



## PEOPLE-CENTRED PROGRAMMING: EMPOWERING PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

People are not just users of justice and security systems—they are co-creators of solutions, drivers of accountability and agents of change.

This part of the Guide explores how programming can strengthen the five interrelated dimensions of empowerment:

1. **Participation**

2. **Inclusion**

3. **Agency**

4. **Access**

5. **Accountability**

Each dimension reinforces the principle that justice and security must be built with people, not for them. They serve as guides for designing and monitoring of interventions that are context-specific and responsive to the needs of people and communities.

These dimensions go beyond service delivery to focus on how programming can support the capacities, relationships and mechanisms that allow people, and especially the most vulnerable and excluded, to define justice and security priorities, influence decisions, and actively shape the systems that affect them.

The dimensions are interconnected and should be considered together when designing any empowerment-focused intervention. For example, establishing community mediation committees can involve all five dimensions:

- **Participation:** Community members are involved in the design of the mechanism.
- **Inclusion:** Women, youth, minority groups and other often-excluded voices are intentionally represented.
- **Agency:** The committee enables people to resolve disputes, assert their rights and solve problems collectively.
- **Access:** It brings justice services closer to the community, especially where State mechanisms are absent or distrusted.
- **Accountability:** Transparent, fair, rights-based processes and community oversight build trust.

For each dimension described below, a brief explanation is followed by selected examples from UNDP programming. These examples aim illustrate the practical impact of people-centred interventions but are not intended as a comprehensive list of all possible activities.

Each dimension concludes with a checklist to help ensure interventions are people-centred, impactful and sustainable. These checklists draw on lessons from UNDP's global practice and evaluations.



For UNDP evaluations, see the [UNDP Independent Evaluation Office \(IEO\) Evaluation Resource Centre](#).

**Common pitfalls to avoid:**

- Neglecting community agency and ownership. Top-down design with limited community engagement risks ineffective solutions, weak legitimacy and poor sustainability.
- Providing one-off trainings without follow-up. Capacity-building efforts often fail to deliver impact without mentoring, peer learning or ongoing support.
- Neglecting trust-building. Failing to address mistrust, lack of transparency or past harms can block meaningful engagement and reduce public confidence in justice and security actors.
- Working in silos. Fragmented interventions, such as focusing solely on infrastructure or a single service area, rarely address root causes or achieve transformational results.
- Overlooking sustainability. Community-based mechanisms that lack formal recognition, resourcing or links to formal justice and security systems often struggle to sustain themselves once external support ends.

**A.1 Participation**

Participation is a cornerstone of the people-centred approach to justice and security because it enables those most affected by injustice and insecurity to shape the systems intended to serve them. Rather than treating people as passive recipients of services, participation ensures they are co-creators of solutions, helping to define priorities, design interventions and monitor outcomes. This shift from consultation to co-creation strengthens public trust, legitimacy, and the accountability of justice and security systems, especially in contexts where State–society relationships are weak.

**Participation goes beyond one-off consultations.** It requires informed, active and sustained engagement, particularly of marginalized or excluded groups, in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

For UNDP, participation is not only a human rights principle; it is a strategic programming approach that improves effectiveness, strengthens local ownership, and increases the sustainability of justice and security reforms. Context-specific participatory processes that integrate local practices and respect sociocultural realities foster trust and support, promote inclusion, and ensure that justice and security efforts are aligned with people’s needs and priorities. Participation is closely tied to the principles of inclusion, agency and accountability.

An example of participatory practice is the use of community-police mechanisms that enable shared security planning and foster people-centred outcomes. UNDP supports the creation and institutionalization of diverse, locally led platforms that prioritize participatory approaches and have consistently contributed to improved trust, crime reduction and community-police cooperation. Evaluations show that sustainability depends on local ownership, integration into national frameworks, capacity building and inclusivity, particularly gender responsiveness.

**Example | Bangladesh**

In [Bangladesh](#), police and communities in Cox’s Bazar jointly developed community safety plans, ensuring responsiveness to community needs and fostering sustainability and local ownership.

**What makes participation-focused initiatives people-centred and impactful?**

- Dialogue and planning processes are inclusive and shaped by communities, including vulnerable and marginalized groups.
- Communities define priorities, shape interventions and monitor progress, rather than being passive recipients of services.
- Community input through participation mechanisms directly influences institutional decision-making.
- Participation is sustained and institutionalized, not limited to one-off consultations.



- Communities and local justice and security actors (formal and informal) share responsibility for outcomes, fostering mutual accountability and shifting power dynamics towards more inclusive decision-making.

