

# 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.<sup>1</sup> People-centered justice has gained significant traction around the world. To date, over 60 countries have endorsed the principles of people-centered justice.<sup>2</sup> 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.

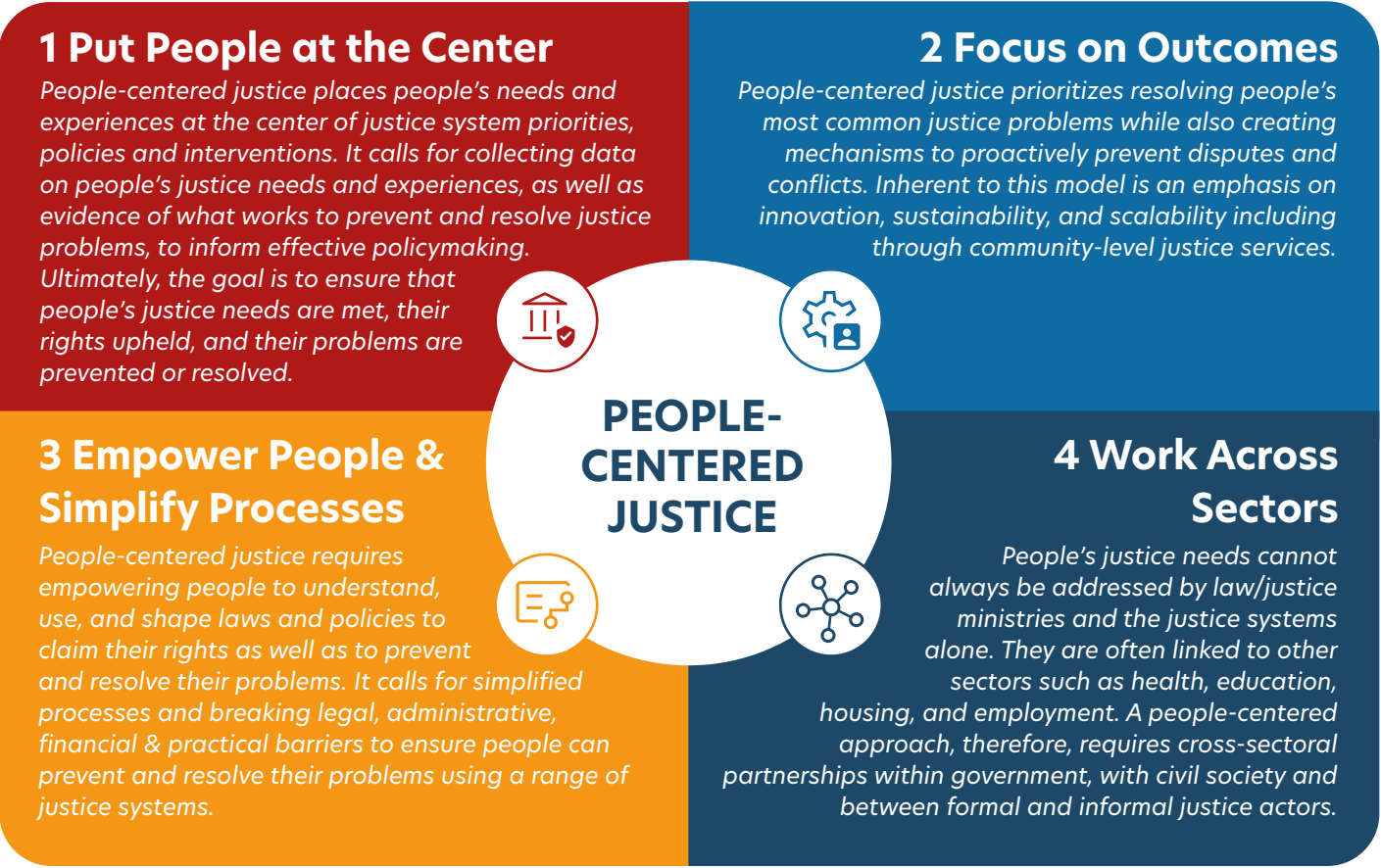
Learnings from successful cases in other countries and sectors that are using people-centered approaches (i.e. health and education) can support justice actors to identify entry points for reform within their own sector. As with other sectors, the bulk of effective rule of law and access to justice interventions 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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,<sup>16</sup> 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;<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>
-  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.<sup>19</sup> 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**

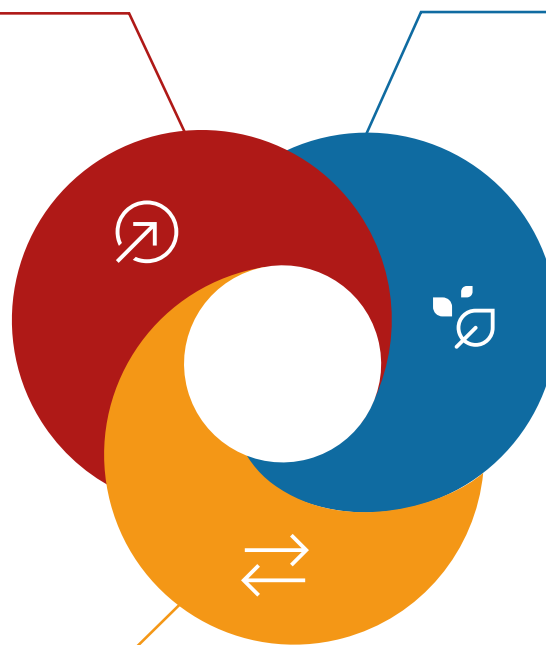
Initiatives that focus on people-centered justice are not new. Much has been achieved at the local level through the use of innovation, piloting, and testing. Often, there may be no need to “reinvent the wheel.” Identify initiatives that work and are cost-effective, and scale them nationally to accelerate 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.<sup>20</sup>

### **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.<sup>21</sup>



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 Leone<sup>22</sup>



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: Colombia<sup>23</sup>



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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- 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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# People-Centered Justice

## AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

### *MINISTRIES OF JUSTICE\**



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



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## About this Publication

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



## CHECKLIST: Collect data and understand people's justice needs



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



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



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





## CHECKLIST: Align actions of relevant ministries and justice actors



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



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



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

# Introduction and Objectives

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Justice Action Coalition<sup>3</sup> proposes **four key actions** that can be taken to further people-centered justice:

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

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

## Entry Points for Action

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



### Collect data and understand people's justice needs

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

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

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



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

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

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

also provide training on evidence-based analytical tools. Where such institutes do not exist the MoJ may want to consider the case for strengthening effective monitoring, evaluation and learning in the sector, including the case for institutionalizing these processes (i.e., through a cross-sector coordination office, a one-off national review, and/or a national justice learning institute to identify the most cost-effective approaches). Beyond the national level, engaging with regional<sup>8</sup> and international<sup>9</sup> networks can help to facilitate the exchange of information, methodology and training for policy research and development.

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



## Align actions of relevant ministries and justice actors

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

Cross-sectoral initiatives have been identified by many justice ministries as a successful and innovative way to advance access to justice.<sup>11</sup> This requires collaboration and negotiation with relevant line ministries such as the ministries of planning and finance to effectively budget and operationalize access to justice strategies. MoJs can consider creating a cross-sectoral platform<sup>12</sup> for promoting people-centered justice. They should collaborate across the spectrum of stakeholders to create a shared vision on equal access to justice for all. Collaboration can be achieved through activities such as joint analyses, joint data collection, and collective monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

# Examples of Effective Policy Interventions



## Community Mediation Boards: Sri Lanka

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

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

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

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



## Local Justice Systems: Colombia

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

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

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



# Endnotes

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3. The Justice Action Coalition (JAC) is a multi-stakeholder alliance of countries and organizations that is working to achieve measurable progress in justice outcomes for people and communities by the third SDG summit in 2027 and beyond. In 2022, the JAC called on countries to come to make 2023 a turning point for people-centered justice in the 2023 Justice Appeal. <https://www.sdg16.plus/justice-action-coalition/>.
4. The OECD/OSF Guide provides a framework for the design, implementation and analysis of legal needs surveys based on 25 years of experience in a range of countries. OECD/OSF, "Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice," OECD, 2019, 25, [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/05/legal-needs-surveys-and-access-to-justice\\_g1g9a36c/g2g9a36c-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/05/legal-needs-surveys-and-access-to-justice_g1g9a36c/g2g9a36c-en.pdf).
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6. See, the Indonesian case study: Webpage, "Increasing Quality and Accessible Legal Aid (ID0146)," *Open Government Partnership*, n.d., [www.opengovpartnership.org/members/indonesia/commitments/ID0146/](http://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/indonesia/commitments/ID0146/).
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12. Vanuatu: "Strategy for the Justice and Community Services Sector (2014-2017)," *Ministry of Justice and Community Services*, n.d., [https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/policy/Strategy for the Justice and Community Services Sector 2014-2017.pdf](https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/policy/Strategy%20for%20the%20Justice%20and%20Community%20Services%20Sector%202014-2017.pdf); Norway: Webpage, "Youth Policy Governance," *European Commission*, last updated March 21, 2024, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/norway/15-cross-sectoral-approach-with-other-ministries>; Albania: "Annual Monitorial Report," *Government of Albania*, May 2023, <https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Annual-Monitoring-Report-2022.pdf>.
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# People-Centered Justice

## AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

### *THE JUDICIARY*



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# Getting Started: A Checklist for Judiciaries Interested in Pivoting to People-Centered Justice



## CHECKLIST: Setting a strategic people-centered justice vision



- ☐ **Identify and engage key stakeholders.** A people-centered approach requires a broad analysis of stakeholders including internal and external stakeholders.<sup>1</sup> Create a map of stakeholders, including potential people-centered justice champions among the judiciary, government actors, CSOs, academia, community- and faith-based organizations, international actors, etc. alongside a list of potential challenges and barriers at the local and national level.<sup>2</sup>
- ☐ **Rely on data.** Establish a baseline of people's most pressing justice needs and the means by which they seek to resolve them (or the reasons why they do not). Consider data collection as an important, ongoing process. Without this data, policymakers may misdiagnose problems or misallocate scarce resources.<sup>3</sup>
- ☐ **Support integrated data collection systems.** Advocate for developing an integrated data collection system regarding justice service delivery. Support regular monitoring of the impact of access to justice initiatives and the use of data in strategy, policy and program development.
- ☐ **Support legal/justice needs assessments.** Explore options and identify joint resources for commissioning comprehensive justice needs assessments at the provincial/country level.
- ☐ **Plan to improve service delivery.** Engage in strategic planning to identify objectives for reform. Ensure long-term sustainability and develop a model for scaling up successful pilots and local level programs.
- ☐ **Take a sector-wide approach.** Establish or participate in national coalition(s) for promoting people-centered justice. Coordinate efforts to enhance justice service delivery, mapping out the role for the judiciary and other justice actors as well as service providers working outside of the justice system including non-governmental actors and non-legal professionals.



## CHECKLIST: Adopting a people-centered approach in daily practices



**Lead by example in daily courtroom practice**, ensuring that:

- ☐ Courtroom layouts and procedures allow for the respectful treatment of litigants.
- ☐ Victims of crimes, survivors of gender-based violence, witnesses, people with disability, etc. receive adequate protection, psycho-social, and other support in and out of court.
- ☐ Court administrators, court-based paralegals, or inclusive tech-supported apps provide access to relevant information for filing cases and understanding what to expect in the legal process.

**Advocate for procedures that will improve trust and justice journeys** among users by:

- ☐ Identifying the most expeditious mechanisms for dispute resolution proportionate to the complexity of the legal case.
- ☐ Providing access to adequate and affordable legal advice and representation in court in accordance with users' needs and economic means.
- ☐ Conducting consultations with community leaders, civil society representatives, and other community members through regular meetings.



## CHECKLIST: Training and improving service delivery



- ☐ Introduce people-centered justice into judicial training curricula and programs.
- ☐ Support and implement judicial training programs to increase knowledge and capacity to develop and implement people-centered justice strategies, policies, and programs.
- ☐ Use media and organize conferences, seminars, workshops and public events for formal and informal justice actors to promote people-centered justice approaches.



## CHECKLIST: Raising public awareness



- ☐ Partner with legal aid institutions and law schools to **find ways to interact directly with people** and understand their problems in accessing justice.
- ☐ **Focus public awareness and outreach on the role of the judiciary** and the importance of rule of law and procedures to protect people's rights. Explain ways in which the judiciary is taking a people-centered approach. Counter the narrative that judges live in "ivory towers" and do not understand people's problems. Co-create solutions to improve people's experience of seeking justice.



## CHECKLIST: Equitable use of technology



- ☐ Incorporate electronic case management systems which can **improve record-keeping and promote transparency**.
- ☐ Explore online applications that provide legal information and assistance needed for filing cases, **allowing more people to participate in court processes at reduced costs**.
- ☐ **Consider virtual and hybrid court sessions** using video conferencing in contexts where technology is accessible.

# Introduction and Objectives

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

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

This note serves as a guide for **judiciaries** interested in transitioning to a people-centered approach to justice. It is designed to be read in conjunction with the series' introductory note, which discusses the concept of people-centered justice and outlines key interventions needed for its implementation.

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

The judiciary is traditionally seen as one of the key actors for justice sector reform at the national level. Judiciaries are among the main recipients of resources for capacity building and infrastructure development and often lead the implementation of justice sector reform initiatives. This, among other reasons, is why the judiciary is central in any transition towards people-centered justice.

Placing people at the center bestows dual responsibilities on the judiciary - as adjudicators as well as service providers. Judiciaries can at times be more focused on their role as adjudicators than on their role as service providers who engage actively with users and communities to better understand their needs. Transitioning to people-centered justice requires rethinking the latter role. In doing so, it is also important to include the participation of non-governmental justice service providers, paralegals, non-legal professionals and alternative dispute resolution practitioners in justice service delivery.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence shows that the majority of the world's population resolve their disputes and claim their rights outside of formal justice systems.<sup>5</sup> This presents both challenges and opportunities for the judiciary. It means that the provision of justice may, in many cases, fall outside the ambit of the constitutional and human rights standards that many judiciaries seek to uphold. But it also presents an opportunity for collaboration with alternative justice service providers and to reach more people while ensuring that their rights are being adequately upheld. In Kenya, for example, the Alternative Justice Systems Policy seeks to do just that, to embrace alternative justice systems while upholding the nation's constitutional and human rights standards.<sup>6</sup> When members of the judiciary take the responsibility to lead reforms, access to justice increases. Judicial support for reducing pre-trial detention through the deployment of paralegals or for reducing the backlog of cases through alternative dispute resolution mechanisms enhances public trust in the judiciary and in justice services.<sup>7</sup>

# Entry Points for Action

Achieving SDG16.3 in national and local contexts requires coordinated interventions at strategic, policy and programmatic levels. The judiciary has a critical role to play in leading and mobilizing other actors towards a people-centered approach to justice service delivery. Recognizing that each context is different, below is a suggested list of potential entry points for action.



## Setting a strategic people-centered justice vision

The judiciary at the highest level is generally well-suited to lead the development of a strategic people-centered justice vision, including long-term planning, design, and implementation. It is also well-situated to build the coalitional support needed to sustain reforms. In many countries where reform has produced significant gains in access to justice, the process was led by a Chief Justice or Supreme Court Justices. This leadership raised the profile of the initiative and brought key stakeholders to the table.<sup>8</sup> Reform can gain further legitimacy and efficiency if steered in cooperation with other top officials within the justice chain, including ministers of justice, attorney-generals, police commissioners, etc. In leading these efforts, the judiciary should play a critical role in promoting policy coherence, program coordination and strategic alignment with a broad range of local, national and international stakeholders.



## Adopting a people-centered approach in daily practices

In their daily practice, judges should ensure that courtrooms and their procedures are people-centered. This includes ensuring that people feel heard and respected and that their time and effort is well spent. It also means ensuring that people have access to the legal information needed to file their claims, as well as to legal representation in the courtroom. Adequate security and psycho-social support, where possible, should be provided for both victims and witnesses.

People-centered justice is most effective when diverse stakeholders are working together. Senior and mid-level judges should promote the benefits of people-centered justice to the public through media outlets, public engagements, or other forms of outreach.

