

Closing the Justice Gap

How Open and People-Centered Justice Can Drive the Change

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Understanding the Concepts	7
3. How Open Justice and People-Centered Justice Complement Each Other	11
4. Intersection in Practice	17
5. Policy Implications	19
Conclusion	21
Endnotes	21

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About Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies

In an era of rapid global change, the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies (Pathfinders) is a cross-regional, member-state-led, multi-stakeholder coalition committed to advancing action on peace, justice, equality, and inclusive institutions through the Sustainable Development Goals and beyond (SDG16+). It is convened by 46 governments, works with more than 100 partners across civil society, the United Nations (UN), and regional and international organizations, and is hosted by the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) at New York University.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, collective global efforts to strengthen and expand access to justice have generated tangible progress across local, national, and regional contexts—including innovative and digital solutions, more accountable court systems, improved data availability, and outcome-oriented approaches that better address people's justice needs and their lived experiences.

These developments have been supported by a growing ecosystem of regional and global initiatives and platforms that bring together governments, international organizations, academic institutions, and civil society to identify effective strategies for closing the global justice gap. This, in turn, enhances governance and reinforces democratic institutions.

Within this evolving landscape, two concepts have gained particular traction as catalytic frameworks for reimagining how national justice systems could become more inclusive, effective, and equitable: **open justice** and **people-centered justice**.

Open justice focuses on inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, accelerating ambitious reforms to make justice systems more open and accountable to the public.

People-centered justice defines justice problems and their solutions based on the lived experiences of the individuals who face those problems. It relies on data and evidence to advance scalable, cost-effective solutions that provide meaningful outcomes for people. By placing people's experiences and needs at the center—alongside institutional mandates and reform priorities—people-centered justice strengthens efforts to deliver fair, effective, and trusted justice systems.

The key distinction lies in their vantage points: open justice emphasizes transforming institutions to operate more transparently and accountably, while people-centered justice prioritizes the lived experiences and outcomes of individuals, ensuring that justice systems respond directly to their needs.

When linked together, these two paradigms reinforce each other, creating a powerful pathway for reform: one that integrates institutional transparency and accountability with people's lived experiences to produce more accessible, responsive, and impactful justice systems.

Since the launch of the Justice for All report in 2019¹ and the creation of the **Justice Action Coalition** (JAC) in 2021,² the global justice community has increasingly recognized that strengthening institutions and expanding formal access, while vital, are not sufficient to close the justice gap. Inspired by new data from legal-needs surveys and empirical insights, actors in the justice ecosystem are now reframing justice as a service and a public good that must deliver tangible outcomes for individuals and communities. This outcome-oriented, people-centered shift emphasizes evidence-based interventions, legal empowerment of people and communities, and user-friendly, solution-focused, and prevention-oriented design. It also highlights that justice systems are only as strong as the trust people place in them and that such trust is built on results.

At the same time, the open government movement has made decisive contributions by embedding transparency and accountability in governance reform, including in the justice sector. The **Open Government Partnership** (OGP)³ has advanced open justice within national agendas, mobilizing reformers across ministries of justice, judiciaries, and civil society. Through digital and modernization programs, open data and information on procedures and public officials, participatory policy processes and mechanisms for holding officials to account, open justice initiatives have made it possible for citizens to understand, monitor, oversee, and influence the functioning of justice institutions. These efforts have also sought to deepen democratic oversight and public confidence.

The convergence of these two movements and concepts is both timely and necessary. Around the world, people are losing trust in institutions⁴ and demanding better governance. Rapid economic, digital, and social transformations are reshaping how people experience and perceive justice. Governments face mounting pressure to deliver measurable improvements in people's daily lives, beyond the courtroom. Against this backdrop, linking the open justice and people-centered justice movements could offer a pragmatic, forward-looking agenda for creating and sustaining change.

This paper proposes that the next phase of justice reform should connect open justice and people-centered justice as mutually reinforcing approaches. The JAC and the OGP are uniquely positioned to catalyze this new approach to reform. Together, they can help governments and their partners integrate the principles of transparency and accountability into people-centered justice strategies, and conversely ensure that open justice commitments are designed with fair outcomes in sight.