#### Box 25: **Police Community Relations Committees in South Sudan**

In South Sudan, UNDP-supported Police Community Relations Committees (PCRCs) have created inclusive spaces for community members, including women, youth and internally displaced persons, to shape local security strategies. They have been instrumental in reducing crime rates and resolving community conflicts. By the end of 2023, approximately 220 PCRCs had been established, with 34 led by women, 47 by youth and 9 by IDPs. Volunteer community members, nominated through inclusive community consultations, are trained in community policing, conflict resolution, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and human rights, and equipped with radios, torches, bicycles and gumboots to support local safety initiatives. For example, organized efforts to protect women fetching water or collecting grass have reduced the risk of violence and exploitation. Regular community–police dialogues and the development of joint action plans have built trust and improved collaboration between communities and police. In locations where PCRCs were established, respondents to a UNDP impact assessment reported higher levels of improved perceptions of community safety than in non-intervention locations.

Source: *UNDP, Impact Assessment for the Access to Justice and Security Interventions Supported by United Nations Development Programme in South Sudan (November 2024).*

## A.2 Inclusion

Inclusion requires deliberate strategies to address the structural barriers that prevent certain groups from participating in and benefiting from justice and security systems. Exclusion based on gender, age, disability, displacement, ethnicity or social identity violates fundamental rights and undermines the rule of law, which holds that all people must be equal before and accountable to the law, and have access to fair and effective dispute resolution mechanisms. Exclusion undermines the legitimacy of institutions, weakens the effectiveness of justice and security systems, and increases risks of grievance and instability.

The people-centred approach supports inclusion by identifying and addressing structural and identity-based barriers that limit access to justice and security. It recognizes that these systems often fail to serve certain groups and places particular emphasis on reaching those furthest behind, including women, youth, persons with disabilities, displaced populations and others facing systemic discrimination. This aligns with the commitment to Leave No One Behind.



See **Annex 10** for how the people-centred approach to Environmental Justice supports traditionally excluded groups to monitor environmental harm, access remedies, and participate in environmental decision-making.

Inclusion starts with understanding whose perspective, voice and knowledge are being prioritized in decision-making, who is excluded, and why? For example, why are women or Indigenous groups underrepresented within formal justice institutions (such as the judiciary) and what impact does that have on the perceptions of justice and the quality of justice experiences and outcomes for members of those groups? Based on this analysis, an inclusive approach looks at how systems can better respond to their rights and needs through changes in institutions, relations, behaviour and organizational capacities. It is advanced through meaningful participation, changes in institutional practices (see Part B: Engaging the State and its institutions) and shifting power so that all people can influence and benefit from justice and security systems. Using disaggregated data is critical to identifying patterns of exclusion and designing targeted interventions.



UNDP's [Human Rights-Based Approach \(HRBA\) Toolkit](#) supports country offices to integrate human rights, equality and inclusion across all programming phases.

The use of community dialogue platforms is a well-established strategy for amplifying the voices and needs of marginalized groups, enabling participation in local decision-making structures, and strengthening social cohesion across diverse contexts and regions. Lessons from implementation of the [Women, Peace and Security Agenda](#), for example, highlight the value of women-led community platforms that not only provide mutual support and foster recovery but also enable survivor-led advocacy for accountability around sensitive issues such as SGBV, helping to break stigma, influence local responses and strengthen trust within communities.



#### Examples | **Nigeria** | **Ukraine**

In Nigeria, [community-led platforms](#) supported by the local government enable women and girls to have their specific needs heard and responded to and have created space for diverse groups to exchange ideas and cooperate around shared concerns.

In [Ukraine](#), [Community Security Working Groups](#) and networks of self-help groups representing vulnerable and marginalized populations enable communities to better organize, articulate their demands and constructively engage local authorities in joint decision-making around their priority justice and security needs. The mechanisms have proved resilient even during the full-scale invasion and have been effective for building trust and cooperation.

UNDP is increasingly applying behavioural insights to address the social and psychological drivers of exclusion. The approach helps identify barriers rooted in attitudes, mindsets and social norms, and supports the design, [testing and adaptation](#) of interventions that are informed by local contexts and behavioural science. This includes working with both service providers and communities to shift behaviours and perceptions that limit access to justice and security, especially for women and

marginalized groups. Behavioural insights complement legal and institutional reform by addressing the underlying factors that shape how people act and interact with justice and security systems.



