



HiiL Knowledge and Research

A people-centred solution to improving access to justice in Imo State, Nigeria 2025



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Executive Summary

In Imo State, Nigeria, a significant justice gap leaves many people without resolution for their most pressing justice problems, which are often related to land, family and money. High costs, a lack of trust, and the intimidating nature of the formal court system often lead people to pursue informal justice mechanisms, which can lack consistency and enforceability. In response, HiiL convened a diverse group of local stakeholders to co-create an innovative solution to these challenges in a data-driven, collaborative process: a Justice Innovation Lab (JIL). The resulting solution of this human-centred design process is a Community Justice Centre (CJC) model.

This case study examines the journey of the CJC from its ambitious initial design to its practical application in a pilot project. Originally envisioned as a government-led initiative with six locations, the model was adapted due to political changes and security challenges, becoming a private sector-led pilot anchored by a multi-stakeholder Steering Committee and operating from a central location in Owerri.

Despite these adaptations, the CJC has proven to be a profoundly people-centred solution. Justice seekers—many of whom had given up on finding help—report feeling welcomed, respected, and empowered. The CJC provides free, accessible services that focus on users' desired outcomes, such as preserving family relationships through mediation rather than pursuing costly and adversarial court battles. Key successes include effective community outreach via a popular radio program and the growing autonomy of the local Steering Committee, which points to the model's sustainability. However, significant challenges remain, primarily the need to develop a sustainable financial model beyond pro-bono work and the necessity of securing government backing to make its resolutions legally binding. The pilot's journey offers valuable lessons on adapting innovative justice solutions to real-world complexities.

Clinic day at the Community Justice Centre in Imo State, Nigeria



1. Introduction

Obinna¹ struggled with a land dispute within his family for quite some time before bringing his case to the Community Justice Centre (CJC) in Owerri, Imo State. Three years ago his family sold some of their land. In the process, one of his brothers who managed the sale gave him less than his rightful share. Obinna first tried to resolve the problem through his traditional ruler, who advised him to settle the matter with his family head. However, the family head ignored his requests. Obinna then turned to a lawyer who sent the family head a letter demanding the money, which was also ignored.

Obinna was advised by some in his network to involve the police, but he chose not to, fearing it would escalate the problem in a direction that neither he, nor his village, would be happy with. In his words, it would become a “continuous quarrel in the village”. He did not want to end up with his family members being arrested, having to pay bail, or risk them potentially trying to have him arrested in turn. He felt this was a village and family problem which would not benefit from such intervention. He also avoided the formal courts because of the high costs.

Obinna had all but given up when he heard about the CJC on the “Justice Voice” radio programme and thought it would be a perfect fit: a low-cost option focused on amicable resolutions that would preserve family relationships. His experience at the CJC was a stark contrast to his justice journey thus far. The staff were accessible and listened carefully to his situation and what he wanted to achieve. He never felt judged for his financial status, as he feels often happens in other justice institutions, sharing:

“The way they receive people here...They didn’t ignore me or say, who is this man? Because I trekked to this place, I don’t have money. If it is in some offices, they will look at...maybe see the type of car you came with before they can attend to you. But they didn’t do that. They attended to me freely as a citizen.”

The CJC’s free services removed the financial barrier and the assigned service provider quickly introduced Obinna to the small-claims court: an affordable formal pathway he was previously unaware of. The CJC bridged the gap between Obinna and the justice system by providing vital information and guiding him through unknown processes, making the system less intimidating and more accessible. Obinna has been satisfied thus far, noting the CJC helped him “follow the right way to pursue this case, because if not that I came here, I may have tried to go to a regular court or go to the police, and they may be harassing me or using any other thing that may not have been all good at the end of the day”. He valued the “legal and in a mature” pathway, which would “not bring bad blood in a relationship”. Reflecting on his experience, Obinna shared, “Community justice centre has also

¹ All names in this report have been changed to protect the privacy of the respondents.

shown me to follow things the way it should be, not to be violent, not to be all those things that will bring trouble at the end of the day. So, I like the way they are carrying out (handling) people's problems, trying to solve them, without much problems."

Obinna's story is, unfortunately, not unique in Nigeria. From 2022-2025 Hiil conducted a three-year longitudinal study on justice needs and satisfaction in Nigeria. Surveying the same group of Nigerians annually for three years, Hiil explored the most common justice problems Nigerians are facing, how these problems evolve over time for Nigerians, and what pathways Nigerians take in order to resolve their problems and find justice. The third and final survey in 2025 found that the path to justice for many Nigerians is often long and complicated, people regularly turn to many sources of help along their journey. People often described trying many different avenues; consulting friends and family within their social networks, reporting to formal institutions such as police and courts, and turning to community mechanisms such as elders and traditional rulers.

Another justice seeker, Amara, came to the CJC seeking to resolve her domestic violence case. Amara was able to escape her abusive husband, however, she was unable to take any of her belongings with her in the process. Her husband is now withholding the items stating that he is not willing to end the marriage, and therefore will not give her the belongings. The problem has been ongoing for months and due to this Amara has not been able to carry on with her business and had to leave the community all together.

To resolve the problem, Amara first turned to her kinsmen, family and village who went to reason with the husband. The husband was not willing to speak to any of the parties and chased them away with a knife. The family and village attempted one more time to help Amara get her belongings, however, they were not willing to go so far as to break tradition. Traditionally, in order to end a marriage and move out of the marital home with your belongings, the husband needs to formally bring the wife back to her parents with a gift of wine. When the husband refused to do this and threatened those trying to help Amara, the community felt they could not go any further. They advised her to turn to the police if she wanted to get her belongings without going through the customary divorce proceeding. Amara did not want to take her matter to the police and therefore did not know what else to do to resolve the problem.