At the same time, judiciaries should try to reach a broader population of justice seekers. They can commission quantitative and qualitative assessments of people's needs, applying innovative legal approaches to support social causes, economic prosperity, and environmental protection, for example.<sup>9</sup> In countries with significant inequality, such as South Africa or Colombia, the judiciary plays an important role in the enforcement of social and economic rights.<sup>10</sup>



## Judicial training and improving service delivery

An important step towards promoting a new approach to justice is to ensure a common understanding of the concept of people-centered justice, its relevance, and its implications for local contexts.<sup>11</sup> To accomplish this, the judiciary should provide trainings and outreach programs to different groups, including peers and other providers. A people-centered justice approach should also be included in judicial training and incorporated into the curricula of national and provincial judicial academies and institutes. For example, curricula could include instructions on people-



centered courtroom management and procedures, how to use legal needs and user satisfaction data effectively, the importance of supporting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and community-based access to justice initiatives, or how to ensure effective public information and outreach services.<sup>12</sup>



## Raising public awareness

By raising public awareness on the role of the judiciary and how people can access justice, the judiciary helps to build public confidence in the justice system and in public institutions more broadly, which is in decline in many countries.<sup>13</sup> The Canadian judiciary, for example, has taken an active role in reaching out to university students to inform them about the role of law in social and economic life and the importance of providing justice for all.<sup>14</sup> Instruction regarding access to justice through legal empowerment and civic engagement,<sup>15</sup> for example, can also be an integral part of civic education, including secondary education.



## Working with other actors on service delivery

SDG16.3 has reinforced the role of the judiciary as a key development partner and a service provider that engages in justice delivery beyond the narrow task of resolving legal cases.<sup>16</sup> This role implies that the judiciary needs to have an understanding of the needs of the communities it serves. At the same time, the judiciary needs to ensure effective information sharing about how courts work. As part of judicial outreach, judges can make themselves available for regular meetings with community leaders and members. In such meetings, community representatives can discuss problems they encounter in everyday life that may have a legal dimension and can thus be addressed through legal means. For example, in Colombia the judiciary regularly participates in local consultations with civil society and community representatives to better understand people's needs and improve accessibility at the municipal level.<sup>17</sup> This Local Justice Systems initiative has enhanced coordination of local government agencies, facilitated broader participation of the public, and enabled direct contact with judges, building trust and capacity to respond to issues relevant to the community.<sup>18</sup>

In supporting a people-centered approach, the judiciary should also work with civil society organizations and other service providers to increase access to justice at community levels, particularly for people in communities with high rates of vulnerability, criminality, community conflict, and/or social or economic marginality, as well as rural communities. This type of partnership has led to innovative justice initiatives such as mobile justice brigades and one-stop shop justice centers.



## Use of technology

Innovation and technology can improve the quality of judicial processes and access to justice for both the general public and for disadvantaged groups. Information technology offers a myriad of opportunities to improve access to information and participation in court systems. Online platforms that offer legal information and services can reach new justice seekers, especially younger users, and enhance legal assistance. However, the use of technology and its potential benefits must be contextualized because in certain instances and jurisdictions, due to limited access, technology may present an additional barrier as opposed to being a solution.

# Examples of Effective Policy Intervention by the Judiciary



## Red Hook Community Justice Center: USA

Red Hook Community Justice Center is an example of a judicial initiative intended to provide people-friendly justice and to develop effective partnerships between the judiciary and other service providers. It was created in 2000 as an experimental problem-solving community court designed to resolve a multitude of neighborhood problems in this disadvantaged urban community in Brooklyn, New York City. It is the first multi-jurisdictional court in the country dealing with low-level criminal cases and matters otherwise adjudicated by Family Courts and Civil Courts. Cases are handled by a single judge with support by a community service team. The Center has programs that focus on healing and community restoration, use community service as restitution for minor violations, provide onsite assistance to victims of domestic violence, and include a youth court where teenagers are trained to resolve real-life cases involving their peers. An independent evaluation in 2013 found a preventative component to the Center's impact, indicating a steady decrease in the number of felony and misdemeanor arrests that correlated with the Center's work in the community.

Sources: [\*Center for Justice Innovation, Red Hook Community Justice Center; and A Community Court Grows in Brooklyn: A comprehensive Evolution of The Red Hook Community Center, 2013.\*](#)



## Transforming Justice Service Delivery: Kenya

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya put a great emphasis on access to justice, defining it as “the provision of dispute resolution mechanisms which are affordable, proximate and ensure speedy justice and whose processes and procedures are understood by users.” Since its adoption, a broad group of Kenyan judges, lawyers and Ministry of Justice officials have come together to work on creating conditions that will live up to this norm.

- The 2012-2016 Judiciary Transformation Framework identified “people-focused delivery of justice” as the first pillar of reform.
- In 2016, the Kenyan Parliament enacted the Legal Aid Act, which led to the establishment of National Legal Aid Services, regulating the practice and ensuring adequate funding for capacity development and service provision.
- This was followed by the development of the National Action Plan on Legal Aid 2017-2022, which further incentivized collaborative efforts in service provision and brought on board all legal aid providers under one umbrella for easy coordination and quality assurance.
- In 2017, the Judiciary of Kenya commissioned a justice needs and satisfaction survey that assessed the effectiveness of various formal and informal justice mechanisms and evaluated the cost and quality of justice journeys.

- On the tenth anniversary of the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, Chief Justice David Maraga launched the Alternative Justice Systems Policy, which provides a framework for linking and co-referencing cases between formal and informal justice mechanisms with a view to enhancing access to justice.
- In 2023, Chief Justice Martha Koome unveiled the Blueprint for Social Transformation through Access to Justice vision (STAJ), laying down the “roadmap to deliver to the Kenyan people an accessible, efficient, expeditious and cost-effective justice system.”

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# People-Centered Justice

## AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

### *MINISTRIES OF JUSTICE\**



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



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



## CHECKLIST: Collect data and understand people's justice needs



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



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



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





## CHECKLIST: Align actions of relevant ministries and justice actors



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



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



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

# Introduction and Objectives

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Justice Action Coalition<sup>3</sup> proposes **four key actions** that can be taken to further people-centered justice:

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

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

## Entry Points for Action

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



### Collect data and understand people's justice needs

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

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

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



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

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

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

also provide training on evidence-based analytical tools. Where such institutes do not exist the MoJ may want to consider the case for strengthening effective monitoring, evaluation and learning in the sector, including the case for institutionalizing these processes (i.e., through a cross-sector coordination office, a one-off national review, and/or a national justice learning institute to identify the most cost-effective approaches). Beyond the national level, engaging with regional<sup>8</sup> and international<sup>9</sup> networks can help to facilitate the exchange of information, methodology and training for policy research and development.

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



## Align actions of relevant ministries and justice actors

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

Cross-sectoral initiatives have been identified by many justice ministries as a successful and innovative way to advance access to justice.<sup>11</sup> This requires collaboration and negotiation with relevant line ministries such as the ministries of planning and finance to effectively budget and operationalize access to justice strategies. MoJs can consider creating a cross-sectoral platform<sup>12</sup> for promoting people-centered justice. They should collaborate across the spectrum of stakeholders to create a shared vision on equal access to justice for all. Collaboration can be achieved through activities such as joint analyses, joint data collection, and collective monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

# Examples of Effective Policy Interventions



## Community Mediation Boards: Sri Lanka

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

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

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

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



## Local Justice Systems: Colombia

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

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

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



# Endnotes

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# People-Centered Justice

## AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

### *External Funders\**



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

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## About this Publication

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



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



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



## CHECKLIST: Move beyond fragmented funding



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



## CHECKLIST: Facilitate and support collective action



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



### CHECKLIST: Support sustainability and scalability



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



### CHECKLIST: Advocate transition to people-centered justice



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



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



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

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

# Introduction and Objectives

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

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

This note serves as a guide for **external funders** who are interested in supporting a people-centered approach to justice. It is designed to be read in conjunction with the series' **introductory note**, which discusses the concept of people-centered justice and outlines key interventions needed for its implementation. Other practice notes respectively target: (1) judiciaries, (2) Ministries of Justice, (4) international program implementers, and (5) any actors interested in institutional reforms specifically.

## What Is the Role of External Funders in Pursuing a People-Centered Approach to Justice?<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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



# Entry Points for Action

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



## Ensure awareness and understanding of what people-centered justice means

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

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



## Move beyond fragmented funding

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

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

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

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



## Facilitate collective action

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

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

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



## Support sustainability and scalability

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

Following a Joint Letter to the UN Secretary-General in 2021, the United Nations' Secretary-General report on Our Common Agenda as well as his new vision on rule of law puts people at the center of justice systems. The Coalition's Justice Appeal<sup>20</sup> urged countries to arrive at the 2023 SDG Summit with data and evidence to demonstrate their contribution to closing the global justice gap. It continues to support and call for action at national and regional level, better data on the justice gap, evidence on innovations that work, and an emphasis to focus on those most at risk of being left behind.