#### Examples | **Syria** | **Guinea-Bissau**

In Syria, [behavioural insights revealed](#) that traditional programming to support women's inheritance rights often unintentionally placed the burden on women alone, exposing them to social and familial pressures. [In response](#), UNDP adopted a whole-of-society approach, engaging fathers, brothers, mothers, religious figures and community leaders as part of the solution, and addressing fears around family cohesion, property loss and community reputation. The approach has been embedded across legal aid, livelihoods and governance programming, and is helping reframe inheritance rights as both religiously legitimate and socially beneficial, increasing community acceptance.

In Guinea-Bissau, behavioural insights were used to assess the accessibility, effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of a model [House of Justice \(HoJ\)](#), which brings justice services—including the court, legal aid providers and civil documentation assistance— under one roof. Findings are being used to inform the nationwide roll-out of HOJ's in line with the government's access to justice strategy.



UNDP, [Human Development Report 2023/2024: Breaking the Gridlock, Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World](#) (2024), p. 105.

#### What makes inclusion-focused initiatives people-centred and impactful?



Inclusions strategies are context-specific and culturally sensitive, apply an intersectional lens (recognizing the overlapping and compounding forms of exclusion faced by individuals), and use disaggregated data to address overlapping forms of exclusion and support adaptive responses.



- Behavioural and social approaches, such as nonviolent communication or behavioural insights, help identify and shift norms, attitudes and mindsets that perpetuate exclusion.
- Marginalized groups gain voice, power and influence through sustained and meaningful participation in decision-making, often supported by local organizations and leveraging local knowledge and networks
- Capacity development is delivered for both institutions and communities.
- Inclusion interventions are institutionally supported and aligned with national policy priorities to support more inclusive and responsive systems.

#### Box 26: **Shifting mindsets and behaviours through nonviolent communication in Somalia**

Traditionally, interventions aimed at strengthening justice or security systems to uphold human rights and eradicate discriminatory practices and harmful social norms have largely adopted a normative and technical approach. UNDP Somalia recognized that discriminatory practices are so embedded in societal and cultural norms that meaningful change can occur only when people change the way they think and interact with one another. To support this, UNDP piloted the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) model at an ADR centre in Baidoa. The approach emphasizes empathetic listening, respectful dialogue and constructive conflict resolution. The centre includes traditional elders, religious leaders and women leaders who support dispute resolution based on customary law (Xeer) and Sharia law. The NVC training had a transformative impact on the behaviours of the mediators, who began to embrace practices based on empathy, mutual respect and understanding. Members made greater efforts to ensure that outcomes met the needs of both parties, particularly women. Mediators also took the initiative to spread NVC practices within their communities, including to camps of internally displaced persons and remote villages where many people are typically excluded from meaningful participation in justice.

### A.3 Agency

Agency is a defining feature of the people-centred approach that recognizes individuals and communities not only as rights holders or recipients of services but also as active agents of change capable of navigating, influencing and transforming the systems around them. When people are empowered with knowledge, confidence, and capacities and tools to understand, claim and defend their rights, they are better equipped to participate meaningfully in decision-making that affects their lives, to resolve disputes peacefully, and to hold justice and security actors to account.



See **Annex 10** for examples of how the approach supports communities to challenge exploitative practices, shape policy and access remedies in the field of Business and Human Rights.

Legal empowerment (the ability of people to know, use and shape the law to achieve justice) is an essential component of the people-centred approach, helping to expand access to justice and promote community security. Since the early 2000s, UNDP has supported legal empowerment interventions working with communities, civil society, governments and justice actors to strengthen legal awareness, expand access to legal aid and promote community-based dispute resolution across all development contexts.

Support to **community-based paralegals** is a common component of legal empowerment. Community paralegals come from impacted communities. They are usually not qualified lawyers but are trained to support people and communities to know their basic legal and human rights through legal education and rights awareness, to understand their options for resolving problems, and to navigate pathways to resolution. They generally do not provide legal advice or representation but are connected to legal aid providers or lawyers who help people navigate formal justice pathways through courts or administrative processes. Paralegals empower people and strengthen their agency in terms of accessing not only justice services but also other public services to which they are entitled. Their support to resolve a person's civil documentation problems, for example, can unlock access to education, healthcare or social protection services that are essential for economic and social development.



Learn more about designing and implementing community-based paralegal programming [here](#).



