strategies and paths to sustainability in the design of any new initiatives from the very inception. These strategies should introduce necessary incentives and create an enabling environment at the national level to chart pathways for bringing services to scale and ensuring sustainability.²⁰

Evidence-Based Learning

Learnings from successful cases in other countries and sectors that are using people-centered approaches (such as health and education) can support justice actors to identify entry points for reform within their own sector. As with other sectors, this requires a shift away from a focus on purely top-down institutional reform and capacity development with the assumption that this will deliver improved services on the ground. Inclusion of a bottom-up approach, which focuses on service delivery is critical. This requires looking at front line/community-level services, legal aid and legal empowerment, alternative dispute resolution and informal justice mechanisms or local justice institutions as starting points for the adoption of people-centered justice.²¹



Strategic planning, implementation and coalition-building at the national level may take a long time. However, sub-national pilot programs can be introduced without delay, with an openness to experimentation, risk-taking and a plan to subsequently scale up cost-effective interventions. Local, municipal and community-based programs that prove effective over time through testing and iteration can then be introduced in other parts of the country. National government should be a partner in these sub-national initiatives, to demonstrate their commitment, maintain awareness of the programs' performance, and plan for geographic or service expansion. Recognizing that change is often difficult, it is important to anticipate resistance and have effective strategies to overcome challenges and vested interests. Some strategies include providing incentives, supporting champions of people-centered justice within resisting groups and building coalitions for change.

In all contexts, achieving a people-centered justice approach depends on adapting principles to local needs and conditions, identifying and mobilizing coalition partners, following the evidence, pursuing innovation, bringing interventions to scale, and sustaining development.

Examples of Effective Policy Interventions

Legal Aid Board: Sierra Leone²²



The development of the Legal Aid Board in Sierra Leone is an excellent example of scalable and sustainable legal aid provisions in lower-income countries. It is the result of a long-term effort to empower community-based paralegals and gradually expand their services to most districts in the country. The Legal Aid Act of 2012 formally recognized the role of paralegals and established a mandate for the Legal Aid Board. The Board was formally launched in 2015, when the government ensured funding of USD 1 million per year, and donors consequently contributed an additional USD 0.5 million. The Board has a national mandate to provide, administer, coordinate, and monitor the provision of legal aid in civil and criminal cases. The Legal Aid Board employs 71 paralegals and reported supporting 160,000 people in 2023.

Justice Houses and Legal Needs Survey: Colombia²³



Colombia has long recognized links between justice, peace and development. The country not only collects data on legal needs to inform its justice policy and planning but also provides community-based services through the justice houses.

In 1995, Colombia's Ministry of Justice, with support from USAID, introduced two pilot Casas de Justicia (Justice Houses) in Bogotá and Cali, respectively. Initially intended to improve access to justice in low-income urban neighborhoods. These houses gradually expanded to 115 venues in 93 municipalities and incorporated rural and conflict-affected populations. They are designed as "one-stop shops" providing multiple services, including information on rights, legal advice, and options for alternative, administrative and formal dispute resolution. They are often conveniently located alongside other government offices, NGOs and civic spaces, and typically offer services from providers such as local prosecutors, public defenders, municipal human rights officers, family commissaries, municipal neighborhood affairs units, legal aid specialists, social workers, and psychologists, among others. According to the Ministry of Justice, these Houses have handled almost 20 million cases since their inception. In recent years, services have been expanded to include targeted legal assistance for migrants, refugees, and returnees.

In 2016, Colombia's National Statistics Department included a comprehensive legal needs survey in the national Quality of Life Survey (replicated in 2020 and 2022 within the national Coexistence and Citizen Security Surveys), which led to the development of Effective Access to Justice Index and a Ten-Year Justice Plan (2017-2027), fostering the practice of long-term justice planning with clear indicators to track within the National Development Plans.

Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters: Canada



Established in 2007, the Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters brings together the perspectives of diverse stakeholders from around Canada to create a "national voice" on access to justice. It includes representatives from both provincial and territorial access to justice committees, justice institutions, civil society groups seeking equity, and academia. This Committee examines existing approaches to access to justice and proposes new approaches stemming from Canada's Justice Development Goals.

Concrete actions include: coordinating national metrics on access to justice, assess progress through annual reporting, bringing experts to an annual summit to share innovations in justice, and planning regional and national initiatives to increase access to justice. The mission of the Committee is to promote multi-sectoral research and innovation to support peoples' understanding and ability to resolve their legal problems, and should be a catalyst for shared inclusive and people-centered vision for access to justice for civil and family matters within Canada and abroad.

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Endnotes

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- 13 Basic Justice Services: local-level services that address people's everyday justice needs, through formal and informal mechanisms by a range of actors.
- 14 See examples provided at the end of this document. For the Sierra Leone example, see the note on judiciary.
- 15 OECD, "Recommendation of the Council on Access to Justice and People-Centred Justice Systems."
- 16 A "systems approach" should be understood as a methodological approach that takes into account a comprehensive view and the complexity of conditions, parts and interdependent components that inform justice service delivery in a particular context. It is not used in reference to reform of the justice system as a whole, for example, by addressing reform of legislative frameworks and institutional components in vertical top-down fashion.
- 17 The justice sector has seen some cross-sectoral coordination. Early examples include multistakeholder platforms in East Africa, such as the Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS) in Uganda available at

<https://judiciary.go.ug/data/smenu/104/Justice%20Law%20and%20Order%20Sector.html>, and the Justice, Reconciliation, Law and Order Sector (JRLO Sector) in Rwanda (founded in 2010) available at <https://www.minijust.gov.rw/index>). However, comprehensive sector-wide approaches have been rare in the sector (see: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/article/sector>).

18. Gustavo Maurino, "The Justice Gap and the Budget Black Hole: Promoting Justice for All through Budget-Based Work," *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/the-justice-gap-and-the-budget-black-hole>. Also see, Justice Action Coalition's forthcoming Justice Financing Framework for guidance on developing a national strategic reform and investment plan.
19. These stakeholders typically include the judiciary, associations of legal professionals, civil society organizations, civic associations and community leaders, the private sector, unions, national experts and research outlets. Of course, external and international implementers (such as the UN, international organizations and international NGOs) are also important stakeholders in supporting national reform processes.
20. In a number of countries, including Guatemala, Nepal, South Sudan, and Timor-Leste, local legal assistance initiatives that made a difference in people's lives have been terminated when external funding was no longer available and the government was unable to provide resources to continue administering the programs. Limited capacity to significantly expand the reach of justice services and sustain services over time continues to be a critical challenge.
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