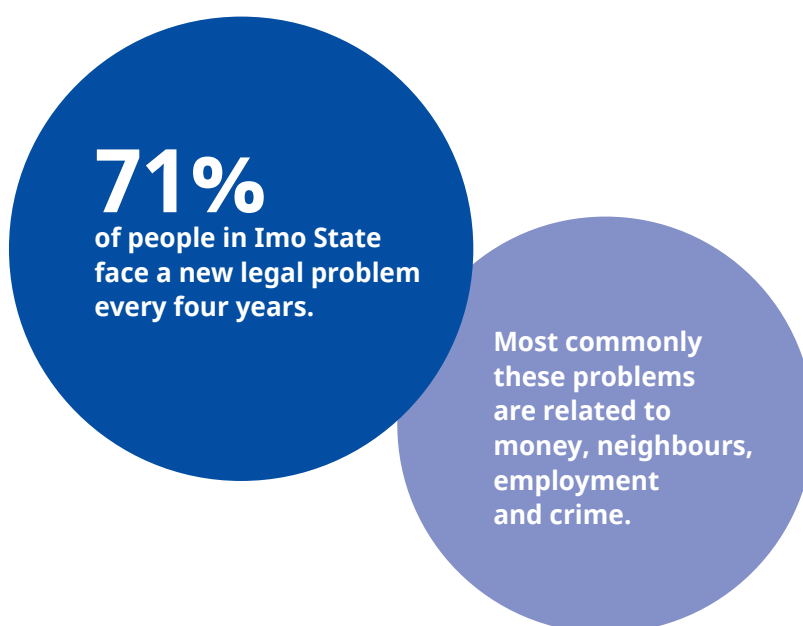
She had all but abandoned the problem until she heard about the CJC on the radio. Given that the centre specifically addresses marriage problems she thought it would be worth finding out if they could help her case, thinking they might be able to get her property back without having to follow traditional protocols or involve the police. Amara shared, "one thing I believe from here is that I think this place will be easier for me to solve the problem."

While Amara's case is still at the beginning stages with the CJC, she already reports a very positive experience. She received attention right away from the staff, "they gave me attention, and they talked to me in a polite manner...They treated me like a sister." She feels hope because someone is finally looking into the matter and something is actually being done.

1.1 The justice gap in Imo State

Domestic violence is one of the most prevalent justice problems in Nigeria. In 2023, HiIL's Justice Needs and Satisfaction survey² found that 23% of people who experienced at least one justice problem, experienced domestic violence. This was the second most commonly faced problem, after neighbour problems. Domestic violence most often takes the form of emotional or psychological abuse, physical violence and economic deprivation. People often report experiencing negative consequences as a result of their domestic violence problems, including loss of time, financial loss and stress-related illnesses. People with domestic violence problems often turn to their inner circle to help resolve their problem, just as Amara did, with 51% of those who take action turning to a family member and 28% turning to a friend. Police, religious leaders, colleagues, and community leaders are also common sources of support outside the inner circle. On the other hand, formal legal channels such as lawyers and the court system are rarely utilised.

The challenge of the justice gap equally applies in Imo State: the 2018 JNS study found that 71% of people in Imo State face a new legal problem every four years. Most commonly these problems are related to money, neighbours, employment and crime. According to the JNS, only 64% of people in Imo State who experience legal problems report their problem as completely or partially resolved, leaving many without a resolution. People mainly seek information and advice for their problems through their personal network, with less than 20% of the people seeking help by going to the formal justice providers. Similar statistics apply to taking action for resolution: 40% take action through their personal network while 24% take self-actions. Courts, lawyers and the police are contacted in only 18% of the cases. These numbers reveal a great variety of justice journeys and pathways, many of which the justice system is not set up to support. In order to improve access to justice, it is important to consider the most common pathways people are taking and design solutions that support the multifaceted reality of people's justice needs.



² All of the Justice Needs and Satisfaction surveys HiIL has conducted in Nigeria can be found here: <https://www.hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-in-nigeria/>.

Challenges in the formal justice system

In 2022, HiiL conducted a complementary Political Economy Analysis (PEA) to the 2018 JNS survey to obtain a fuller picture of the dynamics in Imo State. This mixed methods study of quantitative and qualitative methods revealed that the socio-economic variables that hinder access to justice in Imo State include lack of awareness about rights and legal knowledge, physical insecurity, gender-bias and stereotypes preventing women from reporting and cultural practices and fear of stigmatisation preventing people from going to court.

The current formal justice system lacks capacity to meet the significant justice gap in Imo State. In Imo State, the critical factors affecting access to justice include (but are not limited to):

- Lack of independence of the Judiciary (due to internal or external interference);
- lack of trust in the justice system;
- understaffing and lack of funding;
- delays in justice delivery;
- high costs related to hiring a lawyer and using court services, causing imbalance in access to justice;
- the lack of geographical proximity to the courts;
- evidences of police extortion and corruption which hinder access to justice; and
- corruption.

There is a sentiment in Imo State that court cases can be influenced by personal connections and bribery, and litigation comes with a high cost. Another significant issue in accessing justice at the community level is the distance between various courts and the communities as residents have to travel many kilometres to access courts and other justice providers. Additionally, the issues of insecurity have impacted the justice delivery process in the state, as judges and lawyers often miss court proceedings due to uncertainty over their physical security.

Challenges in the informal justice system

The informal justice system in Imo State exists side-by-side with the formal justice system. This informal system includes: the family, kindred, clan, Umuada, Umunna, Ama-ala (in conjunction with the entire traditional ruling council), town unions and the church who administers justice to aggrieved persons. With this broad range of actors in the informal justice system, it might be expected that every person would have reasonable access to justice. However, the reality is that access to justice has remained low, similar to the rest of Nigeria.

The challenges related to informal system include:

- The requirement to provide some traditional items, and in some cases, money;
- corruption;
- illiteracy;
- many different and conflicting rules and responses, which sometimes cause discrepancies in justice delivery³;
- inconsistency with basic human rights principles or decisions that perpetuate the subordination of women or the exploitation of children⁴;
- lack of documentation of decisions; and
- lack of enforceability of decisions.

According to the same research, the majority of people in Imo State agree that a new justice system – different from the current formal and informal systems – is needed to increase access to justice at the community level. Strengthening both systems and creating synergy can provide the solutions people need. This cooperation between the systems already exists in Imo State and strengthening this further can help to streamline people's justice journeys. As UNDP states: "... in many contexts, the best access to justice and protection of human rights will be afforded when the different systems and mechanisms, formal and informal, are allowed (a) to exchange with and learn from one another, (b) to cooperate with one another, (c) to determine the best division of labour, guided by user preferences as well as state policy imperatives, and (d) to develop in order to meet new challenges."⁵

3 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and UN Women. (2012). Informal Justice Systems: Charting a Course for Human Rights-Based Engagement. Danish Institute for Human Rights. <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Informal-Justice-Systems-Charting-a-Course-for-Human-Rights-Based-Engagement.pdf>

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

2. Case study methodology

This case study was conducted primarily using in-depth qualitative interviews and desk research. Fourteen qualitative interviews were conducted with stakeholders from Imo State, Nigeria, including public officials, traditional rulers, experts, justice service providers and justice users themselves. These participants have been involved with different elements of the project, including:

- Five justice service providers currently working at the CJC.
- Six members of the CJC's Steering Committee, four of whom were personally involved in the Justice Innovation Lab where the design for the CJC was developed.
- Three justice seekers who have brought their cases to the CJC.

Desk research included analysing relevant project documentation, such as materials from the Justice Innovation Lab, the CJC set-up and design proposal and current operational reports.

