Justice Data Observatory

People-Centered Access to Justice Research:

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABOUT JUSTICE DATA OBSERVATORY

The Justice Data Observatory (JDO) aims to understand, shape, and build global evidence that informs how people-centered access to justice can combat poverty and inequality, promote inclusive development and growth, and empower democratic participation and governance through sustained research to support evidence-based policies, programs, and practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, civil justice problems are ubiquitous. In every studied society, these problems affect every group, and they fall most heavily on marginalized groups, such as low-income communities, or groups that are minoritized around their religion, ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, or disability (World Justice Project 2019). These issues affect core areas of life, including the ability to make a dignified living, to have a safe and healthy place to live, and to care for dependents. Over the past two decades, a research literature has developed that offers a new lens on civil justice issues and their impacts. This work centers the justice experiences of ordinary people, rather than the structure or staffing of justice institutions, the elements of legal families, or the content of laws themselves. This growing body of empirical research supports a shift in policy and practice toward justice that is *people-centered,* or designed to be accessible, proportionate, and focused on the outcomes people experience when they face civil justice problems (OECD 2021).

Civil justice is a critical component of democratic function, economic development, and human flourishing (Moore and Farrow 2019). Nonetheless, it is much less studied than criminal justice (e.g., International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, NORC and USAID 2022). One reason for this is that, compared to the data sources that inform about people's experiences of other major social institutions, such as education, health care, labor markets, and criminal justice, the central data infrastructure for civil justice is in most countries underdeveloped. What data do exist are often organized around the interests and function of justice institutions, such as courts or lawyers, rather than the people they serve (Alexander and Sudeall 2023; Poppe 2023; Sandefur 2016). Consequently, in order to do any research at all, people-centered justice researchers must often collect, compile, or generate original data themselves. In this relatively young field, research is pursued by people who are presently seldom in conversation with each other about their research questions and findings. People-centered access to justice research consists largely of individual studies of specific contexts, using unique data collected and analyzed by people who do not understand themselves as participating in a shared intellectual field. This state of affairs results in a literature characterized by enormous variation in method, disciplinary approach, and specific research questions (Sandefur and Burnett 2022).

Part of making full use of existing research evidence is integrating that evidence within a framework that makes explicit guiding questions for the field. This literature presently lacks a shared research agenda that would offer such guiding questions that individual research findings could be understood as informing. This paper offers a first step in developing such a research agenda by exploring the landscape of existing research into relationships between people-centered access to justice and three outcomes: democratic empowerment, economic development, and poverty alleviation. These outcomes are critical to human flourishing, and accordingly have long been of interest to justice donors, policy makers, and practitioners. Research that empirically explores the relationship between access to justice and these outcomes tests a central premise of people-centered access to justice policy and practice: the belief that this type of access to justice leads to reductions in poverty, inclusive growth, and democratic empowerment.

This project seeks to uncover two aspects of extant research: what research questions regarded as important have been explored and what have not; and, the kinds of contexts for which research and data do and do not exist. We investigate the existence of such empirical research literature for different types of country contexts, with various levels of income, civil justice function, and social inclusion of marginalized groups. We chart the kinds of contexts in which researchers have conducted empirical research into questions of people-centered access to justice and the kinds of questions that research has explored, identifying both what kinds of knowledge have been produced for what kinds of contexts, and what kinds of questions and contexts remain as yet unexplored or underexplored.

METHODS

The project draws on three central data sources: cross-national datasets that inform about aspects of country context that may shape people's justice experiences; interviews with experts knowledgeable about people-centered access to justice research activity around the world; and, a literature search seeking empirical research exploring relationships between people-centered access to justice and democratic empowerment, economic development, or anti-poverty efforts.

Country Characteristics Relevant to People's Justice Experiences

Though each geographic space is in some ways unique, countries also share key characteristics that shape the context in which people seek and experience justice. In this research project, we classify countries on three dimensions that may shape people's opportunities to access justice: how well civil justice functions; the degree to which various groups in the country are included or excluded from common life; and, the country's income level.

Civil justice function. A country's ability to offer people a justice system that is accessible and fair supports not only the rule of law, but also people's ability to access justice, whether that is defined as access to courts and lawyers, or in a people-centered way that is focused on people's experiences with their justice issues (Sandefur 2019). In this project, the measure of civil justice function comes from the 2022 World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index. WJP's index of civil justice function includes seven dimensions:

1. **People can access and afford civil justice**
2. **Civil justice is free of discrimination**

3. **Civil justice is free of corruption**
4. **Civil justice is free of improper government influence**
5. **Civil justice is not subject to unreasonable delay**
6. **Civil justice is effectively enforced**
7. **Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms are accessible, impartial, and effective** (World Justice Project 2023).

To measure each dimension, the WJP collects two types of data in each country, "a General Population Poll … and a series of Qualified Respondents' Questionnaires … . [These] capture the experiences and perceptions of ordinary citizens and in-country professionals" (World Justice Project 2023). The ratings are combined into an index that ranges between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating better civil justice function. In the analyses presented here, countries in the top third of the measure are classified as "high" on civil justice function; those in the middle and bottom thirds are classified as "medium" and "low," respectively.