### Programming tips for impactful and sustainable community paralegal interventions:

- Invest in sensitizing key stakeholders within government, the legal profession (including bar associations) and communities to the role and value of community paralegals from the outset of programming to ensure local support and long-term sustainability.
- Design interventions with input and leadership from local stakeholders, including community members, local authorities and existing service providers.
- Engage national stakeholders and institutions from the outset to embed paralegal initiatives within national legal aid and justice sector reform efforts, supporting the shift towards more people-centred systems.
- Clarify the role and scope of work of community paralegals to address potential resistance from the legal profession.
- Ensure strong referral mechanisms between community paralegals and formal justice actors—for example, through legal aid centres or bar associations.
- Provide continuous training, capacity building and oversight to ensure quality and accountability and to support networks of champions who can sustain and expand impact.
- Strengthen and leverage existing laws, institutions and government service delivery networks, such as social protection centres, by integrating paralegal services within government legal aid offices or agencies.
- Link community paralegals with health, livelihoods or other development programmes. For example, train health workers or community mobilizers as paralegals, or connect paralegals with local peace committees.

Agency provides viable alternatives to violence by building skills for dialogue, reconciliation, mediation, negotiation and collective problem-solving. Community-based mediation and ADR are practical, people-centred approaches to resolving disputes, particularly where formal justice and security systems are inaccessible, overburdened or lack public trust. Investing in local mediators, traditional leaders and inclusive dispute resolution platforms, supported by safeguards such as human rights and gender-sensitive training and clear referral pathways to formal systems, helps build more responsive, trusted and fair justice and security systems. These mechanisms can reduce pressure on courts and law enforcement, and ensure more timely and accessible justice, particularly for women and children. They help restore relationships, reduce community tensions and prevent the escalation of disputes into violence. UNDP's support for these approaches helps strengthen social cohesion and promote peaceful conflict resolution, while creating space for marginalized groups, especially women and youth, to assert their rights and obtain fair and timely outcomes.

### What makes agency-focused initiatives people-centred and impactful?

- Ensure local ownership of community-based mechanisms through the early and ongoing input and participation of community members, local authorities, civil society, and vulnerable groups.
- Invest in sustained capacity building and mentoring for community paralegals, mediators, and other local actors to develop the skills, knowledge, and leadership capacities that persist beyond the life of a project.
- Build from existing local or indigenous structures where relevant, recognizing and strengthening trusted, context-appropriate community mechanisms to enhance legitimacy and avoid duplication. Strengthen referral pathways to formal institutions to improve access to justice and reinforce the legitimacy and accountability of both systems.
- Plan for and support the formalization of community-based mechanisms through standardized ways of working and integration with local or national institutions and legal frameworks to promote long-term sustainability and the potential for scaling.
- Enable broad inclusion and accessibility, particularly for women, youth and other marginalized groups, by building trust between stakeholders and actively addressing social and institutional barriers to the meaningful participation and leadership of traditionally excluded groups in justice and dispute resolution.

Examples | **Ethiopia** | **Malawi** | **Yemen**

In Ethiopia, revitalized local peace forums in the Amhara region have helped address blood feuds that displaced families, disrupted schooling and prevented farmers from accessing their land. Composed of elders, religious leaders, youth and local officials, the forums focus on forgiveness and healing, contributing to a sharp drop in revenge killings—from 159 in 2022–23 to just five in 2023–24. The process has also reduced trauma, restored dignity and expanded community participation, including by women and youth. A government-facilitated compensation mechanism, coordinated with religious leaders, elders and peace committees, enabled perpetrators to provide restitution to affected families. This combination of local justice and reparative processes, local support, and government coordination has allowed affected families to return home, children to resume schooling and farmers to restart their livelihoods. This has helped to break cycles of violence and strengthen resilience within affected communities.

In Malawi, village mediators empowered to resolve minor civil and criminal cases through ADR have supported community stability and helped reduce congestion in detention facilities. While serious cases are referred to the police, the mediators resolved over 50,000 local disputes in just two years. This grassroots approach not only improved access to justice but also laid the groundwork for more inclusive national peacebuilding strategies. It contributed to the establishment of the Malawi Peace and Unity Commission, created under the 2022 Peace and Unity Act to promote unity, cohesion, and conflict prevention and resolution. The experience illustrates how locally grounded initiatives can influence and shape broader institutional reform.

In Yemen, community mediation committees have increased citizens' willingness to cooperate with police and justice sector institutions and to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner. Collaboration between the committees and local police to help resolve minor family and financial disputes resulted in a significant drop in pre-trial detention rates. Joint trainings between police, prosecutors, judges and communities have improved communication and coordination. Women committee members support women to access police stations, prosecution offices and courts. Institutionalization of the committees through standard operating procedures and designated workspaces at the Governor's Office and District Offices is supporting the sustainability and scalability of the model. (See UNDP, Final Evaluation Report, Promoting Inclusive Access to Justice in Yemen [PIAJY] Project, UNDP Yemen Country Office [November 2024], Finding 6.)