A moment from the Community Justice Centre outreach session at a local school in Imo State



3. Co-creating a people-centred solution

The CJC emerged from a series of activities HiiL carried out in Nigeria in order to develop a data-based evidence-driven solution which directly addresses the most pressing needs of people in Imo State. The process began with a Justice Needs and Satisfaction survey conducted in 2018 across Nigeria, including in Imo State. This survey provided the data-foundation for the following activities, providing insights into people's most pressing justice problems, typical justice journeys, resolution rates, common sources of help and various pain points within the justice system.

Following the 2018 JNS survey, HiiL conducted a Justice Transformation Lab (JTL) in Imo State in September 2020. This series of stakeholder dialogues was convened by the Imo State Attorney General and Commissioner of Justice, C.O.C. Akaolisa. The JTL brought together thirty justice leaders to discuss how to design a people-centred justice system in Imo State. The leaders took steps towards defining goals, targets and pathways towards making this a reality. In the strategy developed during the JTL, eight goals for Imo State were formulated (see next page).

The stakeholder group also developed an actionable roadmap complete with three pathways which would help them to achieve these ambitious goals. The pathways take into account potential obstacles, current patterns and challenges, what works and potential enablers. The three pathways are:

1. Imo people will have alternative dispute resolution (ADR) as the first port of call in seeking justice. "Imo Justice Movement" will serve as the rallying cry for the platform.
2. Imo people will benefit from better access to court proceedings, assisted by digitisation including virtual proceedings.
3. Imo people will be made aware of improvements to justice delivery and through grassroots awareness-raising, updated information on rights, relevant laws that affect the five justice needs, and the recorded progress of innovations will be shared. Implementation will rely heavily on the substantive political infrastructure in place.

After setting goals and developing initial pathways, HiiL initiated a Justice Innovation Lab in Imo State to develop pragmatic solutions which would work towards achieving these strategic goals.

Our Justice Transformational Goals

The stakeholders identified six goals that are each related to improved resolution or prevention of a specific category of justice problems:



3.1 The Justice Innovation Lab

A Justice Innovation Lab (JIL) is a series of multi-stakeholder design sessions that focus on one prevalent justice issue, which has emerged from data and has political support. Justice stakeholders such as judicial officers, local leaders, other governmental institutions, labour and community organisations, local CSOs, justice leaders and citizens work together to develop an innovative and scalable solution that is financially and operationally feasible. Through a series of design thinking workshops the stakeholders build upon data, evidence-based research, experiential knowledge and specifically designed tools to co-create a focused and financially sustainable solution.

The JIL was held in Owerri, Imo State from September 2022 to February 2023, whereby a group of thirty key stakeholders convened to address the following design challenge:

How can we improve access to justice at the local level in Imo State?

This design question was selected in order to begin operationalising the first pathway: *Imo people will have alternative dispute resolution (ADR) as the first port of call in seeking justice. "Imo Justice Movement" will serve as the rallying cry for the platform.* Stakeholders felt that local level access to justice goes hand in hand with the role of ADR in communities and together these would be the key to addressing the larger strategic goals.

The JIL followed a design thinking approach where the participants collectively went through the following steps:

1. understanding the problem;
2. developing solutions for an ideal justice journey;
3. integrating them into one feasible concept (and testing it);
4. determining the next steps towards implementation.

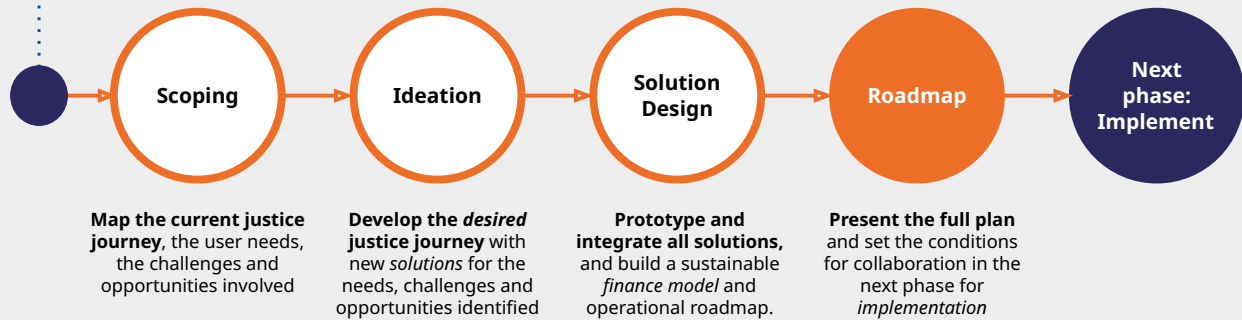
The stakeholders who participated in the lab represented a wide variety of sectors, including:

- Ministry of Justice
- Judiciary
- Traditional rulers
- Town union
- Civil society organisations
- Community advocates
- Tech innovators
- Private practitioners
- Potential Investors
- Practicing justices of peace in Imo State

The Justice Innovation Lab process

The goal is to build an innovative, financially feasible, implementation plan to scale access to justice at the community level across Imo State, connected to the formal justice system.

Justice Transformational Lab



In the case of the Imo State JIL, the stakeholders decided in advance to focus on a community based justice solution which would act as a “one-stop shop”, providing a variety of services for justice seekers. Therefore, the JIL’s design questions were as follows:

- Service model: How might we improve the effectiveness of community justice centres?
- Standardisation and new tools: How might we support community justice centres with standardisation and tools?
- Integration with the formal justice system: How might we connect community justice centres with the formal justice system?
- Enabling environment: How might we develop the enabling environment for community justice centres?
- Financial model: How might we make the services provided by community justice centres affordable and sustainable?
- Operational model: How might we build community justice centres into a scalable operation?
- Marketing model: How might we market the community justice centre’s delivery model?

3.2 The JIL: A collaborative learning experience

The four JIL participants interviewed for this case study had very positive feedback and experiences. Participants, many of whom are now members of the Steering Committee, shared the following reflections:

“It was a departure from the usual in a positive kind of way. So, it builds a lot of expectation, a lot of excitement. A lot of people across sectors were eager to just start going. You could see it from all participants. It was a different approach. It was innovative, not just in name, but in delivery.”

“It got us to do some inward, deep thinking. We did some real deep dives. It wasn't on the surface. You needed to think it through, you needed to – it got me – often, always as a frontline responder, going back to the field and rethinking every step I take and what happens and what's at the root of it. And I think it also did that for every sector of the cluster. It did that for all of us. So it was new. It was refreshingly that, and a departure from the normal convenings we usually used to have. So it did that. And beyond and above that, it transmitted or translated a sense of ownership of the process. It gave responsibility to us.”

