

Working Group on Customary and Informal Justice and SDG16+

Joint Action Plan 2024-26

March 2024

This Joint Action Plan sets out a shared strategy for the Working Group on Customary and Informal Justice and Sustainable Development Goal 16+ to accelerate action on the global commitment to achieve access to justice for all by 2030. The Working Group will contribute to the achievement of SDG 16.3 by identifying and generating evidence on, and advocating for greater engagement with, the centrality of diverse pathways to people-centred justice. This Joint Action Plan sets out activities from 2024-26, and builds on the previous plan covering the period 2021-23.

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1. Preamble

Established in 2020, the **Working Group on CIJ and SDG16+** draws together diverse justice stakeholders from around the world to pursue a common agenda that advocates for the centrality of customary and informal justice (CIJ) systems in achieving people-centred justice. The Working Group draws upon existing evidence and policy frameworks and generates new practice-based insights on how CIJ systems may respond to people's justice needs, taking into account the dynamism of CIJ and significant variation across contexts, as well as including critical analysis of the drawbacks of CIJ systems for women and other marginalised groups. It explores and seeks to identify the most effective means of including CIJ systems in efforts to achieve justice for all, and to share key findings through policy- and practice-oriented recommendations for the global justice community.

The shared strategy outlined in this document is informed by the results achieved by Working Group members acting in concert during 2021-23, in line with the previous Joint Action Plan. **Key deliverables achieved** in that period include:

- Multi-stakeholder coalition expanded to include the broadest possible diversity of organizations and individuals working toward justice for all, with a mailing list of over 100 people and 10-15 active members of the Action Group
- High-Level Dialogue event successfully implemented in Dec 2021
- 10 in-person and online expert and stakeholder consultations organized and implemented, engaging 260 people from nearly 50 countries

- *Diverse pathways to people-centred justice*, the Working Group's report, was published in Sept 2023 during the SDG Summit, and formally launched at an event at the United Nations in New York on in Oct 2023

The shared strategy is also informed by a horizon scan, identifying key trends and relevant challenges and opportunities that will shape the operating environment for the Working Group in the next three years. The horizon scan noted **five key factors**:

1. *The global rule of law crisis*, with a majority of countries experiencing declining rule of law, driven by increasing authoritarianism and overwhelmed, ineffective justice systems;¹ more than six billion people—76% of the world's population—live in countries where the rule of law weakened in the past year; access to civil justice declined in 66% of countries, reflecting sustained and systemic challenges facing justice provision, and increasing demand for practical, innovative, and effective solutions to accelerate progress on SDG16.3 will increase
2. *Inadequate justice financing*, with justice aid falling by 27% over the past decade (while overall aid has increased by more than 50% in the same period),² meaning that a shift in investment strategies is required to achieve justice for all, potentially including universal access to front-line legal advice and informal dispute resolution services, such as those associated with CIJ systems

¹ See [WJP \(2023\)](#)

² See [ODI \(2023\)](#)

3. *Emergence of people-centred justice* as the central conceptual framework for rule of law policy and programming at the global level (for example, by the Justice Action Coalition) and expanding the space available to policies and practices that embrace diverse pathways to justice, including customary and informal pathways
4. *Acceptance of the need to engage with CIJ* in the rule of law sector, both at global and national levels; for example, the landmark UN *New Vision for the Rule of Law* recognizes that justice seekers must “be able to capitalize on the availability and public legitimacy of customary and informal justice mechanisms that operate in line with international human rights standards”³
5. *Intersections with other key policy agendas*, given the relevance of CIJ actors and practices are to key global goals, including equal access to justice for women and gender equality,⁴ sustaining peace,⁵ and efforts to achieve transformative climate action, inclusive natural resource management, and biodiversity protection⁶

Building on the experience of three years of fruitful joint action, and with reference to the operating environment identified in the horizon scan, members of the Working Group considered a number of potential priorities for further collaboration in the next three years. Over the course of Oct 2023-Jan 2024, members of the Working Group contributed to a **series of consultations** and provided inputs on draft documents coalescing around the consensus priorities reflected in this paper.

More than five billion people lack meaningful access to justice. As a result, they are often denied their rights, marginalized, displaced from land, and subjected to violence without remedy. To tackle this global justice gap, the 2030 Agenda commits UN Member States to ensure equal access to justice for all, articulated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies, and specific targets associated with other SDGs (collectively, SDG16+). In order to fulfil the promise of SDG16+, it is imperative that the global justice community engages with **the centrality of CIJ actors and practices in achieving people-centred justice**.