Box 27: **Insider mediation for people-centred justice and security**

Insider mediation is a peacebuilding and conflict prevention approach that empowers trusted, locally rooted change-makers to mediate, prevent and resolve disputes within their own communities. These insider mediators typically have long-standing relationships with those involved in the conflict and possess both local legitimacy and influence. They serve as connectors, conveners and early warning actors, helping to build trust across all levels of society.

Insider mediators may act independently or operate as part of more formalized Infrastructures for peace, such as local peace committees, commissions or task forces. They work on a wide range of thematic issues, including peace processes, natural resource-related conflicts, electoral violence, social cohesion and religious and faith-based issues. UNDP and its partners provide support through capacity building, peer exchange and accompaniment to strengthen their skills for sustained and adaptive engagement.

By fostering inclusive dialogue and supporting communities to articulate grievances, resolve disputes, and collectively address drivers of exclusion and insecurity, insider mediation can advance people-centred justice and security grounded in human rights principles such as participation, equality and accountability.

In Timor Leste, an Early Warning, Early Response System is sustained by a network of local volunteers trained to monitor and report on local conflict dynamics in their community. Mediation training has enabled the volunteers to respond to localized violent incidents through customary dispute resolution mechanisms. Through direct engagement with local security and justice providers, they help ensure that responses comply with human rights standards.



UNDP, Engaging with Insider Mediators: Sustaining Peace in an Age of Turbulence—Guidance Note 2.0 (2020).



#### A.4 Access

At the heart of the people-centred approach is the principle that all people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, should have access to quality, accountable and trusted justice and security services that help prevent or respond to harm and deliver fair outcomes.

The approach recognizes that access to justice and access to security are distinct but closely interconnected:

- **Access to security** focuses on protection from harm. It refers to people's ability to feel safe, protected, and fairly treated, and to have reliable avenues to prevent and respond to threats, whether those are violence, harassment or broader forms of insecurity.
- **Access to justice** focuses on redress and resolution. It is about having the ability to seek and obtain a fair resolution when harm or rights violations occur, in ways that are affordable, timely, equitable, and uphold people's dignity and rights.

In practice, the two often intersect, particularly in situations involving violence, injustice or exclusion. The people-centred approach addresses both, grounded in people's experiences, rights, and expectations of justice and security actors and systems.

Access is not only about physical or geographical access to services such as a police station, legal aid office or community safety forum. It also depends on whether people can afford to seek help, whether they know their rights and understand how to navigate the system, and whether they trust the system and believe they will be treated fairly and receive a just outcome.

Access refers to the full array of services, actors and mechanisms that people turn to in any context to resolve their problems or seek safety, including State, non-State and hybrid institutions, actors and mechanisms at the national, subnational and community levels.

Access is about fair processes and outcomes. In a people-centred approach, access to justice and security is fundamentally about the quality of the outcome people achieve, not just about the availability of services or institutions.

Access to justice and security is not just about the availability of services or institutions, but about what people experience when they seek help. This includes whether they receive a fair outcome that resolves their problem and protects their rights, and whether the process itself is fair, impartial, respectful and accountable. These procedural fairness elements shape whether people see justice and security actors as legitimate and trustworthy.

The people-centred approach emphasizes the importance of addressing “everyday” justice problems, including civil, administrative and criminal issues such as land disputes, debt, family conflicts, housing, employment or exposure to violence. These problems are often manifestations of rights violations, and can directly affect people's dignity, livelihoods and well-being. They also disproportionately impact those who are already vulnerable or marginalized. When left unresolved, they can deepen exclusion, fuel conflict and erode trust in institutions and the State.

People-centred support must focus not only on whether a person received a service but also on the extent to which the service helped them to resolve a problem and how that then contributed to improvements in their lives.

Finally, access reflects how all the other dimensions in this section function in practice. People are more likely to seek justice or security when they feel included, empowered, informed and respected, and when systems are service-oriented, accountable and fair. For this reason, access is a cross-cutting concern and is a key indicator of whether people-centred systems are truly working.