“The advantage [of the JIL] is that we brought people from different institutions. We have the kind of cluster of ideas, and then we married those ideas together, and that, to a large extent, represents what the justice need in Imo State is. And the people too represented all the zones”

“You are allowed to air your opinion, no one shushes you, no one judges you based on what you say. You give your advice. We even pilot together, we do have breakout sessions, kind of group sessions where we discuss between ourselves, then we do presentations. It's not like they are coming here to teach us, we are coming here to brainstorm. We call it a brainstorming session. After a few kinds of discussion, what it is about, we brainstorm. Even the radio program, we designed it, the day it was designed, I was there. So we designed it, we gave it a name, we decided on how the topics are going to unfold, who's going to be there.”

Another Steering Committee member – who was not involved in the JIL herself but her organisation participated and she was kept updated on the process – reflected that the JIL process was extremely collaborative, which is vital to the success of the Community Justice Centre (CJC). She shared,

“CJC is [...] is a variety of stakeholders. And that is the best that was done because you cannot set up the CJC outside the major stakeholders. The police, the Ministry of Justice, the legal aid, the religious organization, the traditional leaders, and the CSOs. This is like, all these stakeholders came together and had a collaboration that gave birth to the CJC. And the CJC could not have existed independently of these major stakeholders.”

When asked whether they felt the JIL itself was people-centred, participants agreed that, in their eyes, the process was people-centred. A Steering Committee member gave an example of how different populations were included and considered in the design of the CJC, "The inferences were drawn from persons on the ground, living in the state, who come from the different populaces...[including] someone representing the Muslim Hausa community."

Repeatedly, JIL participants shared that they learned a lot from the process itself, gaining skills and knowledge that they then applied in their own justice work. While capacity building for justice stakeholders is not the goal of the JIL process, it is often a positive byproduct. Some of the learnings that participants shared include:

“I learned to treat every individual case as it is, individual and different. I've learned more to practicalize putting the survivor first. I've learned to listen to the things that are not being said to me. I've learned to consciously study and watch people's eyes and their body mechanisms when they are talking to me. I've learned to watch out for those things they are not saying.”

“Since HiiL, I've come to realize that we needed a different approach. So what do we do now differently? [...] We can now talk to [the justice seeker] about the next process. If they go to court and it's not working, okay, we now explore. I found out, for instance, as a civil society practitioner, there are avenues open to me more than to others. I can write, the courts. I can engage the judiciary, I can ask questions, what's happening, I can seek accelerated hearing. I can do a lot of things and jiggle the system to work. So I became more proactive, and we engage them in all of these areas. I would say it's all thanks to our exposure to the HiiL lab.”

“I've come to understand that for some people, justice is not about going to court. They don't want to go to court, especially the stereotyping stuff that goes on in the State. They don't want to go to court. They just want you to call this person out, tell the person that whatever he's doing is wrong, or mediate, bring in another method of resolution. For some people, justice is about taking it to court. Let's just reach court. [...] I came to understand that you need to first listen to the victim and know what justice means to that person, the parties involved.”

Overall, stakeholders confirmed the JIL to be a collaborative, people-centred process which had positive side effects on their lives and work, building capacity for people-centred justice programming in key justice stakeholders, practitioners and leaders.

Clinic day at the Community Justice Centre in Imo State, Nigeria



4. The design vs. the pilot: adapting to reality

The resulting designed solution from the JIL is the Community Justice Centre (CJC). The purpose of the CJC is to bridge the justice gap in Imo State by empowering people to prevent or resolve their most common justice problems at an accessible location within their communities. The CJC serves as the first point of contact for those in Imo State seeking to prevent or resolve their justice problems, providing access to high-quality, affordable information and advice, mediation and referral services. In addition to providing direct services and referrals, the CJC officers would work closely with local leadership to raise awareness about its existence and bring CJC services down to the most local levels. The CJC does not act as a competing or parallel service to existing formal and informal justice services, instead, the aim is for it to be integrated into the existing justice chain. Providing a first point of contact, local access to justice and referring to other better-equipped entities where necessary. The innovative delivery model is designed to work in unison with existing formal and informal justice institutions to improve their accessibility for justice users, enhance the quality of their justice delivery and reduce their existing workloads.

4.1 The CJC in theory: the intended model

The CJC was intended to operate with a public-private partnership model, with ultimate ownership lying with the Imo State Ministry of Justice. The designed model could be implemented at the state government level through a dedicated department or bureau. If needed, the design allowed for the government to commission a non-profit organisation to manage operations.

Under the designed model, a person facing a justice problem in Imo State would directly approach the CJC situated in their Local Government Development Center as the first step in their justice journey. They would be received by CJC staff who would listen to their problem, provide preliminary advice and front-line support (as needed) and enable them to access the relevant CJC services. Those seeking tailored information and (step by step) self-help advice to prevent and resolve justice problems would be guided to use the information platform. In case referrals are needed, a referral platform would be available to direct users to existing (legal and non-legal) justice providers and support services that are applicable to their case. Referrals for legal representation, especially to the customary courts, would go through a Register of Lawyers constituted of lawyers accredited by the Nigerian Bar Association and CJC. The accredited lawyers would provide their services to CJC users at subsidised fees determined by the CJC. An outcomes-based case-management system would be used to gather information, document evidence, and monitor cases brought before the CJC and facilitate the exchange of information between the CJC and the formal justice system, especially the customary courts.

In addition to the main location, the CJC would have Ward Liaison Officers (WLOs) operate “satellite offices” in each of the electoral ward, providing access to CJC services to all people, regardless of their geographic location. The WLOs would work alongside the traditional ruler and other local leadership structures in the communities, supporting them with their work resolving disputes. This would be done with the use of evidence-based guidelines, which provide best-practice recommendations on dispute resolution and promote a uniform way of working. All disputes that cannot be resolved at the community level would be referred to a CJC panel, made up of Ward Liaison Officers and representatives from the local government (Autonomous Community President General, Eze-in-Council, etc.). Any matters the panel is not able to resolve would then be referred to the relevant customary or magistrate courts. Special police desks or focal points would be established at the ward level to provide urgent action and fast referrals for criminal and urgent cases.

In order to extend outreach across Imo state (particularly in rural areas), the CJC would also be promoted through a radio programme. This programme would promote the CJC and its services, as well as providing information and advice on the most common pressing justice issues in the state.

All of this work would be overseen by a Steering Committee which would provide policies, long term planning, handle staffing, and take decisions where needed. The Steering Committee would be made up of representatives from local government, traditional rulers, lawyers and other justice practitioners, religious organisations, civil society organisations, among other key sectors.



