

Foundations, Perspectives and Assessment of People-Centred Justice

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ABSTRACT

People-Centred Justice (PCJ) has gained increasing scholarly and policy attention as a framework for enhancing justice systems' responsiveness to the lived realities, needs and expectations of justice seekers, prioritising the timely delivery of frontline services. Its prominence is supported by international legal and normative frameworks that advocate for responsive, fair and equitable justice systems. Despite heightened interest in PCJ, exploration of its conceptual foundation, literature and assessment across justice systems is limited. To address this gap, this study has examined the foundational principles, philosophical underpinnings, and both theoretical and empirical literature on PCJ. Underpinning PCJ is a set of foundational principles. These principles provide the grounding for its legitimacy, adoption and institutional implementation and include accessibility, responsiveness, fairness and impartiality, inclusivity and non-discrimination, empowerment, transparency and accountability, timeliness and efficiency, and collaboration and coordination. Findings further indicate that, although PCJ has gained global traction as a justice reform paradigm, conceptual ambiguities exist, and there is limited quantitative and qualitative assessment of its progress. To address this, a conceptual framework and methods for assessing the progress on the adoption and implementation of PCJ have been provided. The framework, which draws from PCJ principles, broad focus areas, normative and legal frameworks and literature, provides the context that comes into play. It is therefore recommended that the justice sector institutions should, at the onset, have a well-grounded theory of change that links their pre-existing practices to the desirable PCJ practices. Further, effective implementation of PCJ requires enhanced institutional commitment, robust and context-sensitive assessment frameworks, evidence-based learning and sustained responsiveness to the lived needs, realities and expectations of justice seekers.

Key Words: People-Centred Justice (PCJ), Justice Systems, Responsiveness, Principles and Assessment

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1. BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction

Access to justice constitutes a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. In many jurisdictions, formal justice systems are widely perceived as complex, costly and insufficiently responsive to the realities and needs of justice seekers. People-centered justice (PCJ) has emerged as a transformative framework to address these limitations. It departs from formal justice systems by conceptualising justice as a relational, participatory and problem-solving process (World Justice Project, 2023a). Whereas formal justice systems emphasise procedural uniformity and state-centric processes, PCJ prioritises community participation, informal justice mechanisms and the lived experiences of justice seekers. Furthermore, PCJ shifts justice system assessment toward the quality of resolution and user satisfaction (Chapman et al., 2021).

Despite ongoing jurisdictional reforms, most justice seekers continue to encounter barriers to accessing fair, inclusive and responsive justice systems. Conventional justice approaches, characterised by procedural rigidity, formalism and institutional complexity, often fail to address the lived realities, needs and expectations of justice seekers. These challenges are exacerbated by structural barriers, including high access costs, procedural complexity, exclusionary practices, and limited participation of vulnerable and underserved groups in justice processes. In response to these challenges, PCJ has emerged as a transformative framework that places justice seekers at the core of justice delivery. It has gained prominence due to its focus on accessibility, responsiveness, inclusivity and accountability.

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Although scholarly and policy interest in PCJ has increased, significant conceptual, theoretical and assessment gaps remain. Discourse on PCJ is fragmented across disciplines, institutions and jurisdictions. Knowledge of its foundational principles and philosophical basis is limited. Moreover, the quantitative and qualitative assessment of PCJ outcomes in society is weak. To address these challenges, this study explored the foundations of PCJ, including its evolution and philosophical basis. The study further analysed the fundamental principles and frameworks underpinning PCJ, and reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature. Furthermore, the study investigated methods for assessing the extent of PCJ adoption and implementation.

1.2. Methodology and Scope of the Study

This study primarily employed an exploratory research design to achieve its objectives. The adoption of an exploratory approach is justified by the evolving and multifaceted nature of PCJ, which necessitates openness to diverse sources of information and perspectives. The methodology involved a comprehensive review of theoretical and empirical literature to determine philosophical and normative foundations underlying PCJ, and consequently establish the conceptual framework.