#### Supporting ADR and legal aid

ADR and legal aid are two practical entry points that are commonly used to strengthen access to justice and security. UNDP's support in these areas typically focuses not only on strengthening these mechanisms but also on creating enabling environments for their legitimacy, sustainability and impact. Institutionalizing or formalizing effective community-based mechanisms, such as paralegal networks, mediation committees or community security platforms, can expand their reach, improve coordination with formal institutions and support alignment with human rights standards across broader justice and security systems (see the Yemen example). However, in contexts of low trust, premature or poorly managed formalization may undermine the autonomy, responsiveness or perceived legitimacy of community mechanisms. Community-based mechanisms and systems should not be absorbed in a way that erodes their responsiveness to local needs. The goal is not to subjugate, replace or override



non-State or hybrid systems, including customary and indigenous systems, but to strengthen their fairness, accessibility and accountability—for example, through government regulatory frameworks.

The focus should remain on how best to enable a range of trusted pathways to justice and safety that are accountable, rights-based and responsive to people’s needs.

ADR and legal aid support is not limited to “justice” programming, but can occur in programmes such as stabilization, social cohesion and peacebuilding. Teams should be alert to and seek out synergies with other programming areas to ensure people are provided with trusted, legitimate and fair pathways to seek justice and security.



#### Example | Nigeria

In the northeast of Nigeria, UNDP’s stabilization programme partnered with the bar association to train community stabilization committee members as community paralegals. This empowered them to actively engage with the police, local government representatives and other institutions to help solve people’s justice problems. This engagement meant they could refer more complicated and serious cases to the bar association for legal assistance and representation, if necessary.

#### Supporting ADR mechanisms

ADR mechanisms, such as community mediation committees, customary justice forums and local peace committees, are often the most accessible avenues for people seeking to address problems, especially where formal pathways are weak or absent. Examples from across UNDP’s work, including in Yemen, Ethiopia and Somalia (see the examples above in the sections on Participation and Agency), show how ADR can resolve local disputes affordably, quickly and in ways that are perceived as legitimate and fair, and can do so even in the most politically constrained environments.

In Syria and Myanmar, UNDP has implemented the Collaborative Dispute Resolution (CDR) model to help address unresolved disputes that contribute to community instability.



#### Examples | Syria | Myanmar

In Syria, the CDR model design was informed by research into traditional mediation practices and participatory consultations with community representatives, justice professionals, local networks and UNDP field staff to ensure it was culturally appropriate and responsive to local needs. It primarily addressed housing, land and property (HLP), inheritance, and family matters. Committees were composed of volunteers nominated by communities for their reputations as trusted, neutral and fair mediators. Each committee is paired with a Syrian lawyer who ensures compliance with national laws and prepares written records of mediated agreements, which are registered with relevant government entities. This hybrid model combines community trust with legal expertise, strengthening legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

In Myanmar, HLP issues arising before and following the military coup, including land grabs, destruction of property and unchecked exploitation of natural resources by State and private actors, contributed to displacement and persistent insecurity within communities. These issues disproportionately impacted women and girls. Without access to formal land governance systems to resolve land related problems, communities are increasingly relying on largely male-dominated customary systems and the role of village leaders. At the same time, CSOs faced challenges and increased restrictions on their ability to operate. To address these challenges, UNDP empowered community leaders and CSOs to provide gender-sensitive CDR assistance on HLP and family matters, ensuring community access to fair justice outcomes. For CSOs, pivoting their legal aid work in this way, coupled with support from UNDP to build the capacities and capabilities to manage the risk environment, has strengthened their resilience and enabled them to continue operating in a highly constrained context. (See UNDP, Myanmar: *Lesson Learnt—Interim Protection of Housing, Land and Property Rights after the 2021 Military Takeover* [June 2024]).

In other contexts where governments are committed to expanding access to justice, community-based mechanisms have been integrated into formal justice and governance systems, while retaining their unique community-based character:

Example | **Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, village courts are a quasi-judicial local dispute resolution mechanisms that resolves minor civil and criminal dispute swiftly, affordably and fairly. Recognized in law, and delivering legally binding and enforceable decisions, they operate at the lowest tier of government, called the Union Parishad. The courts are designed to remove barriers to access by having extremely low fees and not permitting parties to have a lawyer. User satisfaction is consistently high, and awareness of the justice mechanism increased dramatically, from 9 percent in 2017 to 90 percent in 2021. The village courts have strengthened the capacity of the local authorities to respond to the needs of local communities. Support at the highest political levels and cost-sharing arrangements are helping in the expansion of village courts to over four thousand Union Parishads nationwide.