4.2 The CJC in practice: the pilot application

The first phase of the pilot project operated from April - July 2025. This is followed by a second phase which began in September 2025 and running for 12 months.

The earlier section describes the designed operationalisation for the CJC, however, in practice when implementing the pilot project some changes had to be made due to a variety of factors. Firstly, the CJC was intended to be run in partnership with the Imo State local government, with the government providing 53 community development centres to house the CJC across the state. Unfortunately, due to the slower timeline local elections took place before we were able to kick off the pilot and the new government was not invested in the project in the same way. At this point, the project pivoted to being a private partnership with the Nkemjika Development Foundation, a local civil society organisation in Imo State. During the pilot phases, HiiL and Nkemjika Development Foundation oversee the overall coordination and project management. Additionally, the Steering Committee has taken on a greater role, serving in a leadership capacity: making operational decisions, advising on cases and supporting staff. Interviewees shared the following reflections on the role of the Steering Committee during the pilot:

“The steering committee is the leadership of the CJC and they govern. When we started, we had instances at the CJC where we will take one step and the Steering Committee will say no, they give us guidance. It’s a very wonderful thing.”

“We oversee the activities of the CJC proper, as they are doing. And on a monthly basis we sit and make decisions. We ask them how they are coping, what the issues are. We look at the way forward on those issues, and not just waiting for a monthly basis, we’re also on a weekly basis. I [encourage] members of the steering committee to attend the clinic. By doing so, we are also participating in what the CJC is doing.”

“We, the Steering Committee and the Nkemjika Foundation, we work hand in hand. We set up meetings. We have various discussions and whenever they have challenges, they reach out to the Steering Committee.”

“I think the Steering Committee, we are the major decision-makers. We take the major decisions and then the Nkemjika Foundation now executes the decisions we take. And then whenever they encounter challenges, whenever they hit a roadblock, they refer to the Steering Committee because we direct them on what to do.”

Furthermore, rather than piloting the CJC in 53 community locations, the clinic is only operating in one location, in Owerri, the capital of Imo State. This was due to the loss of the physical spaces the government had originally offered and due to security reasons. Parts of Imo State are currently ungoverned, making it impractical and potentially dangerous to find non-government run sites to set up operations.

In practice, a person experiencing a justice problem today can directly approach the CJC by phone, in-person on weekly clinic days, or via a Ward Liaison Officer in their community. They are received by a staff member who takes down their problem in the case management system and provides preliminary advice and support. The staff member then takes the case to the CJC’s Legal Coordinator and Community Justice Representatives to determine the first steps. It was not initially

planned for the CJC to have a Legal Coordinator in addition to the manager, however, after starting operations the team quickly realised this is a necessary role. They realised that they needed someone with a law degree who could make preliminary decisions on whether or not the problem is a justice problem and whether it needs to be referred to the formal system directly or can be handled within the CJC.

The role of the Ward Liaison Officers also changed from the initial design, mainly due to no longer working with the government to have access to the community development centres, as mentioned above. Without access to these pre-existing locations, it was not feasible to find physical spaces in 53 communities, as well as hire and train officers in every community under the timeline and budget constraints. Unfortunately, due to the same constraints, it was also not possible to set up the CJC panels in the communities. Therefore, the clinic hired a select few Ward Liaison Officers who travel to the communities and conduct outreach and sensitisation for the centre. The officers meet with traditional rulers; go into market places to speak with people about the centre and hand out flyers; and connect with churches to share information about the CJC with members. As one officer so clearly stated, “We let them know when they can bring their matter here and it will receive the attention it deserves.” Throughout this outreach the officers are equipped with tablets connected to the case management system so that they can conduct intakes with justice seekers in the communities.

After a client has their initial intake (whether in person at the clinic, with the Ward Liaison Officer, or over the phone), the CJC staff review the case and determine the next steps. A psychologist was added to the team during the pilot because “a lot of people also need psychological conversations first, counseling first, before they actually even determine what is the justice need.”

That may be informing the person that their case is outside of the clinic’s scope of land and family problems, or referring them to a more appropriate service, per one CJC service provider, “If it's something that's not within our jurisdiction, we can refer. We have other NGOs that we partner with here in Imo State, that we refer cases to.” The CJC has a referral database of organisations that they can refer cases to, such as the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Nigeria. They also have lawyers in the referral database, however, these referrals have proven challenging because lawyers have a limited number of pro bono cases they are willing to take on.

Most often, after an intake the staff begins collecting information and the person is asked to return on a clinic day when lawyers, mediators, social workers, and other service providers are present and able to start working on the case.

“[We] listen to their story. And most times, we document and require further information, fact finding, because we don't just rely on what the complainant or justice seeker tells us at the CJC. We try to balance to see if they are actually saying the truth, and to know the necessary steps to take.”

– CJC service provider

The pathway of each case is different depending on the nature of the case and the person's desires. Typically, the service provider will collect all of the information about the case and then might provide the person with tailored information and step-by-step advice. Alternatively, the service provider may collect the contact information for the other party in order to hear and assess both sides fairly. From here they might begin a mediation process between the parties, or refer them to other more applicable existing (legal and non-legal) justice providers and support services. If the case calls for it, the person will be assigned a lawyer and supported in court. However, the staff tries to avoid this if possible, prioritising ADR mechanisms to address justice needs and avoid putting extra burdens on the justice seeker such as court fees and lengthy complicated processes. One CJC service provider shared an example where court was necessary given the existing case and the financial status of the client,

“Obviously mediation is the key. But then sometimes litigation is unavoidable...The other day we had a [justice] seeker come to the centre hoping to get justice. It was an indigent person. She already has a land matter case already in court, where she is not a plea man or the plea team, rather the defendant looking for a difference. It is a helping hand to defend her in court. That's where we are meeting her already, so that's where they refer to lawyers who can offer pro bono services.”

That said, mediation is the most common pathway thus far, the legal coordinator explained, “We have professional mediators. Most of the cases they handle...If it is a matter we can mediate, we invite the parties involved”. When asked what kinds of cases are mediated he shared:

“Like matrimonial disputes where there is no violence, physical violence, and maybe they are just having a misunderstanding. We can mediate on the matter and invite the parties and give them the necessary advice. But whereby the marriage is – there is violence, we don't advise the parties to go on living together. We also seek the consent of the justice seeker, we ask them ‘what do you want?...If they say they don't want the marriage to continue, the last option is for us to go to court, then we go to court. If the person says she wants the marriage to continue, we can mediate upon the matter and bring the two of them together and see how we can solve their issues.”