In the following sections, this paper will explore how these two approaches can reinforce each other to produce meaningful transformation. It begins by **defining the core concepts of open justice and people-centered justice, outlining their origins, principles, and key global platforms.** It then **compares the two paradigms, identifying their shared goals and distinct approaches, and illustrates how their integration can strengthen both accountability and results.** The paper concludes with **practical examples** of how two concepts intersect from national contexts and policy implications for governments, international organizations, donors, and civil society partners.

2. Understanding the Concepts

The open justice⁵ agenda emerged as a natural extension of the broader open government movement. Since the early 2010s, open government reforms have sought to make public institutions more transparent, accountable, and participatory—principles that have since permeated through to the justice sector.

Through global platforms such as the OGP, countries began to include justice commitments in their national action plans,⁶ ranging from publishing court data to fostering civic oversight of justice institutions. This provided the normative foundation for open justice and created the political space for justice institutions to embrace openness as a source of legitimacy and trust.⁷

Over the past decade, open justice reforms have moved from principles to practice:⁸ more case decisions, court statistics, and procedural data are regularly published; justice systems are embracing digital platforms that allow remote access, livestreaming, and online filings; and civil society and the media are using open-data tools to scrutinize performance and hold justice actors accountable.

Box 1: Core Pillars of Open Justice⁹

- **Transparency:** Ensures proactive disclosure and high-quality public information such as open data, clear operating procedures, access to decisions and opinions, and information about justice officials.
- **Participation:** Creates meaningful opportunities for people to inform, influence, and engage with justice systems—including through public complaint mechanisms; participatory budgeting; independent oversight bodies; and civil society and legal aid actors that make justice processes more accessible.
- **Accountability:** Enables the public to hold justice actors answerable through observable and independent oversight, fair and transparent disciplinary processes, and clear pathways for sanctions and redress

The reform efforts advanced by OGP have placed **open justice** on the broader agenda¹⁰ of rule-of-law and justice-sector modernization. This is a significant step forward, as it builds the infrastructure of transparency and participation needed to enable deeper transformation. Advancing open justice principles means ensuring that access to information also allows the public to see how the justice system works and to better understand their rights.

This progress has been driven in part by global cooperation, including the OGP's Coalition on Justice,¹¹ which has encouraged governments to apply open government principles of transparency, participation, and accountability across the entire justice system, both formal and informal. This movement seeks to help improve how the justice system serves people, reduce opportunities for corruption, and lay the groundwork for stronger public trust.

Nonetheless, many systems remain partially open.¹² In many countries, data may already exist but is not yet in accessible formats; procedures may be transparent on paper but not in practice; and participation remains limited.

The notion of **people-centered justice** has evolved as part of a broader shift in how justice is understood and delivered. Its roots can be traced back to the access-to-

justice movements of the 1990s and 2000s, which focused on removing legal, financial, and social barriers that prevented people from obtaining fair outcomes. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, marked a turning point by embedding “access to justice for all” in Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16),¹³ both as a goal and a foundation for peaceful and inclusive societies.

Building on this momentum, the Task Force on Justice’s *Justice for All report*¹⁴ reframed the global justice challenge, shifting the focus from strengthening institutions to meeting people’s everyday justice needs. This people-centered justice approach marked a fundamental shift in how justice systems are conceived, perceived, delivered, and measured. Rather than defining justice through institutions, laws, or case volumes, it begins with people’s lived experiences and the problems they face.

Through this people-centered justice lens,¹⁵ policymakers are called to assess whether justice problems are being prevented—and, when they occur, whether they are being resolved fairly, effectively, and sustainably, especially for those furthest behind—rather than focusing solely on the institutions involved.

Box 2: Core Elements of the People-Centered Justice Approach¹⁶

- **Evidence-based design:** Using legal needs surveys, user-experience data, and justice outcome metrics.
- **Outcome-focused:** Concentrating on solutions that prevent or resolve people’s most pressing justice problems.
- **Empowerment and agency:** Enabling people to understand, claim, and exercise their rights.
- **Diversified and people-centered pathways:** Combining formal, customary, administrative, and community-based justice mechanisms.
- **Multi-sector coordination:** Recognizing that justice outcomes are linked to social services, security, housing, health, and local governance.