In the study, the justice system has been examined holistically, encompassing all justice-sector institutions and their respective functions. The review draws on examples from multiple countries and historical periods, addressing key justice-sector functions such as policing, adjudication, legal representation and aid, legislative and policy reforms, witness protection, victim support, correction and rehabilitation, and civil justice mechanisms.

2. FOUNDATIONS OF PEOPLE-CENTRED JUSTICE

2.1. Evolution of People-Centred Justice

People-centred justice did not emerge abruptly but is a product of interdisciplinary convergence over time, focused on advancing justice, upholding the rule of law and serving humanity. Its development reflects a response to formal systems that frequently emphasise punitive approaches at the expense of rehabilitation and community participation (Zehr, 2015). Historically, many societies structured their justice systems around community values, relying on local customs and norms to guide behaviour. Dispute resolution often occurred through informal mechanisms such as negotiation, mediation and reconciliation. In most societies, there was a consistent emphasis on conflict management processes that fostered restorative justice rather than punishment.

Following World War II, a global emphasis on human rights significantly impacted justice systems worldwide. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 emphasised the importance of protecting individual rights, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive, people-centred justice framework. This emphasis continued with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1976 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which also came into force that year. These covenants solidified the international community's commitment to a comprehensive and enforceable human rights regime.

Subsequent human rights instruments had considerable influence on the evolution of PCJ. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women provided a legally binding framework that addressed discrimination and supported equal access to justice for women (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW], 2015). Complementing this convention, the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 called for the full realisation of women's human rights and championed women's entitlement to live free of gender-based violence (UN, 1995).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 extended the people-centred framework to children with the principle that justice must be responsive to their vulnerability. Further, the 2015 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities deepened the inclusivity argument, requiring states to actively remove structural barriers to accessing justice.

At the regional level, other mechanisms such as the European Convention on Human Rights, which came into force in 1953, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of 1986, and the American Convention on Human Rights of 1978, played a vital role in advancing legal and normative standards on PCJ. The standards delineated state obligations that underpinned the necessity for refocusing on human rights and the provision of access to justice for all individuals. Further, they set the tone for PCJ as they began to transform the lived realities of vulnerable and underserved populations by emphasising non-discrimination, advancing procedural fairness, and guaranteeing effective remedies. In doing so, they underscored the centrality of PCJ and highlighted the need to dismantle structural impediments to equality before the law.

PCJ also evolved from the concept of restorative justice. In the late 20th century, the modern concept of restorative justice emerged as scholars and practitioners recognised the need to repair harm and restore relationships, rather than leaning to punitive measures. Zehr (2015), particularly in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, outlined the core

principles of restorative practices, highlighting the engagement of victims, offenders and communities in the process of repairing harm and fostering healing.

In the early 2000s, the justice sector began emphasising community and individual justice needs. For instance, Braithwaite (2002) noted that restorative justice approaches emphasised reintegration, community involvement and responsive regulatory approaches. Additionally, Curran (2007) advocated for legal service delivery models that enhanced accessibility, inclusion and community-based problem-solving.

Awareness also grew regarding the injustices experienced by marginalised communities. Movements advocating for social justice, gender equality and the rights of indigenous populations demanded legal frameworks that addressed systemic disparities. In 2012, a UN Declaration committed Member States to providing fair, transparent, effective, non-discriminatory and accountable services. The commitment aimed at promoting access to justice for all, including members of vulnerable groups (UN, 2012).

Over time, these foundational ideas shaped the evolution of PCJ. The progress witnessed increased advocacy and the implementation of justice programmes that not only addressed justice outcomes, but also the intersecting social needs. As a result, PCJ gained significant momentum, with numerous jurisdictions adopting its practices.