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



### Kenya's Blueprint for Social Transformation through Access to Justice

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

Source: A Blueprint for Social Transformation through Access to Justice<sup>22</sup>

# Endnotes

1. The capacity of external funders to contribute to pivoting to people-centered justice at the country level depends on a number of factors such as the bilateral interests and reasons for engagement, the degree of independence of those working in the field; strategic, policy, and programming support from the capitals; opportunities for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the country context; and resources at hand and funding channels available, among others.
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15. Manuel and Manuel, "Justice Aid Update and Lessons from Latest Evaluations of Donor Programming," 26.
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20. Justice Action Coalition, "Justice 2023: Pivoting to People-centered justice," *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, 2022, <https://www.sdg16.plus/resources/pivoting-to-people-centered-justice/>.
21. Webpage, "Justice Action Coalition," *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.sdg16.plus/justice-action-coalition/>.
22. "Kenya is changing the face of Justice, A Blueprint for Social Transformation through Access to Justice 2023-2033, A People-Centred Justice Approach," *Government of Kenya*, 2023, <https://judiciary.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/STAJ-Blueprint-1.pdf>.



# People-Centered Justice

## AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

### *INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM IMPLEMENTERS\**



\*These include entities implementing rule of law/access to justice programs across multiple contexts including UN agencies, intergovernmental organizations, INGOs and private international firms implementing development programs.

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Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, “People-Centered Justice, An Approach to Strategy, Policy and Program Development: Getting Started—Practice Note 4, International Program Implementers,” NYU Center on International Cooperation, November 2025, [sdg16.plus/justice](https://sdg16.plus/justice).

# Getting Started: Cross-Regional and Multistakeholder Global Advocacy Platform Supported by External Funders



## CHECKLIST: Ensure awareness and understanding on people-centered justice



- ☐ **Understand the key principles and best practices** for developing **people-centered justice** strategies, policies and programs.
- ☐ **Engage with like-minded partners and networks** such as the Justice Action Coalition, to expand your understanding on people-centered justice.
- ☐ **Promote people-centered justice** with government and non-governmental stakeholders through leadership training, international conferences, and public information campaigns.
- ☐ **Advise and support national partners on people-centered justice initiatives**, with consideration for context-specific entry points.



## CHECKLIST: Focus on evidence-based holistic programming and collective action



- ☐ **Take a more systematic, holistic and coherent approach** to justice program design, implementation, and impact assessment. Remember that people-centered justice requires much more than merely tweaking existing programs.
- ☐ Support national processes that are aimed at setting shared goals for reform and creating joint actions/partnerships among key stakeholders; promote a people-centered and service delivery focus; use an evidence-based approach; and ensure effective participation of justice users and formal and informal service providers in the design, implementation and evaluation of program initiatives.
- ☐ Identify ways to **obtain comprehensive and disaggregated data on people's justice needs** and their experiences of trying to seek justice (justice journeys).
- ☐ **Map** existing national and local resources and **stakeholders collecting justice data** and consider options for supporting an integrated justice data system.
- ☐ Build/strengthen local, national and programmatic capacity to regularly collect data, conduct analysis, support evidence-based monitoring and reporting, and make iterative program adjustments.



## CHECKLIST: Reassess programming models, support partnerships and invest in front line services and scalable solutions



- ☐ Ensure that program strategy and design prioritize people's justice needs and justice journeys and address gaps in the provision of justice services.
- ☐ Introduce and support online services providing legal information and assistance as well as for filing complaints/cases and participating in court proceedings. Support the use of digital technology in the justice system. This should not be a standalone project but must be designed as part of a larger problem-solving exercise. It should also complement physical services and information and not replace them.
- ☐ Develop program strategies and projects using a people-centered approach to justice including by:
  - ☒ Ensuring programming strategies and project goals are demand-driven and include a focus on improving justice service delivery and accessibility.
  - ☒ Providing strategic and technical assistance for reforming justice institutions from a people-centered lens (see institutional reform Practice Note 5).
  - ☒ Identifying and understanding the justice needs of people including vulnerable groups most at risk of being left behind.
  - ☒ Ensuring that the proportion of assistance directed to criminal justice versus civil justice systems corresponds to the data on people's needs and to address common justice problems as well as opportunities to scale up.
  - ☒ Promoting innovative, data-informed justice services at the community level and encourage local ownership, with support from national justice counterparts.
  - ☒ Considering interventions that combine justice outcomes with broader social and economic challenges in the communities and contribute to peace and development more widely. This should include intervention that help to prevent recurring justice problems by supporting access to social welfare, mental health services, employment, land, and property.
  - ☒ Facilitating and incentivizing greater collaboration and coordination between justice stakeholders including the government and civil society justice service providers. Consider solutions for linking formal justice institutions with informal providers, Alternative Dispute Resolution, and customary mechanisms at the local and community level.
  - ☒ Prioritizing initiatives that are cost-effective, scalable, and sustainable. Create space for innovation, experimentation, and adequate testing of program interventions that can be iterated in other locations within the country, planning for scalability and sustainability from the point of program inception.

# Introduction and Objectives

This Practice Note is part of a series developed for different justice actors and service providers to support the transition to a people-centered approach to justice and reduce the justice gap. Such a transition is in line with SDG16.3 which seeks to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.

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

This note serves as a guide for **international program implementers**, including United Nations (UN) agencies, intergovernmental organizations, international NGOs, and private international firms implementing development programs. It is designed to be read in conjunction with the series' **introductory note**, which discusses the concept of people-centered justice and outlines key interventions needed for its implementation. Other practice notes respectively target: (1) judiciaries, (2) Ministries of Justice, (3) external funders, and (5) any actors interested in institutional reforms specifically.

## The Role of International Implementers in Pursuing a People-Centered Approach to Justice

International implementers typically possess expertise, human capital and the tools needed to support justice reforms. Their outlook is distilled from varied development and humanitarian contexts exhibiting different types of local and national justice challenges and solutions. They benefit from ongoing conversations with policy experts within the international rule of law community who are familiar with cutting edge global policy research and eager to share their knowledge. Furthermore, international program implementers are often engaging with the state and its institutions and creating relationships that they can leverage to promote people-centered justice. For all these reasons, international implementers are particularly well positioned to offer expertise to support people-centered justice initiatives at the national level.

International implementers of rule of law and access to justice programs have played an active role in developing people-centered justice principles and approach. This has occurred, for example, through the development of policy guidance on a people-centered approach, in areas of reform related to justice and security.<sup>1</sup> Many are members of the [Justice Action Coalition](#), which has urged countries to pivot to people-centered justice and to guide their reforms based on its five underlying principles.<sup>2</sup> Moving towards people-centered justice will require implementers' ongoing collective engagement at the national, regional, and global levels.

A key challenge large international implementers often face is that they are bound by specific criteria or areas of focus that donors/external funders prioritize. This reality, at times, hinders engagement in people-centered justice and leads to programming focusing solely/predominantly on institutions thereby, amongst other things, missing out on the role that diverse and informal pathways to justice can play in ensuring justice at the community level. International implementers are particularly effective when they prioritize partnerships with other organizations, rather than competition or duplication of efforts. A people-centered justice approach can help reduce fragmentation and support different partners and their external funders to align themselves with a joint-vision and strategy.

# Entry Points for Action

Recognizing that each context is different, below is a suggested list of potential entry points for action for international implementers:



## Ensure awareness and understanding of what people-centered justice means

It is important to promote a shared understanding of the concept of people-centered justice, its relevance, as well as its implications for local contexts.<sup>3</sup> While the term “people-centered justice” has proliferated within the international rule of law community, it is not always well understood. Some programs, even while purporting to implement people-centered justice, still proceed with top-down approaches to justice. They concentrate their support on institutional reform and capacity development of formal actors within the justice sector without understanding people’s actual justice needs and their experiences of seeking justice. It is important for international implementers to ensure that people-centered justice principles are fully understood and upheld within their policies and practices. This requires an emphasis on improving people’s experiences of seeking justice and focusing on fair outcomes for them including through provision of community level services.



## Develop a holistic and systemic approach to justice at the country level

While international implementers have made some efforts towards the development of people-centered justice policies and have advocated for their adoption, there is an ongoing need to develop and test comprehensive, nationally led, people-centered approaches to justice at the national and local level. Many people-centered interventions are part of what implementers are already doing. However, there is a need for a more systematic, holistic and coherent approach to program design, implementation, and impact assessment.

