

OPINION

TIME TO COMMIT TO JUSTICE FOR ALL | OPINION

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Refugees risk their lives to get to countries where they can be safe, and their children can grow up without fear. #MeToo stories continue to surface as women speak out, in the workplace and beyond. Violence erupts regularly between rebel groups and government forces in different countries around the globe.

What unites these problems? A lack of justice. Whether they are victims of violence, facing harassment at work, seeking a business permit or dealing with debt, people have nowhere to turn in countries across the world as justice systems fail to respond to their needs.

The size of the justice gap is staggering. More than 1.5 billion people worldwide cannot solve their justice problems. Half of women who are sexually assaulted do not report the crime because they believe no action will be taken. A quarter of a billion people live in countries where the justice system has failed entirely or are stateless or living in modern slavery. Another 4.5 billion lack the documents needed to prove who they are or have no contract for the work they do or the place where they live.

The costs of injustice are high, hitting people's health and destroying their livelihoods, and damaging their societies and economies. Conflict costs the world \$2,000 per person per year, or 12.5 percent of global GDP. But justice can be provided for only \$20 per person in low-income countries, and \$64 and \$190 per person per year in middle- and high-income countries. This is half what it costs to provide universal primary and secondary education and a quarter of the cost of providing essential health services.

Everyone now agrees that education and health care should be available to all. Yet we don't accord the same importance to justice. We have built justice systems that cater to the privileged few rather than the many. They often entrench rather than alleviate injustice and deny people opportunities to thrive. In most countries, justice is slow, expensive and inaccessible to those who need it most.

But creating just societies and providing equal access to justice for everyone is an achievable goal. We served as chairs of the Task Force on Justice, which for the first time has set an agenda for delivering justice for all. In our report, we make the case for investing in justice, and we outline what works to build justice systems that resolve and prevent the justice problems that matter most to people.

The first step to achieving justice for all is to put people at the center, empowering them to seek solutions to their problems. People must have easy access to services that are designed around their practical and psychological needs, provided both by those working within and beyond what we traditionally think of as the justice system.

At the same time, we should devote more attention and resources to preventing problems from arising in the first place. By proactively identifying where injustices commonly occur and addressing the structural issues that create chronic problems, we can narrow the justice gap and improve the lives of billions of people.

People-centered approaches to justice are already having positive impacts around the world, including our own countries.

In Sierra Leone, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission heard the voices of thousands of victims of the country's civil war, granted reparations and has helped cement almost two decades of peace.

In Argentina, Access to Justice Centers allow lawyers, social workers and psychologists to attend to people's multiple justice-related needs under one roof, reaching thousands of people in areas where justice services had traditionally been absent.

In the Netherlands, the judiciary works to increase its relevance to society, with a pilot project that gives people informal access to a judge to discuss their justice problem and obtain fast and inexpensive solutions.



By addressing the justice gap head on and recognizing it as a root cause of so many of the crises we face today, we can work towards a world in which migrants need not flee their country out of fear of violence and sexual assault does not continue with impunity. We can also help people resolve their disputes peacefully and free them to work for a better future for their families and communities.

The Sustainable Development Goals promise justice for all by 2030. Although we have a long way to go before this target can be achieved, we possess the tools, knowledge and strategies needed to accelerate progress. We call on all world leaders to work together to invest in smarter, fairer justice systems and to put people at their center. It is time to deliver justice for all.

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The views expressed in this article are the writers' own.