**Supporting legal aid**

UNDP has significant experience supporting legal aid to expand access to justice and protect vulnerable and marginalized people from harm. As justice needs rise and resources are constrained, countries are increasingly adopting a hybrid model of legal aid delivery that integrates State institutions, private sector actors (e.g., professional associations and law firms), civil society (e.g., university law clinics and CSOs), and non-lawyers (e.g., community organizers and paralegals) to expand access and enable sustainability.

UNDP's support to legal aid includes:

- Working with civil society, bar associations and other non-State legal aid providers (such as paralegals and university law clinics) to expand access and strengthen the quality, availability and responsiveness of services.
- Partnering with governments to develop inclusive legal and policy frameworks.
- Strengthening institutions to become more responsive, accessible and service-oriented (see Part B: Engaging the State and its institutions, Service orientation).

Partnerships with civil society actors are especially impactful when UNDP invests in their capacity development and reinforces their role as a key actor within a State's legal aid system. This includes enabling CSO participation in national discussions and planning processes for people-centred access to justice and rule of law reforms.

Examples | **Nepal | Lebanon**

In Nepal, UNDP supports the government to implement the Integrated Legal Aid Policy 2076, which brings together government institutions, the judiciary, bar associations and civil society to deliver accessible socio-legal aid services throughout the country.

In Lebanon, a Ministry of Justice–led effort to develop a national legal aid system is based on evidence from four UNDP-supported pilot legal aid service delivery models: a bar association–operated model; the local government-NGO–operated model; the university legal clinic model; and the NGO-operated prison-based model. By partnering with non-State actors and harnessing innovations such as mobile legal aid services and community paralegals, the models have shown how comprehensive legal aid can flexibly and cost-effectively meet the diverse justice needs of Lebanon's most vulnerable populations. The flexibility of the models allowed for tailored, locally relevant approaches to justice delivery in vulnerable communities and emphasizes the importance of focusing on function (ensuring access to justice for the most vulnerable) over form (adopting a uniform delivery model). (See UNDP Lebanon, “Advancing Justice in Lebanon: The Case for Greater Investment in Legal Aid” [draft report, June 2025])



### Programming tips for people-centred legal aid support:

- Focus data collection and analysis on the impact of legal aid services for people and communities. Did the client feel they received fair treatment and a just outcome? Did resolution of their justice problem lead to tangible improvements in their lives?
- Intentionally use legal aid data that reveals bottlenecks, gaps, and legal or systemic barriers to justice based on people's actual experiences to inform evidence-based people-centred justice sector reforms.
- Support governments to embrace legal aid as a tool for advancing justice, social protection and poverty reduction agendas. Legal aid protects vulnerable and marginalized people from eviction and violence, enables access to essential public services, and supports economic empowerment (e.g., by protecting labour rights or enabling women to access alimony and inheritance rights).
- Support capacity building for legal aid CSOs and reinforce their role as key actors in national discussions and policymaking for access to justice
- Identify opportunities to link ADR and legal aid services to other programming areas, including stabilization and early recovery, environment, and Business and Human Rights to ensure vulnerable people have access to fair dispute resolution mechanisms that protect their rights.

### What makes access-related interventions people-centred and impactful?

- Interventions are shaped by the justice and security problems people actually face, with success measured by whether those problems were resolved fairly, safely and sustainably, not just by whether services were delivered.
- Programming addresses specific barriers to access such as geography, cost, literacy, gender, displacement or discrimination, and is tailored to the needs of women, displaced persons and other vulnerable and marginalized groups.
- Interventions work with existing community-based and hybrid mechanisms that people already rely on, while supporting those mechanisms to become more inclusive, accountable and rights-based.
- Community-based mechanisms are strengthened to offer legitimate, effective and fair options for resolving everyday problems, especially where formal mechanisms are inaccessible or distrusted.
- Interventions recognize that many justice problems are civil or administrative in nature and often require support to access services such as health, social protection, housing or legal identity.



UNDP, *Accessing Justice: Legal Aid in Central Asia and the South Caucasus* (2013).

UNDP, *Legal Aid Service Provision: A Guide to Programming in Africa* (2016).

UNDP and UNODC, *Early Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Processes Handbook* (2014).

UNDP and UNODC, *Global Study on Legal Aid* (2017).



## A.5 Accountability

Accountability is a core principle of the people-centred justice and security approach and a necessary condition for systems that are accessible, equitable, effective, and responsive to people’s rights, needs and expectations. It is also a fundamental pillar of the rule of law. In any just society, laws must apply equally to all, meaning that individuals, institutions and authorities are held accountable for their actions, regardless of their status or affiliation. Where rights are violated or harm is caused, there must be mechanisms in place to ensure redress, sanction or remedy, whether through formal or informal justice systems.



UN Security Council, *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-conflict Societies, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2004/616*, 23 August 2004, p. 4.

There are multiple dimensions to accountability within the people-centred approach.

At the foundational level, the approach builds on the HRBA, which defines accountability in terms of the relationship between rights holders (people) and duty bearers (primarily the State), and the obligation of the State to respect, protect and fulfil rights.



See UNDP’s *Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) Toolkit*, “Accountability,” p. 49.

At the systemic level, the approach goes beyond whether rights are protected in law and by formal institutions to examine **how** people experience justice and security in practice, and the outcomes they receive. It focuses on whether systems are accessible, trustworthy, and capable of helping people to resolve their problems safely and fairly. This requires understanding how power is exercised and whether power holders (State, non-State and hybrid actors) act in ways that are transparent, consistent, and uphold people’s rights and their dignity.



See **Section 4.6** for more on power analysis.

Accountability is therefore not only legal and institutional but also relational. It is shaped by the quality of interaction between people and justice and security actors. This includes whether people, especially the most vulnerable or excluded, can participate in processes, have their concerns heard, and trust formal or informal actors and institutions to respond in a way that is transparent, fair and just.

Accountability underpins the legitimacy and perceived trustworthiness of justice and security actors, which in turn affects whether people engage or avoid them.

In many contexts, people access justice or security through a range of State, non-State and hybrid actors. These actors may derive legitimacy from community trust, tradition or legal recognition, but their accountability relationships can shift over time. A community defence group formed by and accountable to a community for daily security may, over time, align with political, military or State actors, reducing its responsiveness and accountability to local needs. People-centred programming must constantly analyse these power dynamics and adapt accordingly to ensure interventions support mechanisms that are accountable, locally legitimate, and responsive to people’s rights and needs.

The people-centred approach recognizes that accountability is not the responsibility of any single institution. It must be supported through a combination of political and institutional leadership, internal accountability structures, independent oversight, and public participation. Political commitment, civil society engagement, grievance mechanisms and user feedback systems all play complementary roles in making justice and security systems fairer and more responsive. By reinforcing these different layers, programming can identify where accountability is weak, where it is shifting, and how it can be strengthened at national, subnational, and community levels.

The previously discussed dimensions of participation, inclusion and agency are essential for enabling people to articulate their demands, raise concerns, and hold justice and security institutions to account through co-design, feedback systems and regular dialogue mechanisms. These interventions focus on ensuring institutions are answerable not only to legal frameworks but also to people’s real problems,



expectations and outcomes. They aim to ensure that individuals can raise concerns safely and that their feedback results in fair and timely responses. For example:

- **Community policing forums** enable community members, CSOs and officials to collaborate to monitor police performance, share feedback and guide policing priorities. This fosters trust, enhances transparency and embeds community oversight into everyday policing. See the example of [Local Prevention and Security Boards](#) in Türkiye.
- **Local safety platforms** composed of police, community leaders, youth, women's groups and local authorities that co-develop safety plans give communities direct and institutionalized influence over public safety decision-making and foster accountability through sustained engagement.
- **Court user committees** involving court users (e.g., litigants, victims and community members), legal professionals, court staff and civil society can identify service gaps, raise them directly with court leadership and local authorities, and co-create solutions for improved court processes. Such forums create an accountability loop for users to voice needs directly into reform planning and court operations. See the example of court user committees in [Kenya](#).
- **Civil society-led court monitoring** programmes that monitor court cases and gather user perceptions can directly inform court processes, enhancing transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of the courts to people's experiences of and actual needs when seeking justice. See the examples of [Sierra Leone](#) and [Palestine](#).

#### **What makes accountability-related interventions people-centred and impactful?**

- Interventions create safe, structured and direct ways for people, especially those who are often excluded, to raise concerns, provide feedback, and influence justice and security systems.
- Accountability mechanisms are designed to be inclusive, with deliberate representation of women, youth, displaced people, people with disabilities and minority communities to reflect the diversity of those served by the system.

- Programming is grounded in a contextual understanding of how power operates and how accountability relationships shift over time to ensure that power holders are answerable to the people they serve and that actions are constrained by principles of fairness, transparency and human rights.
- Support is given to legitimate community-based mechanisms, such as mediation committees, police-community forums, or court user groups, that are linked to formal institutions in ways that strengthen mutual accountability.
- Interventions focus on outcomes, including whether people receive just resolution to their problems and the quality of services improve. Effectiveness is measured by improvements in people's experiences of justice and security.