Creating this coherent approach at the national level will require four key areas of work in line with the Justice Action Coalition’s 2023 Justice Appeal:<sup>4</sup>

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



## Set shared goals, focus on collective action and reduce fragmentation

Policy coherence, program coordination, and strategic alignment should be prioritized across local, national, and international stakeholders. International program implementers can support efforts to work jointly in support of national justice actors such as ministries of justice. This includes support for the development of a shared vision, joint analyses, and joint data collection, monitoring, evaluation and learning. Implementors can encourage country-led efforts to develop a national strategic reform and investment plan for people-centered justice. They could also support the sector to develop a detailed finance and spending plan, including steps and processes needed for implementation. This



would seek to maximize financing efforts while being realistic about total available finance when planning.<sup>5</sup>



## Design and implement programs based on data and evidence

Program models for justice sector reform are often based on an assessment of institutional and professional capacities. Such assessments use available administrative data from the formal justice system and rely on consultations with associated service providers. A people-centered approach to justice reform, on the other hand, focuses on the justice needs of people, their ability to access justice, and their satisfaction with the services of all providers, including informal providers and customary mechanisms. This more holistic approach, is outcome-oriented, seeking to address peoples' justice problems. To follow this approach, one must begin with collecting data and evidence.<sup>6</sup>

Justice/legal needs surveys outline people's most common legal problems and examine people's justice journeys: their lived experiences in resolving disputes using available services (including their treatment, physical access, length and cost of the legal process and the impact of unresolved problems on their lives). It is important to have disaggregated data, which demonstrates commonalities and differences between geographies, demographics, and other vulnerable people who are most at risk of being left behind.<sup>7</sup> Such data enables gaps in justice service provision to be identified and can support effective and targeted justice interventions.

Justice/legal needs survey should be led and coordinated by national institutions and should serve as a starting point for program development. Ideally, where possible, they should be conducted regularly (every three years is ideal) and may often require resources and capacity support. A periodic review of the data, alongside a qualitative assessment of context and outcomes, can inform iterative programmatic adjustments.

To mainstream this evidence-based approach among key stakeholders, international implementers can encourage and support the following:

- Define a common purpose—to collect and use data and evidence - across stakeholders.
- Promote an institutional culture that emphasizes evidence-based methodology.
- Support national capacity for data collection including government infrastructure, mapping of data resources, and integrated data collection ecosystems.<sup>8</sup>

Notably, improving data collection and quality alone will not translate into better policymaking. There must be an investment in the dissemination and utilization of data to enhance accountability and inform policy decisions.



## Reassess programming models

To address people's justice needs, a new alignment of key stakeholders is needed. International implementers can support country-led approaches to this. A people-centered approach requires a reassessment of the traditional model of top-down program development<sup>9</sup> by prioritizing evidence-based assistance to justice services that will most effectively and efficiently address people's needs and improve their justice journeys.

The latter approach means supporting broader and more innovative interventions that may include but are not limited to formal institutions. This encompasses support for front line/community-based

actors including those providing legal advice, assistance and dispute resolution, which may include informal legal aid providers, paralegals, private sector actors, mediators and customary mechanisms.<sup>10</sup> Preventing common problems and supporting their resolution requires an integrated package of services, including other forms of community development support. This could include broadening the range of services available at community level including deployment of social workers or psychologists or facilitating youth employment and livelihoods support.<sup>11</sup>

Programs could also focus on increasing accessibility using digital technology, including online applications for legal information and assistance, digital filing for people, online processing of service providers, online consultations and hearings, and virtual hearings of protected witnesses. Lastly, to support the resolution of peoples' most common justice problems, there ought to be more investment in civil justice to accompany services which already exist for the criminal justice matters.<sup>12</sup>



### **Support partnerships and platforms for action**

Pivoting to a people-centered approach requires creating/strengthening country-led platforms for joint planning and action. The ability to deliver change will depend on partnerships and collaboration with a full range of national justice actors and institutions including civil society as well as international stakeholders who bring diplomatic and operational capacity to a country. To facilitate national and local ownership, international implementers can conduct leadership training or share international good practices on people-centered justice with decision-makers and (potential) champions.

Programming should also include joint initiatives as well as incentives to promote collaboration among key stakeholders. International implementers could potentially play a role in facilitating cooperation and joint action between national service providers, including government agencies and civil society actors, or formal and informal providers at the local level. This can take many forms including:

- Gathering and sharing justice data;
- Coordinating advocacy efforts and messaging;
- Conducting joint analyses and assessments of progress;
- Contributing to reforms.



### **Support context-specific and cost-effective front line services and scalable solutions**

Program strategy and design should be based on evidence of effectiveness (including cost-effectiveness) and impact. Empirical studies of access to justice programs in the last decade have indicated that community-based initiatives and investment in front line/community-based workers is more impactful and cost-effective than institutional reforms and application of international norms and standards at the national level.<sup>13</sup> While the latter often display only incremental progress, at times needing a generational effort, community level efforts tend to have a faster impact on justice seekers, enhance prevention, and increase trust in both service providers and the justice system as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

Research demonstrates that “affordable unit costs are achieved by local innovation: approaches that begin with people and their needs, are context-specific, and are developed on a low-cost basis from the start. Examples include community-based paralegals, mobile legal aid clinics, village courts, village mediation, alternative dispute resolution centers and telephone call-in centers.”<sup>15</sup> Investment

in community-based people-centered initiatives are particularly cost-effective when they are context-specific,<sup>16</sup> include plans for scalability and sustainability at their onset, when they are supported by justice institutions, and when they are included in strategic planning at the national level.

## Examples of Evidence-Based Programming by International Implementers



### Justice Activity: Kosovo

USAID funded Justice Activity Program 2020-2025,<sup>17</sup> implemented by Chemonics, has assisted the Government of Kosovo to pivot to a people-centered approach to reforms. Kosovo's justice leaders adopted a Rule of Law Strategy in 2021 and issued a joint statement of commitment for justice reform in 2023. The objectives of the Justice Activity Program include: creating people-centered service delivery options for users, strengthening people's understanding, improving engagement with and trust of the justice system, and promoting innovation to improve quality of services with opportunities for scalability and sustainability.

The program conducted a series of nationwide surveys of over 5,500 court users and the public, assessing people's justice needs, level of satisfaction with services, and confidence in the justice system. Based on the findings, it launched a wide range of initiatives, including: initiating the Procedural Justice Initiative in all basic courts which included training for the judiciary and court administration and raised legal awareness to navigate the justice system; expanding legal aid and introducing best practices for developing community justice projects in 11 municipalities housing under-served communities; setting up a Justice Innovation Network and launching an innovation competition for justice actors; providing leadership training; and organizing "Judiciary Days" as an opportunity for people to meet with justice representatives.

*[17]: With the shutdown of USAID operations, it is unclear if funding covers the full 2025 period.*



### Enhancing Access to Justice: Solomon Islands

In 2019, the Access to Justice Study Report for Solomon Islands was released. The study examined people's justice needs and gaps in services in Solomon Islands, disaggregated by geography and demographically disadvantaged groups. It also assessed existing formal and informal mechanisms; justice user satisfaction; and costs associated with service provision through formal institutions and frontline providers. It found that communities lacked awareness about formal justice services and that geographic location and cost were barriers in accessing justice services due to the topography of the archipelago, which consists of over 1,000 islands. These barriers particularly impact women, persons with disability, and victims of violence in remote areas.

Based on findings from this report, UNDP developed a new access to justice program in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs and Public Solicitor's Office (PSO). The project aims to improve the efficiency of resources by investing in frontline workers instead of formal institutions. It focuses on training and deploying paralegals through the PSO and its provincial offices as well as community legal advocates to conduct community awareness for 25,441 people (12,896 of whom are women). In addition, the project developed a range of community-specific initiatives to enhance gender and social inclusion, including the introduction of a legal clinic for people with disabilities.

