

JusticeMatters

Building Better Justice for Growth and Stability

On May 8th, the Peace Palace in The Hague set the stage for an urgent and timely conversation convened by HiiL on the need for people-centred justice. We gathered experts and participants from around the world to explore how to consolidate justice systems against a backdrop of reshifting political priorities. The livestreamed event included opening speeches from leaders in the field, panel discussions and Ted talk style presentations aimed at addressing the

growing challenges facing legal systems and exploring practical ways to improve and scale the delivery of justice for people. It was a rich and timely exchange of ideas, taking place at a moment when political momentum for justice is both needed and possible. The City of The Hague and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs were partners in hosting the event. This summary document captures the main insights and takeaways from the day.

"When Justice fails, the world shakes"

- Opening remarks by Udo Jude Ilo, CEO of HiiL



The Problem: An Unresolved Justice Gap

Each year, 1.5 billion people face justice problems, many of which remain unresolved. At the heart of the issue is a system-wide inertia: many justice systems are still operating under frameworks that have barely changed in decades, or even centuries. As a result people remain stuck in their justice challenges because the system is disconnected from their reality. Billions of people, in both conflict-affected and stable countries, lack meaningful access to justice and face problems they cannot resolve, ranging from family issues and land disputes to business and employer conflicts. Justice systems remain often complex and unaffordable. Consequently, many people lose trust in state institutions and may resort to taking matters into their own hands, leading to more conflict and violence. This is the justice gap: the difference between people's justice needs and the availability of fair and effective solutions. Closing this gap means transforming how justice is conceived, delivered, and measured, shifting from institutional procedures to human outcomes.

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"We believe justice is crucial for peace and prosperity – people need access to justice in their daily lives to protect their rights."

- Opening remarks by Lex Gerts, Deputy Director Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid, MFA the Netherlands

The Solution? People-Centred Justice

People affected by unresolved justice problems are looking for ways to move on with their lives, take care of their families, build their businesses, or even simply to feel safe. The answer to how justice systems can help them achieve this is "people-centred justice". This responsive approach begins with a mapping of people's justice needs and seeks to build solutions that are adapted, accessible, and fair. People-centred justice turns the traditional model on its head: instead of building systems around legal institutions, it starts with the real-life experiences and needs of the people those systems are meant to serve.

Why Justice Matters for well-being, stability and economic growth

But why should this transformation matter to sectors outside the legal world?

The importance of justice extends far beyond the legal domain. Having more effective justice systems not only serves people with justice problems but also contributes to well-being, trust (in institutions), security, stability, and even the economy. In a world that is increasingly unrecognisable and rapidly changing, justice provides needed consistency and certainty. When fair justice solutions are guaranteed, trust in institutions and social cohesion increases and conflicts are less likely to arise, creating an enabling environment for economic development and investments.

Stability

Stability and security are fundamental human needs closely tied to governance, development and trust. Effective justice systems—rooted in legal fairness and social equity—can reduce conflict by facilitating access, participation and rights-based approaches to conflict resolution. In fragile areas, solutions should respect local dynamics, with external actors supporting, not imposing. Strong cooperation and leadership are essential in leveraging local justice systems for regional and even global stability.

Migration

Treating underlying causes of instability by ensuring people-centred justice systems also addresses drivers of migration. Undocumented migrants, lacking legal protections, are especially vulnerable—a case study from Niger shows how an anti-smuggling law, meant to protect migrants and comply with international norms, instead criminalized movement and ignored migration's root causes, ultimately undermining government legitimacy and highlighting the need for a people-centred approach that prioritizes understanding over punishment.

Economic growth

When people are not stuck in lingering disputes, they can create value. People-centred justice systems promote economic growth by ensuring equal access to legal protections, reducing conflict, and fostering trust in institutions, which encourages investment, entrepreneurship, and inclusive development. A weak local justice system can drive away valuable businesses and resources. To ensure economic justice and protect rights sustainably, new legal frameworks are needed – especially ones that address the internet, technology and digital assets to ensure fair treatment of ideas and intellectual property across borders.



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"Our Kenyan journey shows that with the courage to reimagine solutions for the justice gap, creativity to innovate, deep community collaboration, justice can shift from being exclusive to being people driven and inclusive."

- Video address by Martha Koome, Chief Justice and President of the Supreme Court, Kenya
(Session 4 *Justice In Action*)



"If we position justice as a developmental imperative I think we can build significantly on the growth that has already been obtained."