2.2. *Philosophical Anchorage of People-Centred Justice*

The philosophical underpinning of PCJ reflects a gradual movement away from state-centric justice delivery models towards approaches that prioritise the lived realities and needs of individuals and communities. It is grounded in the recognition of each person's inherent dignity and the right to pursue a meaningful life. This principle resonates with longstanding natural law traditions, as articulated by thinkers such as John Locke and Thomas Aquinas, who underscored the moral foundations of natural law and human dignity (Finnis, 2011). It is also rooted in Immanuel Kant's ethics (Kant, 2012), which underscores the intrinsic dignity of every individual and the importance of autonomy and respect as foundational principles in moral philosophy and legal theory (Finnis, 2011).

While Hart (1961) in *The Concept of Law*, emphasises the importance of formal legality in the operation of legal systems, PCJ seeks to ensure that outcomes are fair, meaningful and empowering for those involved. This emphasis is also reflected in Rawls's theory of justice as fairness, which highlights the importance of equal basic liberties and the rectification of structural inequalities through distributive principles (Rawls, 1971).

PCJ also draws from contemporary philosophies of development and governance, particularly those that foreground democratic participation and inclusivity. The democratic ideals advanced by Habermas (1996), for example, highlight the significance of public deliberation, mutual recognition and legitimacy achieved through inclusive dialogue. The perspective is also reinforced by global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek to promote peaceful societies and accountable and inclusive institutions (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2015).

Restorative justice has also played a significant role in shaping PCJ's philosophy, offering a vision of justice centred on restoring relationships, repairing harm and rebuilding trust within communities (Zehr, 2015). The approach moves away from punishment and blame as the primary focus of justice processes. In doing so, justice becomes a relational process, oriented towards social harmony and reconciliation (Braithwaite, 2002).

Critiques of exclusion within legal systems have also informed the development of PCJ. In this vein, PCJ is characterised by participatory approaches that regard individuals not as passive recipients of law, but as active co-creators of justice. The capabilities approach argues that justice systems should go beyond the resolution of disputes to actively enhance people's capabilities and core freedoms to lead lives they value (Nussbaum, 2011). This orientation is consistent with Paulo Freire's concept of conscientisation, whereby individuals become aware of their social realities and work collectively to transform them (Freire, 1970).

Feminist jurisprudence has further contributed to the philosophy of PCJ by highlighting how formal legal systems fail to reflect the realities of marginalised groups (Crenshaw, 1989). This perspective is particularly relevant in addressing the needs of survivors, such as those affected by gender-based violence.

In summary, diverse philosophical foundations have shaped PCJ into a transformative approach, one that foregrounds lived experiences and the active participation of justice seekers. Hence, and in the context of this study, PCJ is centred on dignity and the lived experiences of individuals and communities as they engage with justice systems.

2.3. *Fundamental Principles of People-Centred Justice*

Underpinning PCJ is a set of foundational principles. These principles provide the grounding for its legitimacy, adoption and institutional implementation. The principles form the core of what it means to put people first and to be responsive to their lived realities. The following are the main principles of PCJ.

2.3.1 Accessibility

Accessibility within the administration of justice encompasses the extent to which individuals can engage with justice system institutions and obtain the services they require. It covers equitable access to information, legal advice, representation and mechanisms for redress. According to the United Nations (2015), strengthening accessibility as a core principle of PCJ requires sustained, proactive efforts to identify and address the diverse barriers individuals encounter in their pursuit of justice. Drawing on OECD (2021), accessibility refers to active engagement with the justice system for every individual, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender or ability. Therefore, realising accessibility requires removing physical, financial, informational and procedural barriers that impede fair and equitable access to justice.