## Endnotes

1. Examples of policy development activity include: Mark Sedra, PhD, "A People-Centered Approach to Security: Seeking Conceptual Clarity to Guide UN Policy Development," *UNDP*, 2022, <https://www.undp.org/publications/people-centered-approach-security>; "Applying a people-centric approach to advocacy and project management - A Guidebook For Syrian Civil Society Organisations," *OHCHR*, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/technical-guidebook-people-centric-approach-programming-advocacy>; UN Women, "Multi-country analytical study on access to justice for victims and survivors of violence against women and girls in East and Southern Africa," *UN Women*, 2021, <https://www.academia.edu/89307484/Multi-Country-Study-on-Access-to-Justice-for-Women-and-Girls-in-East-and-Southern-Africa-Final>; Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG16+, "Towards Victim-Centered Change: Integrating Transitional Justice into Sustainable Peace and Development," *UN Women*, 2023 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/toward-victim-centred-change-integrating-transitional-justice-into-sustainable-peace-and-development>; Working Group on Customary and Informal Justice and SDG16+, "Diverse pathways to people-centred justice: Report of the Working Group on Customary and Informal Justice and SDG16.3," *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, September 2023, <https://www.sdg16.plus/resources/diverse-pathways-to-people-centered-justice/>; USAID has prominently included people-centered justice approach in their new rule of law policy: Stephen Hendrix, "USAID Introduces Landmark Rule of Law Policy: A Pragmatic Approach to Global Development," *ABA*, May 2024, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/international\\_law/resources/international-law-news/2024-spring/usaids-landmark-rule-of-law-policy-global-development/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/international_law/resources/international-law-news/2024-spring/usaids-landmark-rule-of-law-policy-global-development/), while other large international implementers are testing this new programming outlook: <https://chemonics.com/projects/championing-people-centered-justice-in-ukraine>, or taking steps towards creating institutional arrangements to develop a new programming approach, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2023/achieving-people-centered-justice-150623.htm>.
2. The people-centered justice principles are defined as: 1) Put people and their justice needs at the systems; 2) Use justice for prevention and to promote reconciliation; 3) Empower people to access services and opportunities; 4) Resolve justice problems; and 5) Improve justice journeys. See, Statement, "The Hague Declaration, Declaration on Equal Access to Justice for All by 2030," *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.sdg16.plus/resources/hague-declaration-on-equal-access-to-justice-for-all-by-2030>.
3. This series is intended to provide an initial information and guide to resources on people-centered justice. Also see the Further Readings section added to the introductory note.
4. Justice Action Coalition, "Justice 2023: Pivoting to People-Centered Justice," *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, 2023, <https://www.sdg16.plus/resources/pivoting-to-people-centered-justice>.
5. For further discussion on these issues, see the Practice Note 2 for Ministry of Justice as well as the Justice Action Coalition's "Justice Financing Framework," *Justice Action Coalition*, November 2025, <https://www.sdg16.plus/justice-financing-framework>.
6. See Peter Chapmen, "Grasping the Justice Gap: Opportunities and Challenges for People-Centered Justice Data," *World Justice Project/Pathfinders/OECD*, 2021, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/news/grasping-justice-gap-opportunities-and-challenges-people-centered-justice-data>. Also see SDG16.3 indicators on the kind of data which must be collected at a minimum.
7. See, OECD, "OECD Framework and Good Practice Principles for People-Centered Justice," *OECD*, 2021, <https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-framework-and-good-practice-principles-for-people-centred-justice-cdc3bde7-en.html>.
8. See, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, "Measuring Civil Justice for All: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know? How Can We Know It?," *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 2021, <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2021-Measuring-Civil-Justice-for-All.pdf>.
9. Praia Group on Governance Statistics, "Handbook on Governance Statistics," 2020 (118 and Table VI.2), [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/51st-session/documents/Handbook\\_on\\_GovernanceStatistics-Draft\\_for\\_global\\_consultation-E.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/51st-session/documents/Handbook_on_GovernanceStatistics-Draft_for_global_consultation-E.pdf); and Chapman, "Grasping the Justice Gap."

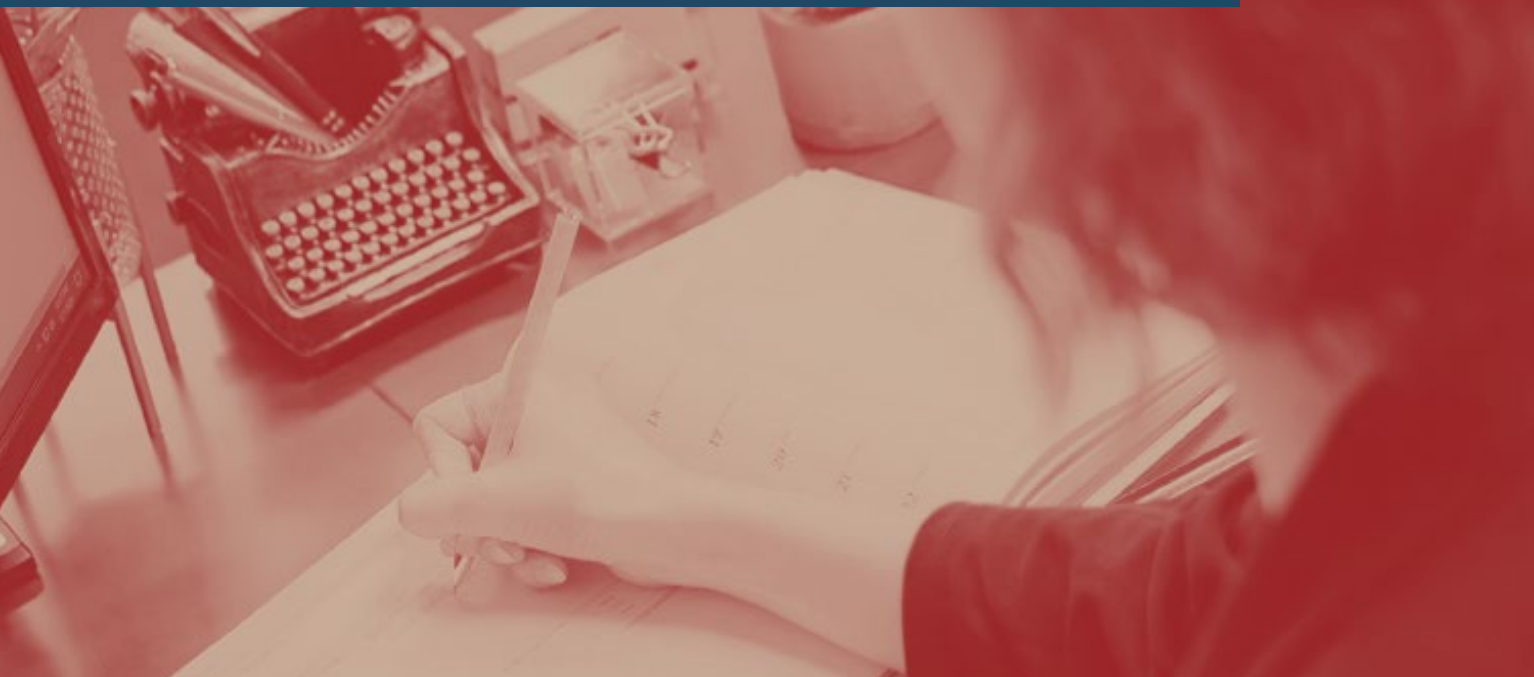
10. Traditionally, justice sector reform starts with constitutional or legislative reform and moves on to focus on capacity building for justice institutions, its departments and services, and training of the judiciary and other formal justice actors. Resulting initiatives tend to develop some provision for legal aid and other forms of access to justice support. This is a standard top-down approach. Such top-down interventions often operate under the implicit assumption that they will result in improved service delivery for the people. Evaluations of programming over the past 20 years have, however, concluded that this assumption does not hold and that the top-down approach to justice reform has not resulted in significant impact for the system's users. See for example, Clare Manuel and Marcus Manuel, "Justice Aid Update and Lessons from Latest Evaluations of Donor Programming," ODI, 2022, 23, <https://odi.org/en/publications/justice-aid-update-and-lessons-from-latest-evaluations-of-donor-programming/>.
11. Task Force on Justice, "Justice for All Report," *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, 2019, 67, <https://www.sdg16.plus/resources/justice-for-all-report-of-the-task-force-on-justice/>.
12. For example, the Access to Justice Centers in Argentina. These are small offices, often located in low-income neighborhoods or in informal settlements, where a team composed of a lawyer, a social worker, a psychologist, and an administrative agent provide diverse justice services—such as legal information, representation, and advice, assistance with administrative procedures, community mediation. Gustavo Maurino, "Putting People at the Center, A case study on access to justice centers in Argentina," *NYU Center on International Cooperation*, 2020, <https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/putting-people-at-the-center-a-case-study-on-access-to-justice-centers-in-argentina/>.
13. Report, "Evaluation of the UNDP support to access to justice," *UNDP*, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/evaluation/publications/evaluation-undp-support-accesscs-justice>.
14. See, for example, Dr. Adam Day and Jessica Kau, "Rule of Law and Sustaining Peace: Towards More Impactful, Effective Conflict Prevention," *United Nations University*, 2021, [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8342/RuleofLaw\\_Overarching.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8342/RuleofLaw_Overarching.pdf); European Court of Auditors, "EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist," *European Union*, 2022, <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=60343>; and Manuel and Manuel, Justice Aid Update and Lessons from Latest Evaluations of Donor Programming."
15. ODI research provides 25 examples of "innovative, locally developed approaches that are providing cost-effective front-line legal advice, assistance and informal dispute resolution services" provided by both the government and civil society. LIC countries examined include Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Tajikistan, and Uganda. See, Clare Manuel and Marcus Manuel, "How to finance universal access to people-centered justice: Scaling up local innovation to leave no one behind," *ODI*, 2023, <https://odi.org/en/publications/how-to-finance-universal-access-to-people-centred-justice-scaling-up-local-innovation-to-leave-no-one-behind/>.
16. *Ibid.*, 2.
17. For more information on context specific and area-based programming and how that is particularly important to consider in conflict settings, see UNDP's Development Future Series, "Fit for purpose? Area based programming in contemporary crisis and development response," *UNDP*, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/publications/dfs-fit-purpose-area-based-programming-contemporary-crisis-and-development-response>.