³ See [UN \(2023\)](#)

⁴ See [UN Women et. al \(2020\)](#)

⁵ See [UN \(2023\)](#)

⁶ See, for example, [UNDP \(2022\)](#) and [IDLO \(2021\)](#)

2. Shared vision

Consistent with its predecessor, the **intended outcome** of this Joint Action Plan is *an enabling policy and investment environment, at national and global levels, for governments, development partners, and civil society to engage effectively with CIJ in efforts to build more inclusive justice systems that contribute to achieving people-centred justice for all, and evidence-based tools supporting them to do so.*

Our **shared vision** is of a world in which all people have equal access to justice that meets their needs, provided by pathways to justice which are inclusive, responsive, effective, accountable, and consistent with human rights norms and standards; in which states use data and evidence to understand CIJ systems as playing a role in people-centred justice and the rule of law in their distinct contexts; in which donors support and invest in evidence-based access to justice across a spectrum of justice providers; and in which civil society has the space and capacity to empower justice seekers, safeguard their rights, and demand accountability from all justice providers.

In striving to deliver on this vision, our Working Group will be:

- Open, inclusive of the broadest possible diversity of stakeholders, and welcoming of participation based on the interests and capabilities of each stakeholder
- Innovative, practical and action-oriented, leveraging existing policy frameworks and processes where these are already in place.

The shared vision will be achieved through progress toward **four inter-related goals**:

1. *Ensure that the Working Group remains a central platform for coordination and advocacy around CIJ at the global level while growing participation*
2. *Strengthen and share a compelling CIJ evidence base by consolidating and disseminating existing evidence, and foster innovation on CIJ data collection*
3. *Champion recognition of a central role for CIJ in achieving people-centred justice through high-level leadership*
4. *Build policy consensus on CIJ and drive more relevant and effective justice investments*

3. Workstreams

In order to realize the shared vision described above, the stakeholders will work together in four distinct but inter-related workstreams, each of which will be co-coordinated by designated Working Group members:

Workstream 1: Sustain collective action on CIJ

Goal 1: Ensure that the Working Group remains a central platform for coordination and advocacy around CIJ at the global level while growing participation

Following establishment of the Working Group in 2020, it has evolved to include many organizations and individuals committed to achieving justice for all, including through greater engagement with CIJ. Ongoing action will be needed to enhance and sustain knowledge-sharing and coordinated action across the Working Group for the period of this Joint Action Plan, including within the structures described in section 4 below. It is also an agreed priority of all Working Group members to broaden and deepen participation in the community, with a particular focus on growing to include more organizations and individuals from the Global South, and more

that operate at the grassroots level, especially those representing historically marginalized and excluded constituencies like women, youth, minority ethnic and faith communities, and Indigenous Peoples.

Deliverables:

- Continued expansion of the multi-stakeholder coalition to include the broadest possible diversity of organizations and individuals working toward justice for all, with a particular focus on inclusion of organizations and individuals from the Global South and those operating at the grassroots level
- Monthly meetings of the Action Group
- Biannual meetings of Working Group stakeholders

Workstream co-leads: IDLO and ODI

Workstream 2: Improve the policy-relevant evidence base on understanding and engaging with CIJ systems

Goal 2: Strengthen and share a compelling CIJ evidence base by consolidating and disseminating existing evidence, and foster innovation on CIJ data collection

A key dimension of the Working Group's strategy is capturing and sharing evidence on the most effective means of understanding and including CIJ systems in efforts to achieve people-centred justice. This includes recognising the dynamism and diversity of CIJ,

critical analysis of the drawbacks of CIJ systems for women and other marginalised and excluded constituencies, and a commitment to engage innovatively on new topics and in new spaces (especially as a result of technological progress). Toward that end, and with the 2023 report as a point of departure, Working Group members will collaborate to strengthen the policy and practice-relevant evidence base on CIJ, with a focus on consolidating and disseminating existing evidence, incorporating

both quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence, exploring cross-sectoral approaches (for example, intersections with climate action, peacebuilding, work in politically estranged contexts, and access to justice for women and children), homing in on productive examples of CIJ delivering people-centred justice and being supported to do so by key stakeholders, and translating research into actionable policy briefs for influencing.