2.3.2 Responsiveness

People-centred justice is grounded in the principle of responsiveness. This principle calls for justice systems to adapt to the changing needs and circumstances of individuals and communities. It affirms the importance of integrating lessons learned from service delivery to remain responsive to evolving community needs (OECD, 2021). It requires a commitment to listening to and addressing the concerns of those served, as well as adapting practices to address the unique local contexts (OECD/Open Society Foundations, 2019). Therefore, legitimacy is strengthened once individuals feel adequately responded to. A responsive justice system requires accessible information and respect for the diversity of those served by the justice system institutions. For instance, responsiveness may require integrating elements of customary or religious systems into the administration of justice, provided they align with human rights standards.

2.3.3 Impartiality and Fairness

Impartiality and fairness work to eliminate barriers that may disadvantage justice seekers. Impartiality requires that justice actors remain unbiased, making decisions based solely on the law and facts without favouritism or prejudice. On the other hand, fairness requires that both processes and outcomes be equitable and attuned to the varied needs, rights and circumstances of individuals and communities. It mandates that legal procedures uphold respect and dignity for all participants, guaranteeing each party the right to be heard irrespective of social status or identity. A justice system perceived as impartial and fair is more likely to earn the public's trust and cooperation (Tyler, 2017). A notable example is South Africa's post-apartheid reforms, which established the Equality Courts under the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (Republic of South Africa, 2000).

2.3.4 Inclusivity and Non-Discrimination

Inclusivity, as a foundational PCJ principle, seeks to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their background, participate meaningfully in justice processes. It requires justice systems to reduce discriminatory practices in laws, procedures and social norms, ensuring that victims, offenders and community members can contribute to the administration of justice and shape outcomes (OECD, 2025). For instance, restorative justice practices enable affected parties to engage in dialogue, fostering inclusivity in resolving conflicts (Zehr, 2015). For its part, non-discrimination obligates justice systems to treat every individual with fairness and respect. Further, inclusivity and non-discrimination require ensuring that vulnerable groups are represented and engaged in justice processes.

2.3.5 Empowerment

Empowerment, as a guiding principle of PCJ, recognises the importance of addressing the broader socio-economic factors that shape individuals' experiences with the justice system. It encompasses the provision of resources and opportunities that enable individuals and communities to shape their lives (Tyler, 2017). This implies that justice systems have a responsibility not only to resolve disputes but also to contribute to the overall well-being of those they serve. For example, efforts to reduce harm, alleviate stress, promote peaceful conflict resolution, support human development and empower justice seekers are vital (UNDP, n.d.). Thus, as Hiil (2021) puts forth, PCJ deviates from adversarial justice and aims not merely to close a file but to restore relationships by empowering individuals and communities.

2.3.6 Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability mechanisms foster public trust in justice sector institutions. The justice processes should be transparent to enable individuals to understand how decisions are made and how they can engage with the system (Irvita & Asriani, 2025). According to the World Justice Project (2023b), transparency encompasses open data, transparent decision-making processes, user feedback mechanisms and opportunities for public scrutiny. These may include transparent reporting processes, independent oversight bodies and adequate whistle-blower protections to expose wrongdoing without fear of retaliation. Accountability to the public by the justice sector, on the other hand, requires institutions to be responsible for their actions. Accountability involves mechanisms that enable individuals to voice their concerns and ensure their grievances are addressed (Goetz & Jenkins, 2005).

2.3.7 Timeliness and Efficiency

Timely resolution of disputes is essential for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the administration of justice. The PCJ seeks to ensure that individuals access justice promptly, recognising that delays and backlogs undermine fairness. By addressing issues swiftly, the justice system enables individuals to move forward without enduring prolonged uncertainty (Sharma & Patel, 2024). Since justice-sector challenges often reflect deeper governance concerns, addressing them at an early stage prevents escalation and minimises costs and trauma associated with prolonged proceedings (Pathfinders, 2019).

2.3.8 Collaboration and Partnership

The PCJ approach also recognises the interconnectedness of social, economic and health needs (Gilboe & Curran, 2025). To address these needs, effective institutional collaboration is vital. Collaboration requires involving various justice-sector actors in the design and delivery of justice services. For example, a person facing eviction may simultaneously deal with unemployment, mental health challenges and family breakdown. Responding to such a complex issue requires collaborative actions that intersect legal, social and health services (Plesence & Balmer, 2014).