# People-Centered Justice:

## AN APPROACH TO STRATEGY, POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

*POLICYMAKERS AND OTHER  
STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGED IN  
INSTITUTIONAL REFORM*





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# Getting Started: A Checklist for Policymakers and Other Stakeholders Engaged in (Justice) Institutional Reform and Interested in Pivoting to People-Centered Justice



## CHECKLIST: Reorient strategic goals of reform



- ☐ **Analyze previous and ongoing institutional reform strategies** in the country and assess their goals and impact, **using a people-centered lens**. Focus on service delivery to address the justice gap, in the light of a realistic resource envelope.
- ☐ **Map and use available data on legal needs and service delivery** of formal justice institutions to inform reform. Promote data collection, evidence-based reform planning, and the implementation of monitoring, evaluation, and learning mechanisms.
- ☐ **Develop a context-specific business case** for promoting people-centered institutional reforms involving government line ministries and agencies, the judiciary, and associated service providers. Ensure the inclusive participation of the Bar and users' associations, CSOs, the private sector, academia, and the international community, among other stakeholders.
- ☐ **Reform local and national justice institutions** to enhance justice service delivery, using a comprehensive analysis of formal and informal justice providers to identify challenges and opportunities.



## CHECKLIST: Take a user-centered approach to institutional reform



- ☐ Support the improvement of people's justice journeys by emphasizing a user-centered approach to reform of justice institutions:
  - ☒ **Conduct user satisfaction surveys to inform improved service delivery.** Understand users' experience of interacting with institutions. Encourage and support regular user satisfaction surveys and ensure that survey findings inform how service is delivered.
  - ☒ **Simplify court procedures.** Explore and test innovative context-specific solutions for simplifying and streamlining court procedures, sharing relevant information and guiding users through their legal process.
  - ☒ **Train staff to be user-friendly.** Train staff involved in the administration of justice in user-friendly conduct, and establish related codes of conduct and complaint mechanisms—to ensure dignified treatment of users and accommodation of special needs. Promote and facilitate the use of services for vulnerable people who are most at risk of being left behind.

- **Bring services closer to the users.** Consider innovative solutions to bring services within physical proximity to users, especially in remote areas, by expanding the reach of the court network, creating mobile courts and legal aid services, providing access to legal information, broadening the type of available services, and reducing costs at the local level.
- Improve access and efficiency of justice services through the equitable and innovative use of information technology:
  - **Map capacities and access.** Understand providers' and users' behavior and technological skills, IT infrastructure and access of the public to digital technology as a basis for problem-solving
  - **Use information technology effectively to address problems.** Use court digitalization or automation, integrated electronic file management systems, or artificial intelligence to equitably address problems or bottlenecks in service delivery.
  - **Ensure that IT reforms are equitable.** Assess risks associated with IT reforms of justice administration such as inequities in digital access and the protection of users' privacy, and develop protective regulations.



## CHECKLIST: Build trust through local engagement, participation and civil oversight



- Support people's participation and partnerships with local communities to build trust in justice institutions:
  - Ensure institutional reforms are carried out in consultation with all stakeholders and representatives of relevant user groups, with regular public outreach throughout the process.
  - Support the introduction and strengthening of existing complaint and oversight mechanisms to improve public participation in justice system accountability as well as the transparency of service provision.
  - Support the reform of local justice institutions by facilitating and incorporating, as appropriate, interventions of informal justice providers and other relevant state services, while maintaining community engagement in reform design and implementation.
  - Plan reforms of local justice institutions with provisions for community participation, testing and refining reforms in other parts of the country, and developing a nation-wide model for institutional and financial sustainability of such local justice services. Advance policies of experimentation and piloting efforts, with built-in feedback loops, to improve access to justice. This can encourage innovation and opportunities to scale.

# Introduction and Objectives

This Practice Note is part of a series developed for different justice actors and service providers to support the transition to a people-centered approach to justice and reduce the justice gap. Such a transition is in line with SDG16.3 which seeks to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.

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

This note is intended to serve a variety of actors working on **institutional reforms** with the goal of advancing justice service delivery. It is designed to be read in conjunction with the series' **introductory note**, which discusses the concept of people-centered justice and outlines key interventions needed for its implementation. Other practice notes respectively target: (1) judiciaries, (2) Ministries of Justice, (3) external funders, and (4) international program implementors.

## Towards a People-Centered Approach to Institutional Justice Reform

Justice sector reform initiatives have traditionally been top-down institutional reform initiatives, often focused on constitutional and legislative changes, capacity building, and in some cases including coordination between formal justice institutions.<sup>1</sup> Planned interventions often start with constitution-making to improve the protection of constitutional rights or technical assistance for legislative reform including the introduction and application of international laws and standards.

Typically, the largest investments of international assistance are used for the capacity development of departments and units within ministries of justice, the judiciary, and other relevant line ministries. Capacity development can include legislative drafting, policymaking, and creating standard operating procedures; supporting infrastructure and the improvement of the administration of justice, including courts, police stations and correctional facilities; and creating judicial and other professional training facilities. Addressing broader access to justice issues and the provision of services, including administration of legal aid and support for informal providers, receives less attention.<sup>2</sup>

International assistance attempts to target local justice efforts by supporting, for example, capacity development for district and municipal courts, law enforcement and other justice mechanisms or services. However, such assistance is usually only for small-scale pilots that are tested in select underserved localities and communities. Barring a few exceptions, they are often discontinued or fail to be scaled up into national programs for local justice institutions and services.

Top-down interventions often operate under the implicit assumption that they will result in improved service delivery for the people. However, evaluations of programming over the past 20 years have concluded that this assumption does not hold and that the top-down approach to justice reform has not resulted in significant impact for the system's users.<sup>3</sup> Another limitation of focusing solely on reforms at the institutional level is that, globally, only 10-20 percent of justice seekers resolve their legal problems through formal justice systems.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that institutional reform should be taken off the agenda of people-centered justice.

On the contrary, strategic coordination at national level and formal institutions and service providers are vital for any effort to scale up access to justice for the largest segments of a population.

For support focused on institutional reform and capacity development at the national level, it can be beneficial for external funders to approach reform in a nuanced way that reflects a deep understanding of contextual determinants of change, with the expectation that improvements in institutional performance may be gradual, progress will occur in a non-linear form and are unlikely to result in speedy improvements in service delivery. In such cases, therefore, policy makers/funders must be committed to long-term support to ensure sustainability and impact. Ideally, these efforts must also take a people-centered lens and be accompanied with a focus on service delivery at the local level. This note suggests some key elements for making institutional reform people centered. These efforts are guided by the goal of reaching more justice seekers, addressing and preventing the most common justice problems, making service delivery cost-effective, and integrating the services provided by informal justice actors with those of the formal sector.

## Entry Points for Action

Recognizing that each context is different, below is a suggested list of potential entry points for action by actors engaged in (justice) institutional reform.



### Reorient strategic goals of the reform

The overall objective of justice reform must be geared towards better addressing people's justice needs. Reforms must, therefore, be informed by a comprehensive needs assessment of people's justice problems and their experiences in trying to prevent and resolve those problems (justice journeys), and of gaps in justice service delivery. Evidence-based approaches help to monitor justice seekers' satisfaction with service provision. They also illuminate other progressive or regressive trends, helping policymakers to evaluate the overall trajectory of reforms in quantitative and qualitative terms and to make necessary adjustments.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Lack of justice: whose problem is it?**

The 'justice gap problem' can lack an institutional home and political champion in an institutionally complex and fragmented sector. Constitutionally independent judiciaries tend to be concerned with processing cases within the judicial system, rather than broader issues of addressing disputes, conflicts and grievances and preventing them coming to court in the first place; ministries of justice tend to focus on providing legal advice and representation to the government in addition to leading prosecutorial services and in some case legal aid; some key front line/community-based justice services are provided outside government (e.g., legal advice and assistance by civil society organizations); and other front line/community-based services (such as local courts or mediation services) tend to be under the auspices of ministries traditionally seen as outside the justice sector (such as ministries of local government).