Beyond the operations of the centre itself, the radio programme has gone forward as intended, with the “Justice Voices” programme running multiple times each week. In addition to providing legal information and raising awareness, experts have been joining the programme to take calls from listeners, providing preliminary advice and directing people to the CJC. The effectiveness of this approach is clear, as all three justice seekers interviewed for this case study first heard about the CJC through this programme.

5. What makes the Community Justice Centre people-centred?

The ultimate measure of a people-centred justice service lies in the experiences of the people who access it. While the CJC pilot was adapted from its original design, its core mission remained unchanged: to provide justice solutions that are built around the needs of the community. The pilot's impact, as shared by CJC staff, Steering Committee members, and justice seekers, demonstrates that the CJC is profoundly people-centred. This was nicely summed up by one of the CJC service providers:

“The CJC is different because of the desire to make justice affordable. Accessible and affordable to the poorest person in Nigeria, especially in Imo state...So that makes the CJC a hero. This can distinguish [it] from other organisations by reason of the value for justice...We educate and enlighten people on their rights and the way forward...They've contributed a lot to the well being and justice of the people in the state.”

This people-centred nature is evident in its co-creative design, its operational approach and its tangible impact on users' lives.

Clinic day at the Community Justice Centre in Imo State, Nigeria



5.1 Designed by and for the community

The CJC is not a top-down solution or one that centres institutions over people. Instead, the CJC was designed from the ground up by the people it serves. The multi-stakeholder design process in the Justice Innovation Lab, which included a diverse group of local leaders and practitioners, ensured the solution was created from their lived realities. By basing the design process on people-centred data about justice needs and experiences, and empowering stakeholders to build the solution themselves, the CJC's people-centred nature was embedded in the design from the start.

5.2 Accessible, affordable and approachable

For justice to be people-centred, it must first be reachable. In Nigeria, people often do not seek help to resolve their justice problems because seeking justice is seen as too expensive, too slow, or they do not know how to use or access justice services.⁶ The CJC addresses the primary barriers of cost and complexity head-on. By providing free services, it opens its doors to those who may not have accessed justice otherwise.

For example, a justice seeker, Adaeze, was sold land which the seller had already sold to another party. She planted cassava on the land and intended to earn a living farming the land. Instead, her cassava plants were dug up and she was refused access to the land. Because she lost her source of income on top of the money spent purchasing the land, Adaeze had no funds to seek justice. She explained, "due to lack of money, I could not speak up, I could not seek justice because I cannot fight due to lack of finance. So, I kept quiet until I heard about the CJC. I said, okay, this is the right time for me to speak up."

Justice seekers shared that they had avoided formal courts due to the high costs involved, and even when accessing community justice mechanisms such as village courts or traditional rulers, there were still costs. Multiple justice seekers found the CJC's free services to be crucial to pursuing, and not abandoning, their cases. This removal of financial barriers is the CJC's most tangible and immediate benefit, opening the door to justice for those who were previously excluded.

Beyond being affordable, the centre is designed to be approachable. Users consistently reported a welcoming experience that stands in stark contrast to the reportedly intimidating nature of other justice institutions. One justice seeker, Amara, reflected on her first visit: "The first time I came here, they attended to me very well. There was no problem. I was welcomed". This positive impression was echoed by Adaeze, who shared: "It was very easy, at least they welcomed me and they gave me the assurance that I will get justice".

This reception is intentionally dignified. The respectful treatment described by Obinna in the introduction – where he was not judged for his financial status – fosters an environment of trust. Adaeze described the reception as "cordial" and "friendly," noting that the staff gave her their full attention and the "assurance that I will get justice".

⁶ Hiil, 2025 Justice Needs and Satisfaction in Nigeria, <https://www.hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-in-nigeria/>.

5.3 Focus on user's desired outcomes

The CJC prioritises what justice actually means to the individual, going beyond traditional and institutional definitions. This allows the CJC to provide outcomes which the justice system often cannot. For some, justice isn't about going to court; it's about mediation or simply being heard and having their feelings validated. For others, the primary goal might be the preservation of family and community relationships. Obinna, for example, valued that the CJC provided a "legal and in a mature" pathway that would "not bring bad blood in a relationship" with his family members. He felt that going to the police would have escalated the conflict, harming the relationship in an irreparable way.

The centre's emphasis on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) provides a mechanism for resolving conflicts while maintaining communal peace, an outcome often more valuable to users than a legal victory. This approach, however, requires a shift in mindset for CJC service providers. As one provider explained, "I came to understand that you need to first listen to the victim and know what justice means to that person, the parties involved".

The CJC also offers a crucial bridge between informal and formal justice systems. While community justice can be invaluable, it has its gaps. Justice seeker Obinna highlighted such gaps: "The problem with some people is that anything settled in the village, they may not abide by it because they know everybody there. Because most of the time, [the other party] has had many cases in the palace of the traditional ruler and most of the time when the judgement is given, he will not abide by it because of familiarity and brotherhood. That is why I came to [the CJC], because anything the court says, he can't go against it. It will be binding on him." She was looking for a pathway which could provide the outcomes she needed and that those outcomes would be respected by the other party.

5.4 Empowerment through information and guidance

The CJC's people-centred approach has a tangible and transformative impact on those who use the service, primarily by restoring their sense of agency and hope.

For individuals who felt lost or ignored by the system, the CJC is empowering. For Adaeze, who had "kept quiet" for years, learning about the CJC gave her the confidence to finally "speak up". For Amara, whose case had been stagnant for months, the simple fact that "something is actually being done" brought a renewed sense of hope. This shift creates a powerful belief in the possibility of resolution, best captured by Obinna's simple and powerful statement: "They [the CJC] will help you, because what they stand for is getting justice for people".

This empowerment also comes through knowledge and guidance. The CJC acts as a vital bridge, guiding users through intimidating processes. The service providers at the clinic will explain the different formal and informal options available to the person in order to resolve their problem. For example, the clinic introduced Obinna to the small-claims court: an affordable, formal pathway he was previously unaware of. This pathway was much more affordable and accessible for this justice seeker and gave him the opportunity to reach the outcome he sought in the way

that he needed. It actually aligns perfectly with how Uche himself defined the concept of people-centred justice:

“You have my interest at heart. It's going to be fast; you are going to be serious about it. You're going to have my interest at heart to get justice for me, maybe at a low cost or free”.

The clinic also provides legal advice and counselling that can help to resolve people's problems before they need to escalate to the formal system. For example, one service provider at the clinic shared examples counselling a man on the proper way to handle a customary divorce and advising another on the legal realities of contesting his living father's will, resolving both issues through information alone.