Social inclusiveness. The extent to which social, political, and economic life invite and welcome the participation of diverse groups of people is another factor that likely shapes people's ability to access justice, through their ability to engage on grounds of equality with other people and with social institutions. In the analyses presented here, the measure of social inclusion comes from the Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California-Berkeley. The inclusiveness index seeks to represent

> inclusivity and marginality across many of the full range of human differences … focusing primarily on the degree of institutional inclusion and protections extended to vulnerable groups across salient social cleavages, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability. [The] index focuses on social groups rather than individuals, emphasizing the kind of marginality that results from social identities and group membership. (Menendian, Elsheikh, and Gambhir 2022).

The index includes six dimensions: outgroup violence, political representation, income inequality, anti-discrimination laws, rates of incarceration, and immigration and asylum policies. The inclusiveness index averages across all six dimensions and is standardized to the mean of all countries. Countries in the top third of this measure are classified as demonstrating "high inclusiveness," those in the middle third as "medium inclusiveness," and those in the bottom third "low inclusiveness."

Income level. A country's income level also likely affects people's ability to access justice and the relationships between that access and outcomes such as democratic engagement. Income not only facilitates individual action but also is a critical resource base for public institutions like courts, ombudsmen, and administrative agencies, as well as for civil society organizations that may be implicated in people's justice problems. The measure of country income level comes from the World Bank's classification of countries' economies based on Gross National Income, which measures both earnings within a country and remittances and other inflows of income from outside a country's borders (World Bank 2023). Calculating this quantity per capita, the World Bank then assigns countries to one of four categories: high income, upper-middle income, lower-middle income, and low income. For the purposes of this analysis, we collapse the middle-income categories into one.

Table 1. Country Groups Classified by Social Inclusiveness, Civil Justice Function, and

