

**His Excellency Mr António Guterres  
United Nations Secretary-General  
NEW YORK**

The Hague, 14 April 2021

## **Reimagining social contracts: A call to put people at the centre of justice**

Your Excellency,

We write to you as member states of the United Nations that are committed to building more peaceful, just and inclusive societies, pursuant to Sustainable Development Goal 16. With this joint letter, we hope to inform your reflection on the recommendations to advance our Common Agenda, as requested in the Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations.

We are writing this letter in the context of a pandemic that has dramatically altered societies around the globe. It has exposed inequalities, exacerbated injustices and contributed to a wave of protest and unrest. It has had a particularly dire impact in conflict-affected countries, but calls for strengthened respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, including more dignity, equality and justice, can be heard around the world. The pandemic has also demonstrated our interdependency and the need for stronger international cooperation, including vaccine equity. Preventing conflict, sustaining peace, promoting the rule of law and access to justice are crucial to building back better.

Against this backdrop, we heed your call for ‘a new social contract for a new era’ under the Common Agenda, and agree that it necessary to rethink the fundamentals of our societies, as we work towards a more equitable, more resilient, more peaceful and sustainable future.

Strengthening the rule of law is a fundamental part of building trust in the social contract. The rule of law also requires a new approach, one that allows justice systems to be more effective and transparent in addressing injustices and grievances, tackling inequalities and building resilient societies. We believe that transforming justice, by putting people at the centre, is key to reviving the bonds that hold our societies together, and to re-establishing trust between people and communities, and governments.

Globally, even prior to the pandemic, 1.5 billion people had unresolved justice problems, as improved data about the size of the global justice gap has revealed. Data also shows that some groups, including for instance women, children and youth, are more likely to suffer injustice than others. We have a responsibility not to leave anyone behind. In addition, impunity, including for the most serious crimes under international law, continues to be a burden on societies.

This failure of justice systems to resolve and prevent people's justice problems weakens the social contract, and contributes to unresolved grievances, violence and instability. Corruption by justice actors, and institutions that serve the powerful rather than the people, are undermining trust in many countries. As the world emerges from the pandemic, we must reverse coercive policies and actions frequently deployed during the public health emergency that lack respect for human rights.

The SDGs seek to promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies by providing equal access to justice for all and building accountable and transparent institutions. This requires a shift towards putting people's needs and rights at the centre of justice systems, services and policies, and enabling institutions to respond effectively and credibly. Access to justice is best understood as the ability of people to resolve and prevent their justice problems, and to use justice as a platform to participate in their economies and societies.

The following principles towards achieving people-centred justice have received recognition and support from UN member states, including in [The Hague Declaration](#), the [Joint Action Plan](#) of the G7+ countries, and subsequent declarations and statements:

1. **Put people and their justice needs at the centre of justice systems.** Understand what people need and want when they seek justice, and the justice they receive. Make better use of data (including the new indicator SDG 16.3.3) to map and understand the context and tailor actions to groups that are more likely to suffer injustice.
2. **Resolve justice problems.** Transform justice institutions and broaden the range of formal and informal justice actors to provide people with fair, inclusive, relevant and timely justice solutions that respect human rights. Promote open justice and embrace high-tech as well as low-tech innovations based on data, digitalisation, evidence and learning.
3. **Improve justice journeys.** Empower people and communities to understand, use and shape the law, increase meaningful participation in justice, and provide people-centred justice services that help them achieve fair outcomes.
4. **Use justice for prevention and to promote reconciliation.** Take measures to reduce violence and de-escalate conflicts and disputes, build trustworthy and legitimate justice systems, prevent recurrence of grave human rights violations, tackle the root causes of injustice and use the law to reduce risks.
5. **Empower people to access services and opportunities.** Eliminate legal, administrative, financial and practical barriers that people face to obtain documents, access public services, including for mental health, and participate fully in society and the economy, while promoting gender equality.

By embracing people-centred justice, we can reduce inequality and exclusion, reduce all forms of violence, revive the social contract and rebuild trust. This will enable us to more effectively uphold human rights, combat racism, discrimination and other forms of structural injustice and to better meet demands from the next generation, most notably for climate justice.

We ourselves plan to contribute to building peaceful, just and inclusive societies in various ways, including through a justice action coalition that will serve as a platform where justice actors can exchange experiences. We are mindful that some countries will require institutional or financial support, to enable them to provide access to justice for all. We aim to forge new partnerships and strengthen collaboration across borders in line with your vision of inclusive and networked multilateralism.

We look to the United Nations as a partner in this effort, and invite you to take practical steps to make the United Nations more fit for purpose, to develop a more unified voice and approach as you review the organisation's rule of law strategy, and to work more closely with international financial institutions, regional organisations, and civil society.

We encourage you to include in the Common Agenda these five principles on people-centered justice, and a vision of justice where no one is left behind, to identify justice as a guiding principle for economic recovery and the societal reset, and to raise our collective ambitions to achieve the goal of providing equal access to justice for all by 2030.

We stand ready to support you in these endeavours.

The Joint Letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, *"Reimagining social contract: A call to put people at the centre of justice"*, was endorsed at the Ministerial Meeting on Building Peaceful and Inclusive Societies through Justice for All, held virtually on 14 April 2021.

The letter is endorsed by **Afghanistan, Canada, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Liberia, Libya, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Sweden, and Switzerland.**

The meeting was organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the g7+ secretariat, The Elders, and the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies.

For more information, please see: [www.justice.sdg16.plus](http://www.justice.sdg16.plus)