5.5 Institutional benefits: Strengthening the broader justice system

Beyond the direct impact on individual users, the CJC model offers institutional benefits that have the potential to support broader justice system change within Imo State. By providing an effective and accessible alternative to formal litigation, the CJC helps to alleviate pressure on the overburdened court system, promotes the professionalisation of ADR, and serves as a bridge between formal and informal justice.

A primary institutional benefit is the reduction of the court's workload. Steering Committee members consistently noted that courts in Nigeria have “piles of cases to hear and determine”, leading to constant adjournments that lengthen the process. By focusing on resolving disputes through ADR mechanisms before they reach the court system, the CJC can help to prevent case backlog and allow the formal courts to dedicate their limited resources to more complex justice matters.

Furthermore, the CJC is not just hiring justice professionals to provide typical legal aid services. Instead, the centre is working to standardise and professionalise the use of ADR. While informal dispute resolution exists at the community level in Nigeria, it can lack structure and consistency. The CJC addresses this by using an evidence-based, best practices approach to tackling justice problems with the use of family and land justice guidelines. Additionally, the Steering Committee members and service providers received certified mediation training, creating a pool of qualified mediators and ensuring a higher quality of service for justice seekers. These efforts help to build the legitimacy of ADR as a reliable and effective alternative to the courts. One Steering Committee member shared after the JIL process that he realised that even in the informal system, “you need to understand that there is a process to everything,” so that decisions can be respected and binding.

The CJC sits in the middle of the formal and informal systems, offering pathways within each which are tailored, well documented and based on best practices. Steering Committee members shared that this integration, this bridge role, benefits institutions and is key to the long term success of the CJC. The goal of the CJC is not to operate in isolation, but to create a system where resolutions achieved at the CJC through ADR mechanisms can be formally validated by the courts, making decisions binding and preventing disputes from resurfacing in the future. This creates a simpler integrated justice journey for users, allowing them to access the best justice service for their problem and the outcomes they seek.

6. Lessons learned and the path forward

6.1 Key challenges encountered

The CJC pilot has encountered its challenges, ranging from financial viability to operational logistics and the human toll of delivering justice services. However, these challenges have generated lessons that are essential for the model's future scaling and sustainability.

The most significant obstacle to the CJC model is financial sustainability. The pilot has operated on a largely pro-bono basis, which, while making services accessible, is unsustainable. The strain of this model is particularly evident for justice service providers. Mediators and counselors, who are essential to the CJC's work, volunteer their time without compensation, something they cannot do indefinitely. Stakeholders across the pilot project, from service providers to the Steering Committee, agree that funding and more particularly, staff compensation, is a primary challenge. It has also already become clear that an entirely free model is not possible unless there is budget for external costs, such as court fees. Currently justice seekers whose cases must go to court are asked to pay the court fees. This is a departure from the intended free model and can act as a barrier for low-income justice seekers. Additionally, the free service model has led to people bringing cases which they have already tried to resolve via many different pathways and know it requires a court process. They think that because the CJC is free it will also cover their court fees. This creates a central conflict where the promise of free services draws in users but also creates unsustainable operational pressures. The pilot team has been working to come up with solutions to these challenges in order to keep the services accessible, but not be overrun with cases that can only go to court. New financing approaches will be tested during the second phase of the pilot project.

Aside from the financial challenges, the pilot has also faced challenges with the geographic and physical accessibility. While outreach efforts have been successful in bringing clients to the CJC, the single location in Owerri has emerged as a significant barrier for people in rural communities. This was a consistent point of feedback from staff and users alike. As one CJC Ward Liaison Officer explained:

“We made a report because we are not satisfied with our limitation to the Owerri Federal constituency, but they keep telling us it is a pilot project. This place is where the elites live. This centre, to me, is meant for those in the communities... Limiting us to [this Owerri] local government is not helping matters to us and is contributing to these low intakes we have.”

This sentiment was echoed by justice seeker, Amara, who advised, “I would give them [the CJC] advice to improve more and make sure that justice reaches even the people in the village”. Justice seekers also shared that they have to pay transportation costs from their communities to the centre every time they need to come. While those interviewed were understanding and accepting of this due to the free services they received, this could pose a barrier to the most vulnerable. Compounding this is the physical inaccessibility of the current office space, which lacks ramps for persons with disabilities.

Finally, the pilot has revealed some of the human costs of delivering justice services. A recurring theme that came up when speaking to Steering Committee members as well as service providers is the need for training in ADR and people-centred methodologies, particularly for legal professionals accustomed to the formal system. This feedback was quickly incorporated into the pilot phase, with all staff now having received certified ADR mediation training. Beyond these technical skills, there also lies the issue of provider well-being. The work of a frontline justice provider involves daily exposure to trauma. One Steering Committee member and service provider shared the realities of this work, describing the secondary trauma she often experiences from dealing with gender-based violence cases in particular. This provider suggested that psychological support and self-care mechanisms for frontline responders is a necessity for the sustainability of any people-centred justice service. Without protecting the well-being justice service providers, the quality and continuity of justice for the clients is at risk.

Community Justice Centre staff in Imo State speaking with pupils during an outreach visit



6.2 Key successes achieved

Despite these challenges, the CJC has demonstrated some successes and achievements which point to the viability of the model. The most compelling achievements are the resolved cases where the CJC's intervention led to positive outcomes, which may not have been achievable through other pathways.

Positive Case Outcome: A service provider from the clinic shared one example of a case of gender-based violence: a woman reported that her husband was threatening her life. Instead of a confrontational approach via the police or courts, the CJC team decided to mediate the case through a trusted community elder whom the husband respected. A counseling call, framed as coming from the elder, educated the husband on the legal and personal consequences of his actions. The intervention was quite positive, with the wife reporting a complete change in her husband's behaviour. He was no longer violent and had begun providing for the family, resolving the issue without the need for formal proceedings. In another example shared by the service provider, a man had been struggling for two years within the formal system to resolve a dispute with his violent wife. The CJC advised him on the correct customary procedure for divorce, an option he had been unaware of. This simple piece of legal and cultural guidance provided him with a clear path to resolution, bringing him satisfaction and relief.

Outreach through Radio: One of the most effective tools of the CJC has been its outreach campaign through the "Justice Voice" radio programme. This programme has been a primary channel through which justice seekers learn about the CJC's existence and services. The programme has raised awareness as well as acting as a tool for problem prevention. The programme educates the audience about their legal rights, even discussing culturally sensitive topics like women's rights for inheritance, and provides practical advice on issues like land documentation. By empowering people with knowledge, the radio programme helps to prevent disputes from arising or escalating. This fulfills a key part of the CJC's mission: going beyond case resolution to tackling justice problem prevention. The high volume of calls received during the programme speaks to its reach and relevance to the community.