Political leadership in the sector is often drawn from senior lawyers and judges, who often have limited experience and/or interest in engaging with front line/community-based service provision. Service provision can be highly regulated and restrictive (with only lawyers permitted to provide justice services) making scaled-up front line services unaffordable for individuals and for the country as a whole.

Typically, the justice sector lacks both the institutional architecture to drive change, and credible, costed, and prioritized plans for scaling-up front line/community-based justice services. Thus, sectoral restructuring and regulatory reform are needed for affordable, scaled-up front-line/community services.

Although not the kind of sector-wide, systemic and holistic reforms that are needed to effectively close the justice gap, below are some examples of people-centered institutional and regulatory reform:

- Reforms focused on legal information, people's participation, local ownership, and oversight to increase public trust in the justice system.
- Improved legal aid systems which empower people and link them to a broad range of services including psychosocial support.
- Legal recognition of customary and informal systems, including paralegals, and linking them with formal systems to ensure rights protection.
- Context-specific online service provision and the digitalization of court systems to enhance access and efficiency.



### **Take a user-centered approach to institutional reform**

The recognition that poorly designed court procedures can alienate people as they try to resolve their justice problems gave rise to a movement for user-friendly court services. Research on procedural justice, looking at people's experiences with dispute resolution, shows that in some instances, justice seekers can value the quality of the legal process more than the outcome of case itself.<sup>6</sup> People's justice journeys, irrespective of whether they occur within formal justice institutions or with informal providers, can be affected by many different factors. Experiences vary based on the duration of the process; the cost of services; personal interactions and respectful treatment during the process; access to information and developing adequate expectations regarding the process and outcome; proximity of courts and facilities, and associated travel time and transportation costs; accommodation of specific needs including related to protection, social and cultural sensitivities, disability, language barriers, etc. Collect data to understand user experiences of trying to seek services using justice institutions and improve those experiences based on evidence of what works. This could include simplifying legal and court procedures, sharing relevant information with users, and guiding them through their legal processes. The justice administrators should be trained to be user-friendly. Justice services should be brought closer to the people by partnering with local justice providers, experimenting with mobile courts and alternate dispute resolution mechanisms, and finding other innovative and equitable ways to reduce time and costs for users including through the use of technology as appropriate.



### **Build trust through participation and civil oversight**

Reform processes require greater stakeholder engagement to ensure implementation at the local level. Activities such as creating opportunities for the meaningful engagement of people to take part in reform initiatives and partnering with communities to run local innovative solutions for access to justice help to contribute to trust-building between justice institutions and their users.



Participation in reform processes can take many forms, including public consultations on the reform proposals at the national level;<sup>7</sup> monitoring the implementation of reforms;<sup>8</sup> instituting complaint mechanisms to strengthen the accountability of justice institutions including the judiciary;<sup>9</sup> creating civilian oversight of policing;<sup>10</sup> court outreach to underserved<sup>11</sup> or conflict-affected communities, and participation through educational institutions.<sup>12</sup>

Users' Committees (CUCs) in Kenya are an example of an inclusive decision-making mechanism. These are decision-making forums consisting of state and non-state actors who are involved in locally-administered justice. Over 200 such local CUCs were introduced in Kenya, focused on particular jurisdictions or special types of justice problems including those related to children, employment, commercial justice, and environmental or land justice.<sup>13</sup>

Ghana provides another good example of a justice initiative that incorporates effective multistakeholder engagement. There, a community-led initiative for women's access to justice was implemented in coordination between the police victims' unit, the national commission for human rights, and the department of social welfare, which has been successful in combating child marriages.<sup>14</sup>

Key stakeholders who should be meaningfully engaged in justice reform include (but are not limited to):

- Civil society justice service providers
- Frontline workers (for example, community paralegals)
- Informal and customary justice providers
- Alternative dispute resolution mediators
- Bar associations, court users' associations<sup>15</sup>
- Victim and survivor associations
- Community leaders
- National human rights commissions
- Ombudspersons
- Other independent oversight and complaint mechanisms



## **Engage at the local level and support local ownership**

People-centered institutional and regulatory reforms should include a focus on service delivery at the local level. Effective justice service delivery needs to foster local ownership and generate innovative solutions, based on an understanding of local social conditions and cultural norms.<sup>16</sup> Focusing on providing front line/community-based services tends to yield more tangible benefits for the communities that the justice sector serves, and at a faster pace of delivery than top-down national reform initiatives. Whether initiated by civil society, judiciary or governments, the effectiveness of a locally-focused approach generally depends on effective collaboration between local stakeholders including civil society, local courts and other state service providers.

A people-centered approach requires shifting of resources towards initiatives that result in closing the justice gap including by ensuring service delivery at the local level. This includes capacity building initiatives at the local level that promote, train and equip local courts and law enforcement to play a role in the provision of a broad set of services, linking and facilitating the work of informal providers, such as CSOs, community-based organizations and customary

justice providers, with other forms of services provided by the state. For example, Community Justice Boards in Zambia provide an innovative channel for the judiciary, customary courts, paralegals, and other relevant stakeholders such as social service providers and health centers to meet on a regular basis and coordinate interventions in their respective communities.<sup>17</sup>

In developing a strategy for institutional reform and service delivery at the local level, long-term outcomes should be considered, including testing the feasibility, replicability, scalability and sustainability of local institutional-community partnership models. One such example is the Local Council Courts model that was initiated using local informal mechanisms in conflict-affected Northern Uganda and was subsequently granted judicial authority. With assistance on training and quality assurance from the Ministry of Local Development and the judiciary, Uganda saw widespread usage of the courts throughout the country, as they proved to expedite dispute resolution while offering low-cost and user-friendly services.<sup>18</sup>

## Examples of People-Centered Institutional Reform:



### Institutional Police Reform: Northern Ireland

The end of conflict in Northern Ireland provided an impetus for reforming the police from being seen as a brutal and partisan force to a service that had the confidence of the community. The Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland was tasked to make recommendations in this regard and their [report](#) (also known as the Patten report) is often cited as a [model for police reform](#) with five benchmarks as guiding principles:

1. Does the proposal promote efficient and effective policing?
2. Will it deliver fair and impartial policing, free from partisan control?
3. Does it provide for accountability, both to the law and to the community?
4. Will it make the police more representative of the society they serve?
5. Does it protect and vindicate the human rights and human dignity of all?

Following the report's recommendations, several institutional reforms were implemented. For example, 2003 Police Act provides an oath of office which includes upholding human rights.<sup>19</sup> Set up in 2000, the [Office of the Police Ombudsman](#) ushered in a new era in dealing with complaints against the police by introducing "a system of independent, impartial, civilian oversight of policing." Similarly, the [Northern Ireland Policing Board](#), established in 2001 is "an independent public body made up of ten political and nine independent members established to ensure for all the people of Northern Ireland an effective, efficient, impartial, representative and accountable police service."



## Sector-Wide Planning for Justice Reform: Uganda

In Uganda in the late 1990s, the Ministry of Finance encouraged all sectors to develop costed reform plans that linked to the country's national poverty reduction plan and were implemented as part of the national medium-term expenditure framework. With Ministry of Finance leadership (and donor-funded technical assistance), all justice sector institutions (including the constitutionally independent judiciary) joined together as the Justice Law and Order Sector (JLOS)<sup>20</sup> and worked to develop a costed, prioritized reform program with the aim of increasing access to justice. At that time priorities were (1) commercial justice and (2) criminal justice. Cross-sector cooperation and coordination including importantly monitoring and evaluation was spearheaded by a new cross-sector institutional architecture at the political and technical levels (which grew out of Uganda's sectoral budgeting arrangements) including the newly created Justice Sector Coordination Office within the Ministry of Justice. Twenty years on, this cross-sectoral reform architecture still provides a key coordinating mechanism for justice sector dialogue and reform in Uganda. Uganda was the first country to adopt such an approach in the justice sector, and was the inspiration for similar arrangements in others, including Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

## Endnotes

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