



Equal Access to Justice for All - Special Event

Organized by the UNODC Division for Operations
Wednesday 9 March, 14:00-15:30

Access to justice is a key component of fair, humane, effective, inclusive and efficient criminal justice, so all groups in society can equally enjoy their rights. It is important to build societies and allow them to grow. With the adoption of SDG 16, the international community undertook to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and to ensure equal access to justice for all. It is also at the heart of the equality and non-discrimination requirement and overarching objective of the 2030 Agenda: **to leave no one behind**. UNODC's efforts to widen access to justice focus on promoting police reform, access to legal aid, restorative justice programmes and access to justice for victims of crime. It is based on an understanding that, to truly realize this objective, all those affected by crime must be able to seek redress. To this end, there is need to fully safeguard the rights of alleged and sentenced offenders and their humane treatment during and after criminal proceedings; to enable people to make better use of the law and legal services in the protection of their rights; and to protect and assist victims impacted by crime.

Barriers to justice **reinforce poverty and exclusion** and negatively impact the economy. 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 support, especially when it comes to addressing structural barriers and discrimination and achieving equity. When distancing measures and the closing of courts had a massive impact on pre-trial detainees, prisoners and victims of crime, **the pandemic put a spotlight on the absence of strong mechanisms for accessing justice in many countries**. Often, the needs of the population were unclear, as was knowledge of available resources and stakeholders to count on, such as lawyers, paralegals, mediators or social workers – which became apparent when having to deal with a rising number of cases of domestic and gender-based violence. A resort to remote hearings often impacted the rights to due process and to a fair trial, and excluded poor persons, as they did not have the means to pay for or understand how to use the required technology. As also became evident in 2020, any effort to increase access to justice has to respond to the legitimate calls for addressing racial discrimination.

UNODC and its partners have long supported Member States, civil society, academia, community organizations and justice actors **to develop strategies and build capacity that empowers those left behind**. Overcoming challenges, 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 of lawyers, public defenders, paralegals and other professionals to better respond to the needs of their clients, and working towards the release of persons from pre-trial detention so they can return to their families.

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**, particularly for groups facing structural impediments in access to justice. It aims at increasing the evidence-base and exchange of experience between countries and regions, and partners supporting them, to make a real difference in people's lives. Guaranteeing access to justice during the pandemic and in a post-COVID world will be the central focus of the discussion as critical to protect the rights of all those in contact with the criminal justice system.