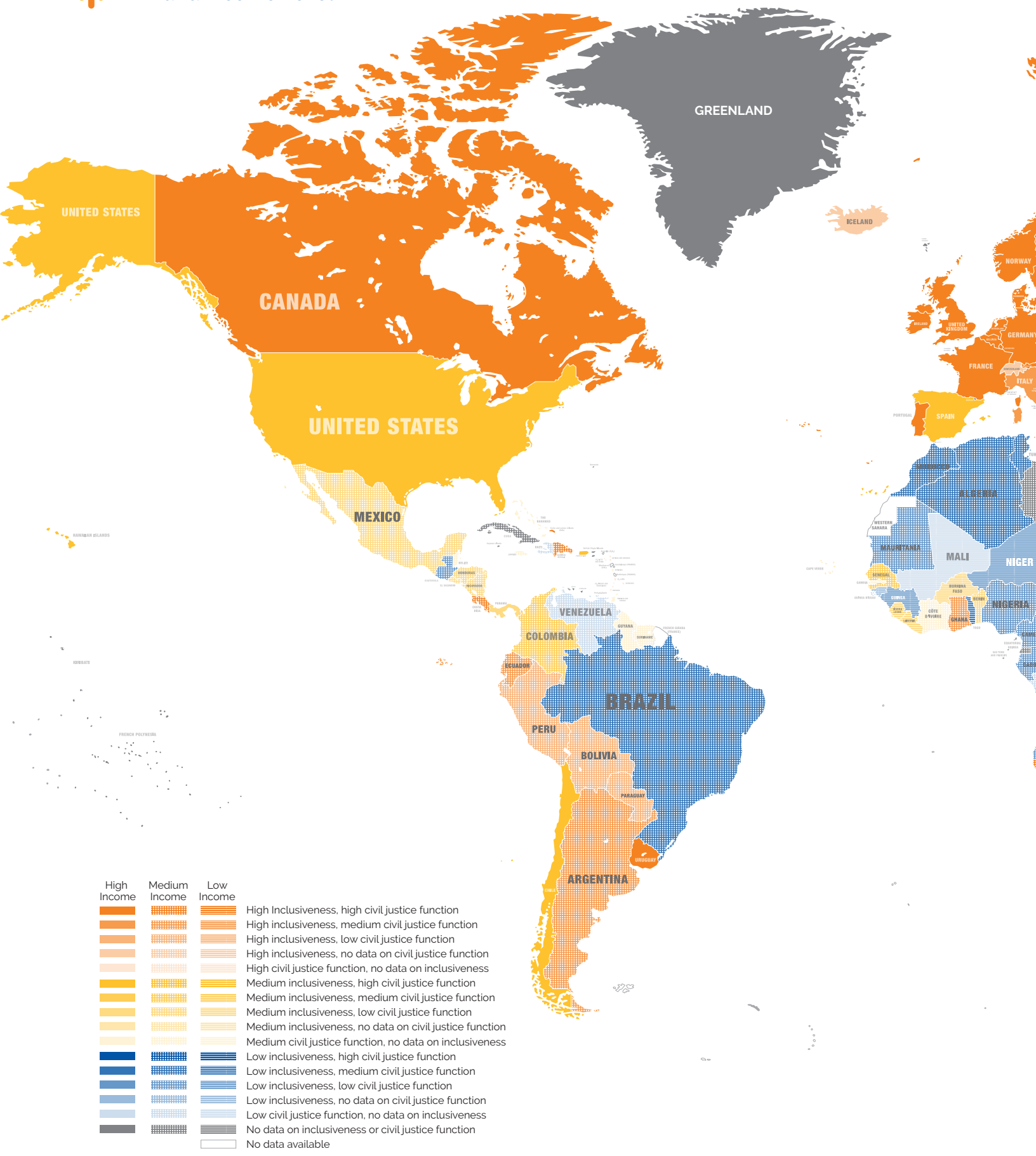
Income Level

	High Income	Middle Income	Low Income
High Inclusiveness, high civil justice function	Australia, Austria Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, United Kingdom, Uruguay	Costa Rica, Namibia	
High inclusiveness, medium civil justice function	Croatia, Italy, Malta	Ghana, Mongolia, Argentina, Ecuador, South Africa	
High inclusiveness, low civil justice function		Bolivia, Albania, Dominican Republic, Paraguay, Peru	
High inclusiveness, no data on civil justice function	Iceland, Switzerland	Lesotho, Fiji	
High civil justice function, no data on inclusiveness	Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Czech Republic, Hong Kong SAR, South Korea, St. Kitts and Nevis	Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines,	
Medium inclusiveness, high civil justice function	Chile, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Spain, United States	Mauritius	
Medium inclusiveness, medium civil justice function	Greece	El Salvador, Senegal Tanzania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Colombia North Macedonia, Serbia, Thailand	Malawi
Medium inclusiveness, low civil justice function	Hungary, Panama	Benin, Cambodia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Philippines, Vietnam, Bosnia and Herzegovina Mexico	Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Liberia Madagascar, Mozambique, Sierra Leone Uganda, Zambia
Medium inclusiveness, no data on civil justice function		Cabo Verde, Djibouti, Solomon Islands, Armenia, Azerbaijan,	

	High Income	Middle Income	Low Income
Medium civil justice function, no data on inclusiveness	Bahamas, Slovak Republic, Trinidad and Tobago	Côte d'Ivoire, Iran, Uzbekistan, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, Kosovo, Russian Federation, Suriname	Gambia
Low inclusiveness, high civil justice function	Singapore, United Arab Emirates	Kazakhstan, Malaysia	Rwanda
Low inclusiveness, medium civil justice function		Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Ukraine, Botswana, Brazil, China, Georgia, Jordan, Moldova	Togo
Low inclusiveness, low civil justice function		Angola, Bangladesh, Cameroon, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Lebanon, Mauritania, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Gabon, Guatemala	Guinea, Niger
Low inclusiveness, no data on civil justice function	Israel	Comoros, Eswatini, Tajikistan, Iraq	Chad, Guinea-Bissau
Low civil justice function, no data on inclusiveness		Congo, Rep., Egypt, Haiti, Kyrgyz Republic, Myanmar, Turkey, Venezuela	Afghanistan, Congo, Dem. Rep., Mali, Sudan
No data on inclusiveness or civil justice function	Andorra, Aruba, Bahrain, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Brunei Darussalam, Cayman Islands, Channel Islands, Curaçao, Faroe Islands, French Polynesia, Gibraltar, Greenland, Guam, Isle of Man	Bhutan, Kiribati, Lao PDR, Micronesia, Fed. Sts., Papua New Guinea, Samoa, São Tomé and Príncipe, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu, West Bank and Gaza, American Samoa, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Palau, Tonga, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu	Central African Republic, Eritrea, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen, Rep.

Sources: Otherness and Belonging Project (2022); World Bank (2023); World Justice Project (2023).

Country Groups Classified by Social Inclusiveness, Civil Justice Function, and Income Level