In practice,¹⁷ people-centered justice calls for rethinking how justice institutions operate.¹⁸ It encourages the prevention and early resolution of disputes, community-based mediation, and the integration of services that reduce barriers for vulnerable groups. It also aligns justice goals with other development outcomes,¹⁹ such as reducing poverty and inequality, preventing violence, and strengthening trust in governance.

The JAC, one of the global drivers of people-centered justice, mobilizes political leadership, evidence, and investment through its thematic tracks, seeking to redefine what “justice delivery” means and to support countries in pivoting towards problem-solving justice systems that meet people where they are. Through this collective effort,²⁰ the Coalition reinforces the broader transformation in how justice is understood and practiced.

By putting people at the heart of reform, this approach reframes justice not as a siloed sector but as an enabler of inclusion and social transformation. It calls for a shift in mindset: from managing caseloads to resolving problems; from legal formalities to practical fairness; and from abstract rights to lived realities.

3. How Open Justice and People-Centered Justice Complement Each Other

Open justice and people-centered justice offer distinct yet complementary lenses for advancing justice reform that strengthen inclusion, participation, trust, legitimacy, cross-sector collaboration, and the use of data and evidence. While they take different approaches to improving national justice systems to better serve people, they are not competing paradigms. Open justice advances openness, participation, and accountability within institutions, while people-centered justice ensures that these institutions and other diverse pathways to justice respond to people's needs and lived realities. When pursued together, these approaches reinforce one another, leading to more inclusive, accessible, and trusted justice systems and fairer outcomes for all.

Open justice calls for institutional changes that ensure inclusivity, participation, independent and transparent processes, and accountability. It is grounded in the hypothesis²¹ that improved public access to information can ensure the rule of law is upheld. Evidence suggests²² that this approach helps abate corruption, supports access to public services, resolves conflicts in ways that improve the legitimacy of the justice system, ensures public accountability and oversight of justice systems, and supports people's ability to request the enforcement of their rights.

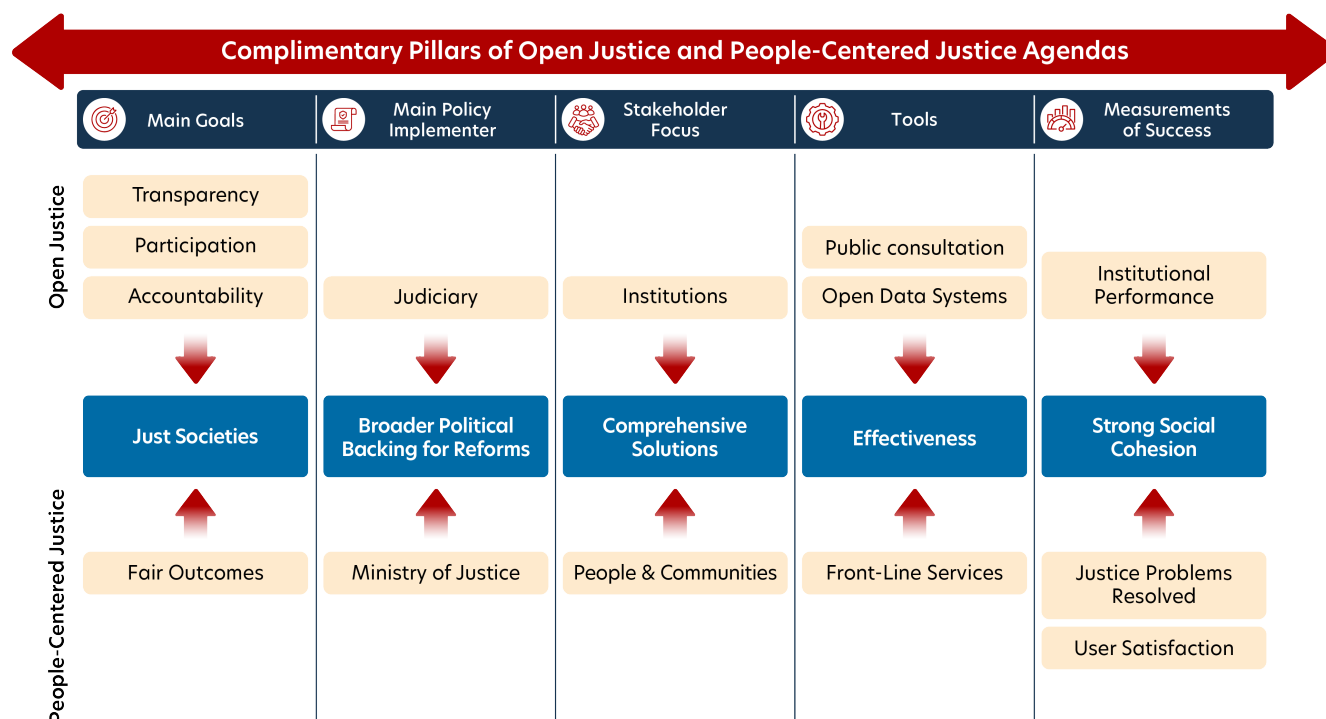
In this effort, open justice promises to illuminate an otherwise "black box" of justice, enabling people to access, understand, and hold their justice systems accountable. This transparency has the potential to support²³ a more equal application of protections, benefits, and rights. However, just because the lights are on does not mean people can always find their way inside. This is where people-centered justice can help. A people-centered approach to justice shows people the doors of the justice system, opens them, and guides users through the system.

