

Rule of Law Technical Note: What is People-Centered Justice?

USAID’s Rule of Law Policy expands our toolkit of approaches for working with partners to improve justice systems and services by including People-Centered Justice (PCJ). PCJ differs from other, more familiar and traditional approaches to rule of law promotion. Instead of a predominant focus on institutions and their needs, a PCJ approach balances institutional interventions with those that address the needs of people and the legal problems affecting them in their everyday lives.

PCJ interventions engage widely, bringing individuals and communities, justice system actors, government officials, and others into an affirmatively iterative process of developing more accessible, more efficient, and more innovative policies, procedures, and processes to resolve them.

The rule of law is more than an abstract concept; it is the operating system for democratic institutions and processes that deliver for citizens. It encompasses government obligations to society, the experience and perceptions of individuals and communities, and ideas like equality and equity. PCJ aims to be holistic as to each of these aspects, seeking to improve the **systems** that support and manage the administration of justice, enhance the **services** that define and comprise how people encounter the delivery of justice, and meet the needs, demands, and ideas of **societies**.

Accordingly, PCJ is broader than access to justice or court reform or judicial independence, though each is important and related. The notion of “centering” people and their problems implicates the mission and structures of several institutions and actors—formal and informal, civil, criminal, and administrative—all along the “justice chain.” Implementing a PCJ approach may include institutional reform, service delivery change, civic engagement, and/or legal empowerment. What makes a PCJ intervention people-centered is the emphasis on people, their problems, and their experiences and outcomes in designing and implementing PCJ interventions.

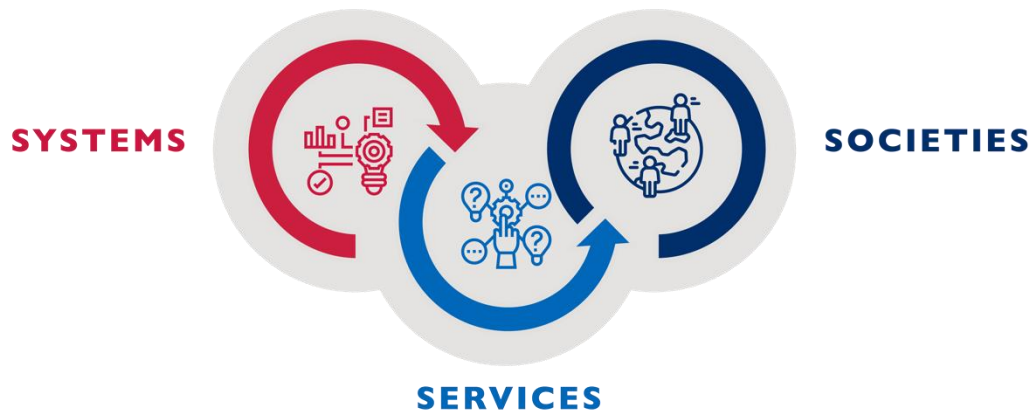


For USAID, people-centered justice is an approach to rule of law promotion that starts with identifying and understanding what people need and want when they seek justice.

It seeks to remove the obstacles people face when doing so, improve their justice-seeking experience, and enhance the outcomes they might receive.

Simply put, people-centered justice puts people, and their justice needs and legal problems, at the center of justice systems and services.

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Thus, PCJ interventions focus on three key touch points within the justice system: the person, the problem, and the process. The person – the justice seeker – has needs, circumstances, expectations, and experience that matter. The (person’s) problem is a circumstance (sometimes readily identifiable as a legal problem; other times not) that can be addressed and in doing so benefit both the individual and the community. The process is the means by which the person’s problem can be solved or ameliorated in an accessible, fair, and effective manner.

PCJ interventions will often involve efforts to:



MAKE JUSTICE SERVICES MORE USER-FRIENDLY. Services that are easy to identify, access, and use solve problems. Practices like navigable pathways, simplified paperwork, self-help stations, and “wayfinding” tools empower and enable justice seekers, and multiply pathways to problem resolution.



FOCUS ON THE SOLUTION. If justice processes don’t solve problems, meet needs, and deliver on goals, they are not fit for purpose and need to be revised accordingly.



USE DATA TO DRIVE REFORMS. Only problem, justice seeker, and resolution data can truly help us understand the depth and nature of problems, whom they affect, and whether justice services help to resolve them.



PREVENT PROBLEMS WHERE POSSIBLE. Avoiding problems is more efficient in a societal and economic sense than redressing them after the fact. There are many forms of legal literacy that can help ordinary people in their everyday lives avoid conflict with the law.



MULTIPLY PATHWAYS TO JUSTICE. Not every legal problem needs a lawyer or a courtroom for effective resolution. People with legal problems face a variety of obstacles to resolving them that can be at least partially addressed through inexpensive means, such as information windows, online access to records, and apps that provide legal resources.

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PCJ interventions collect, analyze, and act upon data about people's legal problems, desired justice outcomes, and the effectiveness of existing processes and practices. Data is the common language of these efforts. Data shows us people and problems, helping us to understand their experience. It helps us gauge whether processes and practices work as intended. An operational data ecosystem will also prioritize feedback and contribute to a culture of testing for usability. No two PCJ interventions will be exactly alike because the data will reveal that people, problems, and processes will differ among partner countries and within local communities.

People-centered justice holds promise for USAID and our partners because it addresses legal problems not just focusing on the specific needs of the individual, but also by engaging individuals with those problems in developing potential solutions.

Additional References

[Rule of Law Policy](#)

[Rule of Law Practitioner's Guide](#)

[Rule of Law Terrain Analysis: A Literature Review](#)

Additional Resources

[Justice for All: Final Report of the Pathfinders Task Force on Justice](#)

[The Hague Declaration on Equal Access to Justice For All](#)

[OECD Framework and Guiding Principles for People-Centered Justice](#)

