

JusticeMatters

Justice First. Stability Follows.

6-8 May 2026 | The Hague, The Netherlands

The critical importance of justice and stability

On the night of December 22, 1988, Chico Mendes stepped into his backyard in a small village deep in the Brazilian Amazon and was killed by a single shotgun blast. He was 44, a husband and father, a rubber tapper, and the organising voice of a community whose forests and livelihoods were being steadily destroyed by encroaching cattle ranchers and landowners.

Chico Mendes had presented his community's grievances to the world, yet at home, he and his neighbours held few formal rights and had no real voice in how their land was governed. His assassination, as HiiL CEO Udo Jude Ilo reminded the Justice Matters 2026 Conference during his opening remarks, was the predictable outcome of a system that denied rights and ignored questions and grievances, producing what he called a "combustible silence" that eventually erupts into violence, mistrust, and instability.

Chico Mendes's story is where this conference report must begin, because it lays bare a truth that ran through every minute of the event: *there can be no peace, and no real stability, without justice!*

"Injustice is like a bad wound. You can put something on top of it and cover it. If you don't deal with it, it will hollow you out from the inside."

– Udo Jude Ilo, HiiL

Conference context

The 2026 Justice Matters conference was the second edition of HiiL's flagship convening. It brought together ministers of justice, judges, legal practitioners, leading national and international civil society organisations, and senior officials from bilateral and multilateral donors across Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, North America, and Europe. Side events on the 6th and 8th of May, co-organised with partners including Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Municipality of The Hague, German Development Cooperation, UNDP, UN Women, UNODC, IDLO, OSF, GIZ, OECD, WJP, Cordaid, the Hague Humanity Hub, and many more, opened the program with sessions on prevention, commercial justice, and informal justice systems.

The plenary on 7 May centred on what meaningful justice looks like in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. During the plenary and the side events, we heard voices, stories and opinions from some of today's justice thought leaders. Five topics stood out throughout the conference: justice is an infrastructure for stability; humanising justice by using plain language is a powerful tool; people-centred justice is cementing its role as a key strategy for reforming justice systems and delivering fair outcomes; making justice more accessible and people-centred can only happen through the efforts of broad coalitions; and lastly, technologies and AI in particular can make justice more accessible but also pose challenges about exclusion, bias and lack of accountability.

Justice is an infrastructure for stability

Many speakers provided vivid examples of how unresolved everyday grievances — land disputes, gender-based violence, contract failures — compound into the conditions for conflict. The World Justice Project estimates that 1.5 billion people worldwide cannot obtain justice for precisely these everyday justice disputes and issues.¹ When everyday justice needs—such as land disputes, family conflicts, or business issues—go unaddressed, they become a catalyst for instability, eroding trust in institutions, breaking relationships, ruining businesses and economies, and fuelling deep-seated frustration. Stability cannot exist in a vacuum without a fair, accessible, and legitimate justice system. When justice is absent, any perceived stability is merely a fragile, coercive, and short-lived illusion.

“Stability and justice are not two separated or separate goals. They are closely linked.”

– Jan Van Zanen, Mayor of The Hague

The opposite of stability is insecurity, but this is not limited to armed conflict; it equally includes authoritarianism, weakened rule of law, uneven access to justice, extreme inequality, and exclusion. Justice must be integrated early into stabilisation efforts. A recurring argument from security and peacebuilding experts is that waiting for complete peace before implementing justice is a flawed strategy. Justice must be used as a frontline mechanism for conflict prevention rather than an afterthought once the fighting stops. For example, in post-conflict zones like Mali or Ethiopia, failing to swiftly establish a trusted justice apparatus leaves a void that leads to arbitrariness, revenge killings, and further unrest.

¹ World Justice Project(2019). Measuring the Justice Gap: A People-Centered Assessment of Unmet Justice Needs Around the World.



“Prevention starts with justice.”

– Lorraine Reuter, UNDP

To build a true infrastructure for stability, justice must meet people where they are rather than relying solely on distant, formal institutions. Violent Extremist Organisations (VOEs) routinely exploit this legitimacy gap by offering quick, informal dispute resolution (such as enforcing contracts or swift taxation) to communities. States must use justice as a frontline, stabilising mechanism. On the ground, stabilisation requires an integrated, area-based approach in which justice is intrinsically linked to public services, social cohesion, and livelihood recovery.

”Justice cannot wait!”

– Koen Davidse, Ministry of Defence,
The Netherlands

Speakers called for treating justice as infrastructure in budgeting processes. Governments must commit to a balanced investment between defence, diplomacy and justice. There is a critical need to break down government silos so that Ministries of Defence, Finance, and Internal Affairs sit down with justice departments to develop collective strategies.

”Stability built on impunity is not stability. It is only a delay. A state that cannot deliver justice is not a state. A peace that silences victims is not a true peace.”

– Adel Nassar, Minister of Justice of
the Republic of Lebanon

Because the vast majority of people in fragile contexts rely on customary or traditional mechanisms rather than formal courts, interventions must meet people where they already are. By supporting and integrating local or informal dispute resolution systems, states can offer immediate, cost-effective solutions that relieve pressure on formal courts and prevent conflicts from escalating.





"Turning the bad into the good, the negative into the positive. Everybody can do it in their lives, and communities can do it, and the world can do it."

– Justice Albie Sachs

The power of simplified and humanised justice language for bringing out the importance of justice

A significant shift towards simplifying and humanising justice language was observed. This approach, exemplified by speakers like Albie Sachs, focuses on how justice affects individuals' lived realities, relies on data, and yields innovative, context-specific solutions. This human-centric narrative moves people emotionally, rather than just by definitions or tools. This language helps them connect justice issues to their own objectives (e.g., how support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) translates to votes).