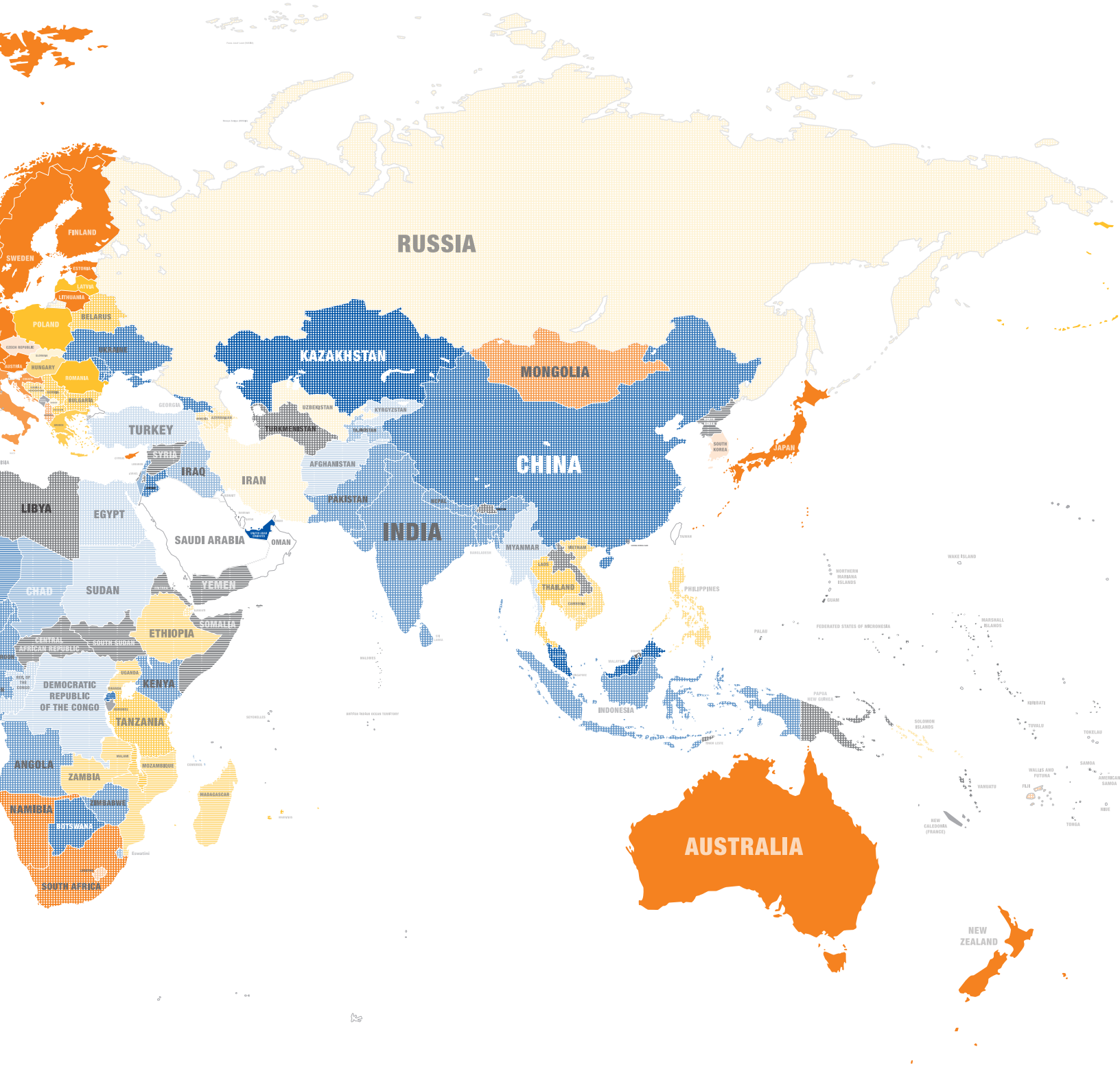

RUSSIA
FINLAND
SWEDEN
ESTONIA
LATVIA
LITHUANIA
BELARUS
POLAND
UKRAINE
HUNGARY
ROMANIA
BULGARIA
GEORGIA
AZERBAIJAN
TURKEY
SYRIA
IRAQ
IRAN
KAZAKHSTAN
UZBEKISTAN
KYRGYZSTAN
TURKMENISTAN
TAJIKISTAN
AFGHANISTAN
PAKISTAN
MONGOLIA
CHINA
INDIA
NEPAL
MYANMAR
VIETNAM
LAOS
THAILAND
CAMBODIA
SOUTH KOREA
JAPAN
TAIWAN
PHILIPPINES
LIBYA
EGYPT
SAUDI ARABIA
OMAN
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
QATAR
KUWAIT
BAHRAIN
YEMEN
CHAD
SUDAN
ERITREA
DJIBOUTI
ETHIOPIA
SOUTH SUDAN
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
UGANDA
KENYA
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO
TANZANIA
ANGOLA
ZAMBIA
MALAWI
MOZAMBIQUE
NAMIBIA
BOTSWANA
ZIMBABWE
SOUTH AFRICA
ESWATINI
MADAGASCAR
COMOROS
SEYCHELLES
MALDIVES
SRI LANKA
BRUNEI
INDONESIA
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
AUSTRALIA
NEW ZEALAND
NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
GUAM
WAKE ISLAND
FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA
PALAU
MARSHALL ISLANDS
SOLOMON ISLANDS
KIRIBATI
TUVALU
TOKELAU
SAMOA
AMERICAN SAMOA
TONGA
FIJI
VANUATU
WALLIS AND FUTUNA
NEW CALEDONIA (FRANCE)

Table 1 reports the classification of each country on these three dimensions. As the table reports, data on all three dimensions are not available for all countries. We are able to classify 106 (49%) of the 218 units for which the World Bank reports income data on all three dimensions and 80% (175) on income and at least one of the other two dimensions. Not all possible country types are found to exist.

The table reveals some interesting patterns. Countries can score high on one dimension and low on others, though there is a relationship between income level and both inclusiveness and civil justice function: only one low-income country for which we have data, Malawi, is classified as at least medium on both inclusiveness and civil justice function; all other low-income countries have lower values on both measures. While income is correlated with civil justice function and inclusiveness, it is also the case that several high-income countries are rated as low on inclusiveness, civil justice function, or both.

Global Informant Interviews

We sought informants who could report knowledgeably on the global access to justice research space, offering their insights on what research has been conducted and in what contexts, important discoveries and knowledge gaps, and where centers of research activity are located. Three factors guided identification of informants: deep expertise and sustained engagement with people-centered civil justice research and data, experience working either globally or across multiple regional or country-level contexts, and diversity of role or function, so that key informants included not only researchers, but also civil society actors, donors, and staff at intergovernmental organizations. In a few instances, informants represented more than one role or function. Additional informants were identified through snowball sampling, particularly when multiple informants we spoke with nominated a specific individual as knowledgeable about empirical research in this field.

Half of the informants were employed by civil society organizations, one third worked for either an international donor or private philanthropy, and the remainder were staff at intergovernmental organizations. Half were actively engaged in empirical research and the other half represented funders and consumers of research. In their work, these respondents used and consumed a range of research methods, including surveys, participatory action research, evaluation, return on investment studies, and policy analysis. No specific approach was dominant. All had a global remit and focused some or all of their work on the Global South. Most had specific regional expertise in the Global South. Fewer than twenty percent of informants interviewed originated from the Global South.