As with all justice systems and dispute resolution mechanisms, the workings of CIJ are politically contested. In building the evidence base, the Working Group will welcome diversity in analytical and methodological approaches to policy and practice-relevant research. There are no pre-set assumptions or theories of change about pathways to advancing people-centred justice through engagement with CIJ. Rather, debate and critical engagement will be encouraged, and quality assurance and critical reflection will be supported in data collection and analysis.

The Working Group will also contribute to efforts to foster innovation in CIJ data collection and analysis. While there is a wide literature on the role and nature of CIJ systems

in a variety of contexts, data is limited. This weakens the evidence base, as it is presented to policymakers. This stream of work will draw on existing justice data to improve our aggregate picture of CIJ system use, as well as capturing where they work for people and where particular groups are left behind.

Deliverables:

- Consolidation of existing data to improve picture of CIJ system use and experience
- Innovative approaches to data collection trialled
- Practical input on effectively including CIJ systems in monitoring and measurement of progress toward SDG16+ achievement
- Publication of ancillary reports and briefs, including on specific justice issues and how these are addressed in CIJ, good practice case studies, context-specific insights of broader interest
- Translate research into actionable policy briefs for influencing

Workstream co-leads: tbc

Workstream 3: Mobilize and support a High-Level Leadership Group on CIJ

Goal 3: Champion recognition of a central role for CIJ in achieving people-centred justice through high-level leadership

Modelled on the experience of the [High-Level Group on Justice for Women](#), and building on the High-Level Dialogue on CIJ and SDG16+ in Dec 2021 and UN launch of the Working Group's report in Oct 2023, a High-Level Leadership Group on CIJ and SDG16+ will be established to mobilize and sustain political engagement and elevate and amplify the work of the Working Group in policy circles.

Consisting of current and former senior-level international and national policymakers, justice thought leaders, eminent civil society representatives, and respected informal justice providers, including those representing women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples, the focus of the High-Level Leadership Group will be to represent the work and recommendations of the Working Group, serve as ambassadors for policy advocacy and networking, and generally advance the campaign described under workstream 4. The

Working Group will set out a timeline by which to agree the mandate, appointment rules and establishment of this High-Level Leadership Group, which will function as an activity of the Working Group and advise on (rather than direct) implementation of the shared strategy.

Deliverables:

- Agreement on the mandate and rules of appointment of the High-Level Leadership Group, and general timeline for its work
- Establishment of the High-Level Leadership Group

- Convening of formal and informal meetings of the High-Level Leadership Group, to support its presence and representation at different justice and other policy fora where the focus on CIJ is relevant
- Providing the High-Level Leadership Group with timely and digestible briefs to inform their engagement in these justice and other policy fora with a view to strengthening the focus on CIJ in such for a

Workstream co-leads: tbc

Workstream 4: Coordinate policy advocacy action through a three-year multi-level campaign

Goal 4: Build policy consensus on CIJ and drive more relevant and effective justice investments

Having developed a series of consensus positions on CIJ as articulated in its 2023 report, the Working Group will shift focus toward catalyzing uptake of the report's recommendations in global, regional, national, and sub-national policy frameworks and processes, and in the investment decisions of governments and bilateral and multilateral donors. This work will be coordinated through a three-year multi-level policy advocacy campaign integrating evidence and data marshalled described under workstream 2 and with high-level support from the leadership group described under workstream 3.

The campaign will consist of a series of bold, concrete actions at both global and country levels intended to drive change in how diverse stakeholders engage with and invest in and around CIJ systems. Strategies and tactics will be determined by a campaign steering group and organized in a detailed work plan to be developed in 2024. The campaign, which may have a distinct brand identity and core messaging drawn from the Working Group's

2023 report, will be underpinned by the public commitments of Working Group members and other stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and bilateral and multilateral donors. Commitments will include legislative and policy changes, development and implementation of programmes, and substantial increases in public and donor funding to engagement with diverse pathways to people-centred justice. Accountability will be built into the campaign through regular reporting by commitment-makers and measurement of collective impact. Taken together, commitments will contribute to the achievement of ambitious and measurable targets fixed during development of the campaign strategy, and accelerate the pace of progress toward the achievement of SDG16+.