"They're in charge of my body, I'll be in charge of the narrative.", Justice Albie Sachs shared this shift from victimhood to agency mindset when recounting his time in solitary confinement without trial in 1963 and deciding to write about his justice ordeal.

Aimee Ongeso of the Open Society Foundations shared an example of the power of humanising justice through language by illustrating how formal criminal justice often excludes victims by defining crimes strictly as acts against the state. A people-centred approach centres the victim's narrative and embraces what she called "dialogical jurisprudence"—a participatory process where victims, offenders, and communities negotiate and co-create practical, restorative outcomes (such as, agreeing to replace a stolen cow with a calf) rather than relying on top-down, prescribed legal punishments.



People-centred justice has moved from pilot to proven model

The conference participants emphasised that the people-centred Justice concept works and delivers results. Whereas past rule-of-law reforms often failed because they focused solely on building formal institutions and transplanting laws, which proved slow and inaccessible. Pascale Grotenhuis of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that effective reform *“starts with looking at people’s actual justice needs for designing effective and impactful public services, rather than focusing on the needs of the institutions only”*.

Reforming justice systems from being “institution-centred” to “people-centred” requires a fundamental shift in mindset, treating justice as an essential public service designed around the lived realities and actual needs of everyday people. Throughout the conference, participants outlined several key arguments for why and how this reform must take place. Justice Lillian Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza from Uganda warned that measuring performance exclusively by the speed and volume of resolved cases risks turning judiciaries into mere “Courts

of Statistics”. Instead, she advocated for evaluating how well a judge’s decision “adapts legal principles to the lived reality of the people” and their changing socio-economic conditions. Justice Diana Rachel Kavedza-Mochache from Kenya highlighted her country’s explicit shift “from institution-centred justice to people-centred justice” by embracing Alternative Justice Systems.

By urging governments to rethink their priorities, Justice Catherine Ogunsanya from Nigeria stated: *“justice delivery is not a fiduciary or financial investment. It must be an investment in the people”*.

The conference revealed that people-centred justice is moving from a concept to a concrete, formalised standard globally. For example, the Ibero-American Convention on Access to Justice is the first binding regional instrument to translate this agenda into a common framework that promotes diverse and effective pathways for resolving disputes. Similarly, the African Alliance for People-centred Justice is working to affirm people-centred justice as a binding “normative commitment” for the continent.





The power and necessity of collaboration in people-centred justice

The strong momentum for collaboration and partnership around people-centred justice was evident, with participants openly sharing ideas and feeling the importance of the cause. Prof. Helen Duffy, an international human rights lawyer, noted that victims of military dictatorships have historically succeeded by creatively supporting one another and building international networks to pursue alternative avenues, such as truth commissions or universal jurisdiction. Similarly, Mariëlle Vavir, Deputy Mayor of The Hague, emphasised that overcoming deeply entrenched injustices—such as systemic patriarchy and inequality -- is impossible to achieve alone, stating that organisations must “work together and change the system” collectively. **Coalitions are the delivery mechanisms for people-centred justice.** The Justice Action Coalition and the regional alliances mentioned above are emerging as the principal vehicles for scaling reform. **Governments are critical leaders in people-centred justice reform,** necessitating whole-of-society involvement. Convincing governments to take this leadership requires using accessible language and data, recognising justice as a fundamental public service.

Maaïke de Langen from the OECD captured this spirit by calling for an “army of doers,” “believers,” and “optimists”. She urged

participants to shift their mindset from isolated efforts to collaborative ones, constantly asking, “What can you and I do together?” to create meaningful justice communities. To that, Martin Hoppe from the German BMZ emphasised the individual responsibility of each “justice soldier” about “What is it I need to do to make justice more accessible and more people-centred”?

AI is a challenge and an opportunity

Technology, and particularly generative AI, was a constant topic throughout the conference. In a dedicated side event on 8 May 2026, speakers highlighted that AI is already entering justice systems through tools such as legal information assistants, translation services, document summarisation, and case management support. These applications can help reduce barriers to justice, especially for underserved populations. However, they also stressed that AI functions as a “stress test” for justice systems: while it may improve efficiency, it can also expose and amplify weaknesses related to bias, opacity, exclusion, and lack of accountability. AI governance, therefore, cannot be treated as a one-time exercise. Responsible adoption requires continuous monitoring, adaptation, and learning based on real-world impacts. Ultimately, the session highlighted that responsible AI in justice is not only about technology, but about governance, ethics, participation, and trust.





Implications for the justice sector

The 2026 Justice Matters Conference delivered a clear message to leaders, ministries, judiciaries, practitioners, innovators, donors, and social investors: justice is core infrastructure for security, stability, and development, and a frontline tool and for conflict prevention. The harder question the conference confronted was how to make justice actually deliver on that promise. The answer that emerged was people-centred justice — anchoring the system in the everyday problems of its users rather than the convenience of its institutions. Getting there demands a coordinated shift: regular, bottom-up data on people’s needs, experiences and perceptions; new values and working practices; sustained innovation; outcomes-based performance metrics; smarter financing; and genuine cross-sector collaboration. Smart investment, in particular, is what turns ideas into pilots and pilots into system-wide change. None of this will be easy. But as Chico Mendes’s story reminded us at the start, the alternative — a justice system that cannot hear the people it is meant to serve — offers no stability at all. It is a combustible silence. Building safe, inclusive, and prosperous societies leaves us no other path.

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