People-centered justice begins with data and evidence to design justice services that meet people's needs as they experience them. With data on people's legal needs, coupled with research on the effectiveness of existing justice processes, people-centered justice encourages the justice ecosystem to rethink service delivery. By focusing on front-line, accessible, cost-effective, and outcome-oriented justice interventions, whether through formal or informal processes, people-centered justice guides justice seekers into the justice system to resolve their most pressing problems. At other times, people-centered justice means cross-sector collaboration to address the root causes of structural injustice, mitigate risks, and therefore prevent the need for people to enter the formal justice system in the first place.

People-centered justice comes from the ground up. This approach does not seek to replace or undermine institutions, but rather to strengthen the broader justice ecosystem, which includes diverse pathways (formal, informal, community-based), through which people experience and seek justice. Ultimately, **people-centered justice** will better deliver meaningful results, facilitate trust and legitimacy, and sustain rights-based societies if paired with institutional promulgation of **open justice** principles. Recognizing the advantages and limitations of each approach is crucial to supporting a world in which justice is equally accessed, understood, shaped, and monitored by all.

Complementary Pillars of Open Justice and People-Centered Justice Agendas

There are **five key ways** in which open justice and people-centered justice approaches are distinct yet complementary, supporting equal access to justice for all.



1. The goals of both approaches are mutually reinforcing

Open justice reforms focus on three key values: **transparency, civic participation, and public accountability**. All three support citizen oversight of the justice system. People-centered justice interventions are grounded in the lived experiences of people and communities and direct resources towards identifying and resolving the barriers they face in accessing justice services. This approach leads to fair and better outcomes. It looks beyond institutional processes and focuses on empowering people to know, use, and shape the law by improving the accessibility of information and legal procedures, providing legal education, and diversifying pathways for justice service delivery, whether through informal and customary routes or community justice workers, to fill service gaps.

Countries need to examine justice reform from both perspectives. Open justice creates the enabling environment for people-centered justice to succeed, while people-centered justice empowers citizens to become co-participants in transparent, accountable, and effective justice systems, thereby promoting just societies.

2. Taken together, the two approaches support the judiciary and the ministry of justice to work together

Open justice and people-centered justice primarily target different segments of the government to achieve a shared agenda for fair justice outcomes. Open justice primarily targets the judicial branch to pursue policy reforms that place the public interest at the center of the justice system's operations. People-centered justice, meanwhile, often targets ministries of justice, focusing on how bureaucratic capacity meets service delivery in local contexts. Civil society, the private sector, police, prosecutors, and other justice actors constitute parts of this ecosystem that span both the design and implementation agendas of reform.

Since both approaches share ambitions, targeting their respective audiences towards common aims can deliver a strong basis for political support for well-rounded reforms.

3. Open people-centered justice data can support feedback loops between institutions and people

Open justice prioritizes the transparency and accountability of institutions. This includes making data and evidence accessible on how justice systems operate and deliver for people (i.e., court decisions, budgets, and performance data in accessible formats), or how judicial officials are selected and disciplined. When made available, data can be used by policymakers and justice users alike. Policymakers can use it to contextualize people-centered reforms that deliver fair outcomes for all. Meanwhile, people can use the data to better understand, use, and shape the law. This not only supports their own legal outcomes but also creates an enabling environment for people to hold their governments to account and reap the benefits of transparent governance systems.

