Riga Statement “Investing in Access to Justice for all!”
High-Level Panel, OECD Roundtable on Equal Access to Justice
Riga, Latvia, July 2018

On 6 July 2018, Ministers, high-level participants from OECD member and partner countries and members of the Task Force on Justice of the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, met in Riga, Latvia at the High-level Panel “Investing in Access to Justice for all!” as part of the OECD Policy Roundtable on Equal Access to Justice. The High-level Panel highlighted collaborative government and civil society efforts in OECD member and partner countries towards strengthening legal empowerment and equal and people-centred access to justice and called for action in investing in access to justice for all to foster inclusive growth and implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

1. Equal access to justice and legal empowerment are intrinsic goods and foundational components of inclusive growth, transparent and accountable institutions and sustainable development. The inability to resolve legal problems, either criminal or civil in nature, can be both a cause and a result of poverty. Lack of legal empowerment and equal access to justice narrows economic opportunities available to individuals, reinforces the poverty trap, and undermines human potential. Justice problems are not randomly distributed and poor, marginalised and vulnerable populations are disparately impacted by justice problems.

2. Target 16.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals\(^1\) provides a unique opportunity to accelerate the provision of justice and work toward ensuring equal access to justice for all by 2030. Justice is central for progress in many of the other Sustainable Development Goals such as eradicating poverty and hunger, supporting gender equality, reducing inequality and preserving the environment.

3. Measuring and monitoring progress in access to justice from the people’s perspective is critical to ensure that no one is left behind and as part of the implementation of SDG target 16.3. It is important to understand and meet legal needs of individuals, communities and business, especially small and medium enterprises in order to promote Inclusive Growth and positive investment climate. Participants called on the international community to develop tools and guidance to support countries’ efforts to better understand and address legal needs, including the forthcoming “Toolkit on Measuring Legal Needs and Access to Justice”.

4. Lack of equal access to justice generates significant costs for individuals and societies. Unmet legal needs create direct and indirect economic and social costs to individuals, communities and the state. These can take the form of health impacts, unemployment, lost productivity, mental illness, family instability, disrupted education for children and gender-based violence, all of which can impact the public purse. A better understanding is required of the needs of women, minorities, persons with disabilities and the elderly who face particular barriers in accessing justice. Failure to provide access justice for women can have intergenerational effects on children or older people as women often take responsibility for their care. Participants called on international partners, such as the Task Force on Justice, UN Agencies, OECD, European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice, IDLO, World Bank and international Non-Governmental Organisations, to continue its efforts to deepen the

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\(^1\) “Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all”
empirical foundations of the business case for investing in effective access to justice and legal empowerment.

5. Innovative approaches are needed in the delivery of people-centred and tailored legal and justice services to meet diverse legal needs and empower individuals, communities and business. The use of technology, non-lawyers, sectoral partnerships and independent civil society models all offer potential in addressing justice needs. A first step is identification of success factors and understanding what works, as well as exchange of good practices and the lessons learned in enhancing access to justice from people’s perspective. Participants emphasised the important role of partnerships between governments, international and civil society organisations and initiatives to identify and foster exchange of experiences, as in the present event, and provide a platform for bringing together policy- and decision makers, experts and civil society to advance people-focused access to justice and legal empowerment. Participants looked forward to the forthcoming report on *People-Centred Legal and Justice Services: Fostering Inclusive Growth through Equal Access to Justice*, which is based on good practice examples from OECD member and partner countries.

6. Participants called for concerted action at the local, national and global level to achieve equal access to justice for all, specifically for women, indigenous communities and vulnerable groups. Participants agreed to impress upon their respective governments the need to allocate sufficient justice financing, defend civic space, and implement strategies and initiatives that will bridge the justice gap. The High-level Political Forum of 2019 was seen as a meaningful opportunity to showcase success and solutions in the area of justice and to make commitments to demonstrate concrete results by the end of a second four-year cycle in 2023.