Two members of the research team participated in all of the interviews, which were conducted over zoom in late 2022 and early 2023. Respondents were asked about four topics:

1. Background information, including information about their organization, their role there, the areas of civil justice research they were most interested in, how they used research in their work, the countries and regions in which they worked, and the research methodologies and approaches they used.
2. The role of research and data in advancing people-centered justice, including key discoveries in empirical civil justice research that have changed or should change the way justice work is done and critical research questions about access to justice.

3. The kinds of information and data available about and useful for supporting people-centered access to justice, including data sources, facts, stories, etc., and the kinds of data and information that are needed but missing from extant work.
4. Information about the global civil justice research and data ecosystem, including existing governments and NGOs that effectively produce and share civil justice data, academic institutions and research hubs that foster or support civil justice research, as well as additional key informants.

We spoke with eleven informants. Interviews were machine transcribed and the transcriptions reviewed and revised by a member of the research team against the audio transcripts.

Literature Search

To produce a scan of relevant literature, we used the integrative search function (OneSearch) of a major research university's library to find writing that included key terms: various combinations of access to justice, people-centered justice, and democracy, legal empowerment, poverty, and development. OneSearch can find a range of different types of materials, including scholarly articles and books, theses, government documents, reports, and materials provided for courses. We also consulted bibliographies of research related to people-centered access to justice. The aim of this exercise was to produce an illustrative, rather than exhaustive, bibliography of the types of research extant and its distribution across different kinds of countries.

To be in scope for this project, the writing had to have been released in the 21st century (2001-present), report on some kind of analysis of empirical data, and explore relationships between access to justice from a people-centered perspective and one or more of the following outcomes: (1) reducing poverty and inequality; (2) promoting inclusive growth and development; and (3) empowering democratic participation and governance. Building on the OECD's (n.d.) "criteria for people centered design and delivery of legal aid and justice services," we define people-centered as:

- user-centered, seeking to promote equality and inclusion, accessibility, and/or availability;
- responsive and proactive, seeking to support timely, proportionate, and appropriate interventions that are responsive to individual needs and circumstances.

To be in scope, the activity studied does not have to achieve these goals of being user-centered, responsive, and proactive, but rather must aspire to them. Similarly, the research does not have to find that the activity is successful in reducing poverty, promoting inclusive growth, or empowering democratic participation; it simply must explore empirically whether one or more of those is a result of the activity. From each piece of writing determined to be in scope, we collected two facts: the country or region reported on and which of the outcomes—democracy, poverty, and/or development—were explored. The appendix to this report lists the articles.

FINDINGS

Foundational Discoveries

The emerging research literature is founded on discoveries that set the stage for identifying critical unanswered questions. These include insights from legal needs surveys, which have now been conducted in over 100 countries and jurisdictions (World Justice Project 2023). In the words of one key informant, these

studies are a "staggering testament" to the disconnect between institutional responses from legal systems and people's actual legal needs and capabilities for responding to civil justice problems. These studies have revealed that formal justice systems are peripheral to the resolution of most civil justice issues (OECD and Open Society Foundations 2019; Pleasence et al. 2014). As one expert put it, "[w]hat usually gets the attention, and probably is changing the way that justice work is done, is this finding [about] how few problems go to courts." Another observed,

> Most people don't recognize [their problems] as legal, the legal system is not the site to address most of those problems, and there's just this whole ecosystem of justice issues that have very severe impacts on people's lives and in their opportunity that the justice system is simply not structured and oriented to resolve. I think that's sort of the biggest discovery over the last, I mean it's been decades, but I feel like in the last … 5 years that has been like, that's no longer a controversial position in many parts of the world.

In addition to redefining the access to justice problem space, informants felt that extant research had also redefined the solution space, in particular by decentering lawyers as the solution to justice issues. One informant described this as

> The myths we tell ourselves around what lawyers are able to do versus regular people, and the recognition that by most metrics, if not all metrics, they're not securing better outcomes. [Lawyers are] not enabling people to be more empowered. You know, access to a lawyer has not been the determining factor in securing justice.

Another noted the research "evidence showing the power of community-based structures and paralegals … . and through a sustained support, which isn't the lawyer, it's the non-traditional legal advocates who can be much closer and embedded within community processes." For many informants, community-based paralegal models were the embodiment of people-centered justice, as shown in a small and methodologically diverse but growing evidence base demonstrating impact across political and geographic contexts.

What Has Been Studied, and Where

Existing research is quite uneven in its coverage of the world and of critical questions, as both the scan of the literature and the key informant interviews reveal. Table 2 reports on the results of the literature search. As with Table 1, each cell of the table includes country contexts that are classified by income, social inclusiveness, and civil justice function. The gray-shaded cells are types of countries that are not observed to exist in the world; thus, we should not expect research concerning these country types. Each cell reports the number of studies discovered for the country group and the topics explored in those studies. Many writings that looked promising based on their titles or abstracts were excluded because they were not actually empirical research, were not engaged with people-centered access to justice (instead approaching justice from the perspective of justice institutions), or did not explore relationships between people-centered access to justice and one or more of the three outcomes of interest. Following these guidelines, we identified 54 studies that were in scope. Sixteen studies focused not on specific countries but rather on one or more regions of the world. While some writings addressed more than one of the three outcomes, most focused on one.