Taken together, these two approaches create a feedback loop that shapes comprehensive solutions to people's justice needs and strengthens trust between people and the justice sector.

4. The policy tools promoted by open justice and people-centered justice are aligned in their objectives

Open justice is a proponent of policies that support public consultations, such as public involvement in setting prosecution priorities, the creation of oversight bodies, or participatory budgeting.²⁴ It also supports open and accessible data, such as requirements for data collection, the publication of police and court data, judicial decisions, open prison data, and the assurance of the right to access information.²⁵ As previously noted, all of these tools promote transparency and accountability in justice systems, enabling people to be co-producers of the policies under which they live.

People-centered justice relies on transparent, well-understood legal systems to inform actions that lead to better justice outcomes for system users. Based on that information, people-centered justice promotes the use of diverse front-line services such as legal advice, assistance, empowerment, or informal dispute resolution, to fill gaps. While policymakers rely on accessible data to design people-centered reforms, front-line community justice workers rely on transparency to support people most effectively.

These tools are well-suited to co-exist. They are not in conflict with one another; rather, they use different entry points into the justice system to create more effective justice interventions.

5. Accessibility to justice and participation in justice systems are the common measurements of success

Whether it is civilian oversight boards or participatory budgeting,²⁶ open justice interventions aim to expand people's access to and participation in the design, governance, and oversight of justice systems. Increasingly, the success of these efforts is assessed not only by traditional institutional metrics but also by how justice

institutions respond to people's needs and experiences, including levels of trust, fairness, and user satisfaction.

On the other hand, people-centered justice prioritizes measures, such as simplifying legal processes or investing in front-line legal services such as mobile courts and legal aid, yet these interventions also focus on increasing access and participation in justice from users. The success of these ambitions can be evaluated by examining the resolution rate of legal problems or justice user satisfaction that will lead to strong social cohesion. While evaluating different sides of the justice system, both approaches can still promote the same central tenets. Success across both approaches is the most likely path to holistic justice reform, leading to equal access to justice for all.

These five complementary pillars of open and people-centered justice are merely a starting point for how these two movements can work in coordination. Just as many justice systems remain only partially open, they also remain only partially people-centered, with an abstract focus on rights that are not lived realities for all. Further research, innovation, and testing are needed to see both approaches through to their common end. Fortunately, evidence suggests this is already occurring in a number of contexts.

4. Intersection in Practice

Across diverse national justice systems, there is growing evidence that open justice and people-centered justice are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing when applied in parallel. While these approaches originate from different traditions, their combined application is increasingly visible in national and local reforms that blend institutional transparency with user-focused service design. The following country examples expand on how these two agendas converge in practice.

In **Argentina** in 2020, the Open Justice & Innovation Lab (JusLab)²⁷ was established as a joint initiative between the Buenos Aires Council of Magistrates²⁸ and the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ),²⁹ integrating open-government principles directly into the justice sector. By convening justice officials, technologists, designers, and civil society, JusLab uses open data, co-creation, and participatory design to improve judicial services. While originating in the open justice framework, this approach also embodies people-centered justice by creating structured feedback loops where users help redesign courts and legal processes. Transforming openness from a matter of mere transparency to a method for generating insight into how justice services should work for people.³⁰

Canada provides another example where open justice and people-centered approaches evolve together. From an open justice perspective, provincial courts, particularly in British Columbia, proactively publish data, decisions, and guidelines on digital justice innovations. At the same time, people-centered justice is present in this initiative. The Civil Resolution Tribunal (CRT)³¹ uses user analytics, legal-needs data, and iterative testing to refine its online processes and ensure their accessibility. Transparency about performance helps build trust, while people-centered design ensures services meet users where they are.

In **Zambia**, the intersection of these two agendas is most evident at the community level. Through a collaboration between the Ministry of Justice, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), and a range of local civil society

organizations, the Enabling Access to Justice, Civil Society Participation and Transparency (EnACT)³² program, established Legal Help Desks³³ in courts, police stations, correctional facilities, and rural community spaces, dramatically expanding frontline access to information and assistance. Staffed by trained paralegals and legal aid assistants, these services meet people where they are and make justice more accessible for underserved populations.³⁴ At the same time, standardized tools for data collection, reporting, and coordination create institutional visibility into how people seek and obtain help. Transparency and accountability are therefore built into a model that begins with users' needs.