- Allyson Maynard Gibson, Former Attorney-General and Minister of Legal Affairs, The Bahamas (Session 5 *Why aren't we scaling?*)

We Know What Works

In response to these challenges, promising solutions have already begun to emerge.

Significant developments like The Hague Declaration (2019) and the OECD Recommendation on Access to Justice and People-Centered Justice Systems (2023) demonstrate a global shift from focusing on rules-driven approach to justice delivery to one focused on providing fair and credible outcomes for justice users, built around their daily needs.. Evidence from implementing this approach points to five critical pillars: high-level political commitment/culture; accessible, appropriate and effective services; supportive infrastructure/ integrated services (like Justice Houses); empowerment of people through legal capability; and robust data and evaluation systems. Effective solutions must be context based. Acknowledging that justice problems are often multi-dimensional means that they require interconnected solutions. Practical experience shows that collaboration across justice actors, reducing procedural delays, and offering community-based services like mediation and restorative justice can build public trust and enhance safety. However, scaling such approaches remains challenging due to fragmented leadership, insufficient data, entrenched bureaucratic cultures, limited resources, regulatory frameworks and the instability of political cycles. Ultimately, the main obstacle is not a lack of knowledge but the difficulty of implementing and scaling proven solutions through coordinated, sustained action.

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Justice in Action: Putting effective solutions into practice

Still, identifying best practices is just the beginning. Knowing what works is one thing. Putting that knowledge into action is another. Through practical examples of how justice initiatives can scale and contribute to lasting, systemic change, the Justice Matters conference showcased how people-centred justice can become particularly effective when grounded in real-world action, driven by data, local legitimacy, and inclusive collaboration. Shifting focus from institutions to individuals empowers communities to resolve everyday legal problems. Accessible mechanisms like alternative or traditional dispute resolution systems are gamechanging and have, through specific initiatives, been scaled to serve many. Technology, including AI tools, can support this process by simplifying access to legal assistance, but it must be complemented by human engagement. In fragile or conflict-affected contexts, meaningful justice reform requires rethinking institutional approaches and must rely on local expertise to design solutions that reflect people's lived realities.

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Scaling justice innovations is notoriously difficult, even when their benefits are clear

The justice sector is deeply fragmented, with government agencies, courts, legal service providers and civil society operating in silos. This fragmentation undermines systemic integration and collective impact. Scaling justice requires not just technical solutions but also strong political will and sustained budget commitments. However, entrenched legal traditions and overloaded, underfunded and culturally conservative bureaucracies create significant resistance to reform. Political turnover frequently disrupts progress, while the persistent lack of reliable, outcome-based data hampers compelling investment cases. International donors and philanthropic actors remain cautious, citing the sector's lack of a coherent narrative, long-term vision and solid funding models. Framing justice merely as a public good, rather than an essential societal service, limits its relevance and stifles innovation in engagement and policy design.



To overcome these barriers, a clear strategy is needed. Justice must be reframed as a foundational service that supports all aspects of social and economic life. This requires engaging institutions beyond the traditional justice sector, including finance, education, health, economic development and informal justice providers. Governments must lead with data-driven arguments showing that justice reform delivers measurable economic and social value, backed by sustainable financing. A scaling strategy should prioritize local ownership, accountability, demonstrating returns on investment, and clarifying national versus international roles. As traditional funding tightens, justice systems must shift toward local solutions and preventive approaches.



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Key Takeaways

1. Continue using data to show what works and why justice matters

Collect and use clear, easy-to-understand information (like success stories, costs, and benefits) to show how justice reforms help people and save money. Use this data to get support and funding, and to improve what's already working.

2. Work together across sectors and with communities

Encourage justice professionals to team up with people in health care, education, finance, and local communities to solve problems together. This includes working with traditional leaders and community groups who help people solve disputes outside of formal courts.

3. Turn good ideas into everyday practice and scale them

Focus on making successful justice programs part of everyday systems. This means getting long-term support from leaders, steady funding, and input from local people. Instead of just talking about what works, put it into action and adjust it to fit each community's needs.

4. Build a wider network of stakeholders

Expand the remit of justice reform partners ensuring that there is a whole government approach to reform. Scaling justice solutions requires every organ of government, especially parliament. Key ministries of government like Ministries of Planning, Land, Interior, Technology amongst others are important to scaling justice. The private sector is equally critical in the process of scaling.

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