Table 2. Research Topics Explored Empirically, by Country Group

	High Income	Middle Income	Low Income
High Inclusiveness, high civil justice function	Anti-poverty (2), Development, Legal empowerment/ democracy (5)		
High inclusiveness, medium civil justice function		Anti-poverty (2) Legal empowerment/ democracy (3),	
High inclusiveness, low civil justice function		Development	
High inclusiveness, no data on civil justice function			
High civil justice function, no data on inclusiveness			
Medium inclusiveness, high civil justice function	Legal empowerment/ democracy		
Medium inclusiveness, medium civil justice function	Legal empowerment/ democracy	Anti-poverty, Development (2) Legal empowerment/ democracy (2)	
Medium inclusiveness, low civil justice function		Anti-poverty, Development (3), Legal empowerment/ democracy (3)	Anti-poverty, Development, Legal empowerment/ democracy (2)
Medium inclusiveness, no data on civil justice function			Legal empowerment/ democracy
Medium civil justice function, no data on inclusiveness			
Low inclusiveness, high civil justice function			
Low inclusiveness, medium civil justice function		Anti-poverty, Legal empowerment/ democracy (2)	
Low inclusiveness, low civil justice function		Anti-poverty (2), Development, Legal empowerment/ democracy (7)	
Low inclusiveness, no data on civil justice function			
Low civil justice function, no data on inclusiveness			Development
No data on inclusiveness or civil justice function			

Surveys of people's civil justice experiences have become widespread at this point (OECD/Open Society Foundations 2019), but the research literature that explores relationships between those experiences and critical outcomes is still developing. Though the literature search aspired to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, the results suggest that the literature that employs empirical data to explore questions about relationships between people-centered access to justice and the outcomes of democratic empowerment, poverty alleviation, or development is not large. In part, this spareness likely goes back to the dearth of centrally collected data on these topics, so that individual research teams must collect or compile new, unique data for each research project.

The most common topic explored is democracy, through the lens of legal empowerment, with 33 instances of this topic being explored in empirical research. Studies linking people-centered access to justice to material outcomes like poverty reduction and development are less common. Nineteen pieces explored anti-poverty efforts, while eleven explored development. In part, this pattern reflects the success of funders, civil society organizations, and intergovernmental organizations in highlighting legal empowerment as an important outcome and tool in achieving other outcomes, such as democratic participation and social equality.

The three-way classification of countries produces 27 possible combinations of countries that have data for all three dimensions. Of these possible types of countries, 7 are not observed to exist in the world (i.e., as data cells, they are empty); this means that our research identifies 20 different substantive contexts in which these questions could be empirically explored. Of those 20 groups of countries, we could find no research exploring these research questions for eleven country types. That is, for really-existing country-types, in over one-half we have as yet found no research empirically exploring people-centered access to justice and the key outcomes of democracy, poverty alleviation, or development. Extending this analysis to the full range of really-existing countries, to include those for which we do not have data about inclusiveness and/or civil justice function, reveals that we have been able to discover no in-scope studies for 25 groups of countries, or nearly two-thirds of contexts. Middle-income countries have received more research attention on the topic of people-centered access to justice and the three outcomes of interest than have either high or low-income countries. Research follows development funds: around the world, more development donor funds go to middle-income countries than to low-income countries (ONE Data and Analysis 2023). As one key informant put it, empirical research to understand these questions is being "created at two very different speeds" in different parts of the world.

The key informants' perspectives resonated strongly with this finding of uneven research coverage. When asked about sources of data and evidence, most informants reported the same small list of global NGOs and intergovernmental organizations, including the World Justice Project, the Hague Institute for the Innovation of Law (HiiL), Pathfinders for Justice, the Global Legal Empowerment Network, the Open Government Partnership, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). All struggled to name examples of either research or researchers coming from the Global South. Collectively, informants were able to identify at least one example of an organization that engages in some activity on access to justice research and data for 20 distinct countries, ten of which are among the 78 Global South countries identified by the United Nations.

Research and Data Needs

The shift to a people-centered perspective on justice has reshaped the kinds of questions necessary to understand justice and development and the needed elements of an evidence base to answer those questions. The research agenda that emerges calls for three types of knowledge and the data necessary to produce them. One type of knowledge lays the groundwork for high-level change, demonstrating that people-centered justice is critical to development outcomes like anti-poverty efforts, distributed growth, and democratic empowerment. Another type of needed knowledge would offer understanding of how people centered justice helps to achieve those outcomes. A third type of knowledge would guide policy and practice, informing the implementation of projects, policies, and justice reforms.

I. Knowledge to Inspire a Change in Approach

> *Demonstrating to different types of audiences the critical role of people-centered justice in development, democracy, and anti-poverty efforts.*

Key informants called for knowledge that would inspire a change in justice practices. This knowledge would demonstrate to different kinds of audiences that people-centered justice plays a critical role in development, democracy, and anti-poverty efforts. Civil justice research and data were seen as necessary to inform advocacy, both at global and national levels, to increase justice financing and political buy-in. Informants linked this need to Sustainable Development Goal 16.3 (promote the rule of law at the national and international levels, and ensure equal access to justice for all), and the new indicator for access to civil justice (SDG 16.3.3). One described this as a need for research evidence that could "feed into policy debates at the UN and other international fora, and try and really make some of the work that's being done at the global level and in international development much more, you know, informed by advances in access to justice research." Another observed that, tactically, "pushing a civil justice research agenda in the context of the SDGs [is] largely, you know, instrumental to make the case for non-criminal justice in the UN development frameworks and financing." One described their work on this task this way:

> we started in supporting the [international development] community through not only gathering data, but also supporting the development of indicators and how to think about the different areas of justice and how to develop these metrics … and eventually as well, just on trying to understand a little bit of the impact of access to justice on development.

Respondents saw the usefulness of this kind of evidence at the country level, as well. They wanted national legal needs survey data that could be used to "sensitize national justice stakeholders that the field of justice is much broader than what they see from their institutional perspective."

Informants observed that different kinds of actors, both inside and outside the justice sector, are responsive to different kinds of information. As one put it, "[there] needs to be both the sort of robust methodological kind of data that plays to more the economic circles, but then more strategic advocacy and storytelling that actually shifts narratives and humanizes these issues." Informants observed that quantitative data, including survey data, are most useful to make the case to governments and multilateral or intergovernmental organizations

and stakeholders, whereas storytelling and narratives are most useful for purposes of policy advocacy and making the case to broader stakeholders, including the public and civil society actors. As one informant reported

> having the data in recent years from Pathfinders, OECD, and World Justice Project, that really spoke well to kind of the instrumentalist, bureaucratic audience when they ask like "Why is this important?" They're actually data thinkers, and they need the quantitative data.

Stories about specific people and experiences were seen as valuable because they "just open doors … [and] bring things alive in a way and get at some of the emotional connection for decision makers in a way that is powerful."

Creating knowledge that can be used effectively for this purpose requires an additional evidence base that provides insight into what kinds of arguments will resonate in what kinds of contexts and with what kinds of actors. As one informant put it, "I think the biggest question is what political arguments can be made that resonate, like what are the messages … that will unlock more resources. How do we move … into a world that actually shifts policy and shifts allocation of resources and power."

II. Knowledge for Understanding How People-Centered Justice Matters

> *Understanding how people-centered justice affects inclusive growth, democratic empowerment, and poverty alleviation.*

Though surveys of people's civil justice experiences have become widespread at this point, the research that explores relationships between those experiences and critical outcomes is still developing. The emerging research agenda includes calls for research that focuses on life outcomes, or the impact of people-centered justice solutions on the outcomes people and communities care about, such as secure housing, a living wage, or clean air and water. Answering this body of research questions will require data sources that collect information about outcomes that matter to people, and that follow people and communities over a long enough period of time to observe impacts broader than the resolution of a specific problem or case.

Several informants raised the lack of settled and shared people-centered outcome indicators as a significant problem for the research space. As one put it, "How is access to civil justice improving outcomes for people overall … like are they better off as a result?" Other informants understood this as a fundamental shift from approaches to justice from the perspective of courts and other case-handling institutions:

> We keep measuring the outcomes through 'has your problem been resolved or pending,' etcetera, we don't really have good outcome indicators. Anything even close to quality of life here … how the resolution of this problem is affecting your wellbeing.

Informants wanted explorations of the impact of people-centered efforts not just on remedies or solutions for specific problems but also on improvements in public institutions, redesign of policies, and redistribution of resources and, conversely, the role of system level changes in shaping people's and communities'

experiences with justice issues. Respondents were interested in role of people-centered justice services in affecting systemic change that addresses the root causes of justice problems:

> If [people] aren't able to get meaningful solutions to the problems they're facing, is that leading to a redesign of policies? Is it leading to changes in where public funding flows? Is it leading to changes in some of the day-to-day operations of different public institutions? … Are we able to translate from remedies to deeper institutional changes that address that root cause?

Informants called for better understanding of the relationships between access to justice, poverty, and inequality, including research investigating how "better access to justice and the efficiency of justice can lead to better economic outcomes and more fairness of treatment among the participants or the parties of legal cases." Another informant described an emerging effort to use legal needs survey data to identify variables and indicators that highlight justice inequality by "comparing outcomes for different people, and then looking at how that compares to other inequality outcomes." A third informant was direct, "what I'm most interested in is … How it is useful in dealing with bigger issues like addressing poverty and inequality?"

While respondents celebrated the contributions of contemporary legal needs surveys, they also identified challenges with these data, including their failure to collect information that would inform about the causes of everyday legal problems and the fact that legal needs surveys are often one-offs or episodic, which limits the ability to make comparisons across time. They also noted that these surveys sample sizes are often too small to permit investigation of many group differences. And several also noted that the structure of legal needs surveys, which tend to ask about civil legal issues exclusively, supports the perception of a separation between criminal and civil legal issues, which they believed was artificial.

Answering this body of research questions will also require greater access to institutional data and the ability to combine data sources to assess how the function of public institutions has or has not changed. The lack of availability of—and access to—court and administrative data was identified as a significant challenge. Even where such data is theoretically available, informants observed that in most countries it is badly organized and not easily accessible to researchers or the public.

Finally, respondents wanted more research that explores the impact of people-centered efforts not just on remedies or solutions for specific problems but also on collective empowerment. Answering this body of research questions will require the development of both methods and metrics of measurement to assess these impacts. Informants interested in democratic empowerment primarily wanted to know about linkages between access to justice, civic participation, and government accountability. As one informant reported, "for us, the main [research] focus really has been on administrative institutions, the control of the day-to-day processes and decision making that respond to the specific rights claims people are making." Another suggested that some of the research questions on justice outcomes "go to larger questions of governance … does having more good and predictable justice supports, especially on these public governance issues, actually drive improvements in public accountability and participation?" Informants also drew connections between legal empowerment and representation among vulnerable and marginalized groups. Finally, they highlighted the need for research to be community-driven, with "a commitment to following the priorities as

defined by local actors." They also emphasized the need for research to be savvy to the political dimensions of grassroots justice work: "that research has better relevance and use and uptake when you have good … political actors who are leading it."