At global level, key campaign actions will focus on milestone events where opportunities for policy influencing are greatest. Milestone events integrated into campaign strategies and plans are likely to include:

Milestone event	Date	Location
Global Forum on Justice and the Rule of Law	25-26 June	Washington, DC
High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2024	8-12 July 2024	New York City
World Justice Forum 2025	Mid-2025	TBC
High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2025	Q3 2025	New York City
High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2026	Q3 2026	New York City
UN Congress on Criminal Justice and Crime Prevention	Late 2026	Dubai

The Working Group may organize one or more milestone events independently or in conjunction with another event on the calendar above, including a possible donor conference intended to mobilize financing for engagement with CIJ systems from bilateral, multilateral, national, and other sources. Other global milestone events might include the annual Commission on the Status of Women (March 2025 and 2026) and UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (April 2025 and 2026) meetings, and the annual UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of States Parties (Dec 2025 and 2026), as well as events such as the 2024 and 2025 sessions of the UN Crime Commission and the Open Government Partnership Global Summits.

In 3-5 priority countries, the campaign will be anchored in cooperation between Working Group members, relevant authorities, and other key stakeholders at national and sub-national levels. Priority countries will be determined by Working Group members committed to workstream 4 based on clear criteria to be established later, including existing legislative and regulatory frameworks and the consent and cooperation of relevant authorities. Country level campaign actions might include multi-stakeholder dialogues on CIJ in the context of people-centred justice, provision of direct technical support, delivery of programming, and complementarity with existing national or sub-national policy processes and events, among others. Country level cooperation within the framework of the

campaign is intended to foster national ownership, grassroots buy-in, practical engagement by diverse members of the Working Group, and more concrete and sustainable policy outcomes.

While the 2030 Agenda and SDG16 provide the main framework for policy advocacy and influencing, the campaign will also link the Working Group to other relevant frameworks that intersect with SDG16, notably including SDSG5 and efforts to achieve equal access to justice for women and gender equality; conflict prevention and sustaining peace; and efforts to achieve transformative climate action, inclusive natural resource management, and biodiversity protection.

Deliverables:

- Adoption of a three-year campaign strategy with clear commitments by Working Group members, ambitious and measurable targets for policy change, and agreed mechanisms for coordination and accountability
- Implementation of global policy advocacy and influencing actions, including interventions in major policy processes and at milestone policy events, ad hoc dialogues and knowledge exchanges at global and country level, and other initiatives
- Identification of 3-5 priority countries for cooperation at country level, including policy advocacy and direct collaboration with and technical support to relevant authorities and

- other key stakeholders to build an enabling environment for CIJ at the heart of people-centred justice
- Forging of coalitions that build political and operational engagement with CIJ as a transecting enabler across key policy agendas, notably (but not exclusively) including equal access to justice for women and gender equality, conflict prevention and sustaining peace, and climate justice and biodiversity protection, among others
 - Achievement of an audacious policy agenda game-changer that builds symbolic and practical momentum toward integration of CIJ in efforts to achieve justice for all by 2030, such as a report by one of the UN Special Rapporteurs, a declaration at the 2026 Crime Congress, or a UN General Assembly resolution

Workstream co-leads: tbc

4. Structures

During preparation of this Joint Action Plan, Working Group members indicated overall satisfaction with the decentralized, working-level network model utilized to date, with a broad spectrum of associated organizations and individuals opting-in to joint action as feasible, and a loosely organized Steering Committee (formerly, the Action Group) providing coordination around priorities determined by consensus. As new priorities are operationalized, it may be necessary to revisit this structure, and move toward more formal arrangements.

Working Group

The Working Group consists of all contributors to the community's shared strategy. The only criteria for participation in the Working Group is embracing the Joint Action Plan and voluntarily opting-in. Stakeholders participating in the Working Group are regularly informed about the Working Group's activities, asked for input on key decisions, and invited to join in activities and processes on an ad hoc basis. The Working Group convenes at

least biannually to review strategy and progress. The Joint Action Plan will be approved by the Working Group, and any adjustments to the Joint Action Plan will require consensus approval by the Working Group.

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee consists of a smaller number of self-nominated Working Group members able and willing to actively contribute to implementation of the Joint Action Plan. Participation in the Steering Committee is voluntary and determined by concrete commitments made by stakeholders to implementation of the Joint Action Plan. The Steering Committee convenes on a regular basis (usually monthly) to coordinate activities and processes within the Joint Action Plan. The Steering Committee will work to set out the messaging and representation tasks of the High-Level Leadership Group.

As of Feb 2024, the Steering Committee consists of 21 people representing 17 organizations.

For more information:

[Working Group on CIJ and SDG16+](#)

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Download the Working Group's report:

