

Equal Access to Justice for All

High-Level Event

Organized by the UNODC Division for Operations

Tuesday 21 April, 2:30-4:00 PM

Conference Room A

Promoting the rule of law and ensuring access to justice for all is essential in criminal justice reform to allow all groups in society to equally enjoy their rights. Access to justice plays an important role in building societies and allowing them to grow, and is closely linked to legal empowerment, to enable people to make better use of the law and legal services in the protection of their rights. Barriers to justice reinforce poverty and exclusion and have a great and negative economic impact. For example, when detainees are held in unlawful detention and as a result lose their jobs, this in turn impacts their families and can plunge them into further destitution, hunger and homelessness, end children's education and force them into child labour, and affect physical and psychological wellbeing of all involved.



There are many challenges that hinder access to justice, including inadequate legislation and policies, limited financial resources, a lack of knowledge of which services exist and how to access them, and insufficient numbers of qualified justice actors to effectively deliver services, especially when it comes to the needs of persons that require special approaches and measures. One key element of enabling access to justice is access to legal advice and representation through **legal aid**, which is at the heart of the equality requirement and of the overarching objective of the 2030 Agenda: **to leave no one behind**. Provided at no cost, it protects those who do not have the means to defend and protect their rights: the detained, arrested or imprisoned, suspected, accused of, or charged with a criminal offence, as well as



victims and witnesses. It has an impact on families and communities, as it helps reduce the length of detention, the number of wrongful convictions, the incidence of bribery and justice mismanagement, and the rates of reoffending. **Women**, as such, are not a vulnerable group but may be subject to specific obstacles in accessing justice and may face discrimination when coming into conflict with the criminal justice system. In many countries, they encounter difficulties due to language barriers, illiteracy or

insufficient knowledge of their rights, as well as cultural barriers within communities. Similarly, legal support has a significant role to play in ensuring that **children** in contact with the criminal justice system – as alleged offenders or victims participating in proceedings – are dealt with in accordance with the relevant rights and laws, including specialized processes. **Victims of crime** also often require legal information, assistance and representation to navigate complex justice systems that are often not adapted to their needs and rights.

UNODC and its partners have long supported Member States and civil society to enable them to build capacity that empowers those ‘left behind’. Overcoming the challenges to achieve access to justice, in partnership with actors on the ground, UNODC assistance most of all enables people to actively participate in society and achieve meaningful justice, by overturning wrongful convictions, empowering victims and preventing their revictimization, training paralegals and other justice actors to better respond to the needs of their clients, or working towards the release of persons from pre-trial detention so they can return to their families.



Objective

This event aims at bringing together high-level speakers from Governments, UN entities, academia and civil society to highlight the key importance of equal access to justice for sustainable development and creating peaceful and prosperous societies in any country – no matter the national level of development – particularly for vulnerable groups and others left behind in access to justice. It will enable high-level discussion and dialogue on effective technical assistance and cooperation projects that make a real difference in people’s lives, including through describing the impact of UNODC’s project activities in Africa, Asia and the Americas by sharing concrete examples of how the beneficiaries work with the UN and how they experience the impact of the support they receive. Access to legal aid, the reduction of pre-trial detention, as well as the experiences and needs of women and children will be the central focus of the discussion as critical to protect the rights of disadvantaged persons in contact with the justice system. The event will also address the need for partnerships and increased sharing of knowledge about good practices from across regions.