III. Knowledge for Implementation

Understanding what solutions are effective, and how to sustain and scale them.

The emerging research agenda in this area includes calls for research that explores what one key informant called "the never-ending what works" questions: what interventions work for whom, where, and when? A common thread throughout was a desire for better evidence to inform policy. As another informant phrased the goal, "How do we make research really not only build the field of knowledge, but how will it impact the policy choices, especially in low and middle-income countries?" Answering these questions will require a systematic approach and systematically collected data to understand why and how types of interventions, policies, programs work in certain contexts and for certain populations or problems.

A key research gap identified consistently by informants is how to best resolve everyday justice problems. As one informant said, "I just think there are basic questions about what works," and another, "How do you best [help people address] domestic violence, exploitation, evictions, all of these common problems that I think there is a combination of justice and other evidence that needs to be brought together to answer some of those questions." In addition to identifying the core research question, informants often qualified their responses in this context; for example, what works across political and institutional contexts or what works without relying on lawyers and courts or what works at scale.

Respondents also called for basic facts about the costs of justice services and the benefits of providing them, to guide the efficient and equitable allocation of justice services and choices between investing in justice and other sectors, such as health, transportation, or education. Answering these questions will require systematically collected data about services, costs, and outcomes from court systems, administrative agencies, and service providers both inside and outside the justice sector. This will require better information and data on justice financing, including data on donor aid flows and justice budgets. Informants were interested in "how resources are allocated and governed," whether justice budgets are actually promoting access to justice, and a better understanding of what the incentives are for investing in justice and what the concrete impacts are. Informants also pointed to a lack of available data on how much governments spend on frontline services and what it costs to deliver basic justice services (primary legal aid) to address everyday legal needs.

Finally, informants called for research that illuminates the pathways to scaling up people-centered solutions. One informant framed the question in this way:

> If you want people-centered justice services that sort of implies a responsiveness and a small scale interaction, but how do you organize that at a large scale? I think that is a massively important question that a lot of organizations are just practically struggling with.

Several informants tied this question to financing, for example how might governments allocate resources or donors' direct aid in a way that reinforces organizing justice sector services in a way that is people-centered or promotes access to justice.

CONCLUSION

This project has sought to chart a research field, exploring what questions have been asked about what kinds of countries around the world and placing that extant research in a broader intellectual context of what knowledge is needed. That effort begins to show the outlines of a shared high-level research agenda around the role of people-centered justice in achieving the development goals of ameliorating poverty, achieving distributed growth, and supporting democracy through legal empowerment. The emerging agenda calls for knowledge for different purposes.

One type of knowledge is meant to inspire change in justice practice. In this effort, different kinds of evidence will be persuasive to different types of audiences. Tailoring that evidence to those audiences will require research into what kinds of arguments different audiences find persuasive. For audiences that are drawn to systematic and quantitative analyses, this research area faces a significant challenge: compared to other sectors, such as education and healthcare, for example, little of the data necessary to conduct large scale-quantitative analyses exist for people-centered access to justice.

A second type of knowledge would illuminate how people-centered justice affects development outcomes. This research requires data that measure life outcomes, rather than case outcomes. This effort will require research to understand what outcomes matter to people, and research designs that follow people and communities over a long enough period of time to observe impacts broader than the resolution of a specific problem or case. This body of desired knowledge also includes investigating relationships between people-centered access to justice and system change, whether in the form of improvements in public institutions, policy reform, and resource distribution. This effort will require much greater access to institutional data than currently exists. A third key desiderata in this type of knowledge would explore relationships between people-centered justice and democratic empowerment. That effort will require researchers to develop methods and measures to explore collective empowerment.

A third type of knowledge would inform implementation of people-centered justice practice. This would include many more studies than currently exist of what interventions work for which populations, in what parts of the world, and under what kinds of social, political, and economic conditions. This body of work would also include understanding the costs of justice services and the benefits of providing them. That research effort would require systematically collected data about service costs and outcomes from a range of actors, both institutional and personal, involved in these matters. Research and data would be critical to understanding another key research question, about the pathways to scaling up people-centered solutions.

Across these three types of knowledge, there are significant gaps in extant research. Material outcomes like poverty and economic growth have been much less studied than legal empowerment. Middle-income countries have received more research attention than low- or high-income countries. Much of the world remains unexplored in this research area.

A shared research agenda presents the opportunity to both generate new insights through integration of existing research and to identify knowledge gaps and opportunities to better understand the role of justice in democratic empowerment, inclusive growth, and antipoverty efforts. Responding effectively to the global challenge of over five billion people experiencing unmet justice needs (World Justice Project 2023) will require a rigorous, evidence-based understanding both of those needs and of effective, scalable, and sustainable solutions to meet them. This emerging agenda can both guide the interpretation of existing research and lay the groundwork for a better understanding of where and how to invest in research and researchers to produce needed knowledge.

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APPENDIX: Illustrative Articles About People-Centered Access To Justice And Key Development Outcomes

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