Recent justice reform efforts in **Thailand** have brought together open justice principles and people-centered design. Through a collaboration between the Thai Courts of Justice, the Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the country has introduced a *Justice by Design*³⁵ approach that applies design-thinking methodologies to reimagine how courts organize information, deliver services, and engage users. This work intentionally centers the experiences of people navigating judicial processes³⁶ and seeks to reduce complexity, improve communication, and make procedures more user-friendly. These efforts demonstrate how user-centered redesign and institutional openness can reinforce one another, making justice processes more accessible, trustworthy, and responsive.

Similarly, the **United Kingdom** has invested in transparency around court performance and digitization through its OGP commitments,³⁷ while simultaneously undertaking research on legal needs and human-centered design through the HM Courts and Tribunals Services (HMCTS) Reform Programme.³⁸ This combination embodies both the open-justice and people-centered justice angles. Public dashboards reveal delays and access challenges, while user-journey research shapes how digital and in-person processes are delivered. This convergence strengthens both accountability and service quality.

5. Policy Implications

The convergence between open justice and people-centered justice presents an opportunity to reimagine how justice systems, including those beyond the courtroom, are designed, measured, and delivered for the people. To achieve this goal, the two agendas should be deliberately connected through coherent policy frameworks, shared learning opportunities, and sustained political and financial support.

Transforming the justice system requires open data and accessible information, as well as justice services that are responsive to people's needs and accountable for outcomes.

First, **governments should embed people-centered indicators into open justice commitments.** While open justice initiatives have focused on disclosure, participation, and accountability, their ultimate value lies in whether they lead to fairer, more effective outcomes for people. Integrating people-centered data indicators, such as problem resolution rates, user satisfaction, and trust levels, can help translate transparency into tangible improvements in service delivery. The JAC's ongoing work on data and evidence,³⁹ under the leadership of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), offers a relevant foundation for developing such indicators, linking openness to measurable progress in access to justice. The Open Gov Challenge on Justice⁴⁰ has defined the next stage of ambitious justice commitments in OGP as those commitments that center on people's needs in justice initiatives and reforms.

Second, **transparency and accountability should be framed as drivers of continuous service improvement.** Open justice reforms mean moving beyond visibility and explicitly aiming to enhance performance, responsiveness, and learning within justice institutions. This entails using open data not only to inform citizens but also to guide justice actors, including courts, ministries, and local justice providers, to better understand what works, where gaps persist, and how resources can be better

targeted. Feedback loops between people and institutions are an essential component: justice systems that listen and adapt build both trust and legitimacy.

Third, **OGP and JAC members should be encouraged to co-design commitments and national strategies that align open government and justice-sector reforms with people-centered justice objectives.** Both initiatives are well positioned to promote hybrid reform agendas and create political synergies. This could include creating national action plans that combine open data on justice delivery with community-driven innovation, or linking judicial transparency initiatives with programs that measure and expand fair outcomes for marginalized populations.

Fourth, **donors and international organizations have a critical role to play in supporting this shift.** Targeted investments are needed to strengthen justice data systems, support evidence-based reforms, and scale up frontline justice services that demonstrate measurable outcomes.⁴¹ Funding should also prioritize capacity development for policymakers and practitioners to use data and evidence for learning and adaptation, rather than compliance alone.

Finally, **policy coherence must bridge top-down and bottom-up reform efforts.** Open justice often begins with institutional reforms, while people-centered justice tends to emerge from grassroots innovation and local problem-solving. Aligning these trajectories can create virtuous cycles: bottom-up insights can inform effective systemic change, and national-level transparency can create enabling conditions for local justice solutions to thrive.

Together, these policy directions can contribute to transforming institutional approaches and strengthening justice systems that are transparent, trusted, and truly people-centered.

Conclusion

While open justice and people-centered justice have often evolved in parallel policy spaces, their objectives are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Together, they form a continuum. Openness ensures that justice systems are visible and answerable to the public, while people-centered approaches ensure that these systems are responsive and effective in solving real problems. **Linking these agendas can therefore move justice reform in the right direction to close the global justice gap.**

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