Governance Model: A key factor for the long-term sustainability of the CJC has been the development of its governance model. The model's pivot to a structure anchored in a multi-stakeholder Steering Committee has fostered a deeper sense of local ownership. One indicator of this is the fact that the Steering Committee has begun to convene and fund its own meetings, independent of HiIL's direct logistical support. This demonstrates a high level of commitment and a transition from being participants in a project to being leaders of an institution. This growing autonomy is a promising sign for the CJC's ability to sustain itself and continue its work into the future.

6.3 The future of the CJC

Phase II of the pilot project

The CJC began phase two of the pilot project in September, the purpose of which is to incorporate some of the learnings thus far and focus on future sustainability.

In this phase the team will address the current geographic limitations by prioritising access to justice and supporting the State Government to scale and replicate the CJC model across 53 locations. This will reflect the initial design more closely, with the goal that the CJC will better integrate into local community systems and become more accessible. The CJs will be working alongside local government and traditional rulers to provide ADR services supported by evidence-based guidelines and a uniform way of working.

Additionally, the second phase will focus on making the CJC website ready and available to the broader public. Currently, people can learn about and access the CJC via the Just Voices radio programme, outreach done by the Ward Liaison Officers, calling, or walking in on clinic days. The team hypothesises that one way to increase the number of case intakes is through the website. Here people will be able to learn about the CJC, get access to legal information and report their cases – making it even easier for people to connect with the centre.

Furthermore, the team is exploring innovative solutions to address the financial sustainability challenges. For example, they are looking into an alternative, means-based costing structure. In this set up, clients who can afford it will be charged a small fee for the services, while free access will still be available to those who need it. Justice seeker Adaeze shared that they would be open to this, stating, “The advice I would give CJC is that, since they have told people it's free, their services are free. But if being free will make the matter to be delayed, they can attach little payments and make sure that they follow the matter up, they follow it to the end, so that the person will get justice and be happy at the end.” This is just one possible solution being explored to bring income into the CJC and decrease its dependency on donor and/or government funding. However, this solution requires further consideration and testing.

Potential for scaling

Steering Committee members, service providers and HiiL staff alike are generally optimistic about the CJC's potential to scale and grow. This belief is rooted in several key factors, including the belief that the CJC is filling a key gap in Imo State; the effectiveness of the CJC's approach; and the demonstrated positive impact on justice seekers thus far.

Why do the CJC participants believe the CJC is scalable? Firstly, because they see it filling a key gap, not only in Imo State but in broader Nigeria. Several interviewees mentioned the lack of justice in Nigeria and the need for better services and access to those services. One member of the Steering Committee stated, “my vision is to see CJC go around Nigeria, even Africa,” because “in Africa as a whole, injustice is our baptismal name”. She went on to say that the CJC is needed and scalable, so long as sustainable funding exists, “If the finance is there, it's not even a matter of thinking twice about it. I should have suggested they push it to all the states in Nigeria. Because people yearn for justice. People

travel for justice.” For example, the fact that the centre has already received calls inquiring about its services from people in other states indicates a broader demand and potential for geographic expansion.

Additionally, participants feel that the people-centred nature of the model will drive demand, causing the CJC to always have enough clients. By offering accessible, affordable and offering high quality services, the CJC will easily be distinguished and favoured. The ability to offer faster resolution compared to traditional courts is also a significant draw.

Furthermore, participants anticipate that the positive experiences and satisfaction of justice seekers during the pilot phase will lead to organic growth through word-of-mouth referrals and testimonials. They believe that once people see that issues are being sorted, "it is a spiral chain that keeps multiplying". Service providers suggest proactively sharing success stories and client testimonials through platforms like radio programmes and social media to "convince a lot of people to bring their cases".

HiiL staff reflected that the dedication, passion and experience of the current Steering Committee and service providers is a key strength and points to the sustainability of the CJC model. Their willingness to learn, adapt, and commit to people-centred justice is crucial for navigating challenges and ensuring growth.

In addition to the challenges mentioned previously, there are two more elements that interviewees feel are important to address to support sustainability and scaling. The first is government backing. The Steering Committee is already conducting advocacy for broader policy changes that support the CJC model, such as institutionalising pro-bono service requirements for lawyers, which would expand the pool of available legal support. But there also needs to be specific backing of the CJC model itself to allow for a more seamless integration with the formal justice system. This requires actively pursuing a formal partnership with the Imo State judiciary to create a clear pathway for CJC-mediated agreements to be legally validated and enforced, transforming them into binding decisions.

The second element is the skill and well-being of service providers at the CJC. The work they are doing is psychologically heavy, time consuming and requires particular skills and capabilities. Paying providers a small stipend for their time as well as providing them with regular training and capacity building in ADR, trauma-informed care and the people-centred justice approach can contribute to the long-term sustainability of the clinic. Support for justice service providers also needs to go beyond the financial, it is also important to find ways to offer psychological support and self-care resources to the frontline workers. Focusing on this support for service providers can ensure they do not burn out and are able to provide high-quality services.

In conclusion, interviewees express confidence that the CJC's people-centred model, combined with strategic expansion, robust partnerships and diversified funding, makes it highly scalable to meet the widespread justice needs in Nigeria.

Conclusions

The journey of the Community Justice Centre in Imo State demonstrates both the need and demand for people-centred justice, and the complex realities of implementing innovative solutions on the ground. The pilot phase, stemming from a collaborative, data-driven design process, has shown that a justice service which is affordable, accessible and focused on the outcomes people need is not only welcome in Imo State, but essential. The CJC has filled a critical gap between the formal and informal justice systems, offering a high quality alternative pathway for people, many of whom had otherwise given up hope of achieving justice.

The pilot has seen many successes. Most notably the high satisfaction of its users, the effective outreach of its radio programme and the inspiring local ownership demonstrated by the Steering Committee. Simultaneously, the pilot has also generated crucial learnings from its challenges. The most pressing being that a purely pro bono model, while accessible, is not sustainable. It places a large burden on dedicated justice practitioners and cannot cover necessary costs like court fees, creating a tension between accessibility and long-term viability. Furthermore, in its current state the CJC's effectiveness is limited by its geographical reach and the lack of formal government backing making its mediated agreements legally binding.

The path forward for the CJC lies in embracing these lessons. The next phase of the pilot has already begun to do so, focusing on replicating the model across Imo State, engaging local government to own, scale, and sustain the model; as well as exploring sustainable funding models. Securing a diverse funding base and, most importantly, achieving formal government integration are critical next steps for scaling, and initial progress has been promising. The CJC's journey of adaptation and learning offers a compelling model for justice innovation. It demonstrates that centering people's needs and anchoring in strong local leadership can help bridge the justice gap and improve access to justice for all.

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