3. FRAMEWORKS UNDERPINNING PEOPLE-CENTRED JUSTICE, AND BROAD FOCUS AREAS

3.1. *Legal and Normative Frameworks of People-Centred Justice*

Diverse legal and normative frameworks underpin PCJ. These frameworks have shaped the rights and responsibilities at the international, regional and national levels as highlighted below.

3.1.1 International Frameworks

At the global level, PCJ draws from a robust foundation of international human rights instruments. These instruments affirm access to justice as a core human right. Notably, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) affirms the right to an effective remedy and a fair public hearing, a focus on the people. Building on this, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966) imposes obligations on states to guarantee effective legal remedies and fair trial. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966) is also particularly significant, as it enshrines the rights to equality, non-discrimination, and access to justice in the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to an effective remedy.

Over time, a range of other international legal instruments have also firmly established PCJ as a foundational principle within the architecture of international human rights law. For example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) not only mandates the eradication of discrimination but also underscores the imperative of equal access to justice for women. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice of 1985 articulate age-appropriate standards for the administration of justice, recognising the distinct needs of juveniles. Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) affirms the right of children to special protection and child-sensitive justice procedures.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) advances the PCJ paradigm by requiring justice systems to be accessible to persons with disabilities. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) recognises the right of indigenous peoples to justice that is consonant with their cultural traditions and collective identities. The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders of 2010 establish comprehensive standards for gender-sensitive justice. In the same vein, SDG 16 underscores the international consensus on equitable access to justice and having accountable and inclusive institutions (UN, 2015). In this context, access to justice is a cornerstone for achieving peace and inclusive development (UNGA, 2015).

Regarding legal aid, the United Nations Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems support the timely provision of effective and quality legal assistance, as well as public awareness of legal rights and available legal aid services (UNODC, 2013). In addition, the Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary (UN, 1985) and the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers (UN, 1990) advocate for accountability, transparency, and procedural fairness within justice institutions.

3.1.2 Regional Frameworks

Regional frameworks also play a critical role in operationalising and reinforcing the normative foundations established at the international level. For instance, the European Convention on Human Rights establishes the foundation for procedural justice. Article 6 of the Convention guarantees individuals the right to a fair and public hearing (Council of Europe, 2026).

In America, the American Convention on Human Rights establishes the right to judicial protection (Organization of American States, 1969). The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has interpreted this provision connecting it to meaningful access to justice, state accountability and enhanced protection for vulnerable groups (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2003).

In Africa, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, notably through Article 7, affirms the right to a fair hearing and places an obligation on states to ensure effective legal remedies in cases of rights violations. In this context, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) highlights the importance of accessible justice mechanisms and the integration of customary legal systems, provided they comply with human rights standards (ACHPR, 2003).

3.1.3 National Frameworks

In addition to the international and regional frameworks, various countries have established comprehensive legal and normative frameworks that advance the principles of PCJ at the national level. In many countries, constitutions, laws and policies recognise access to justice and legal aid as PCJ imperatives (OECD, 2023). For instance, in India and Kenya, there is state-supported legal aid to support access to justice for vulnerable populations (Government of India, 1987; NCAJ, 2025). Many countries are also emphasising public legal education and empowerment to support dispute resolution (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, 2023). Implementing PCJ requires legal pluralism, especially where customary or community-based justice mechanisms remain the primary means of dispute resolution (UNDP & UN Women, 2018).

3.2. Broad Focus Areas of People-Centred Justice

Drawing from the aforementioned principles as well as from the legal and normative frameworks, it is deducible that the broad focus areas of PCJ cover diverse programmes. These include, among others, activities on community awareness and empowerment, alternative forms of dispute resolution, participatory and restorative justice practices, accessibility innovations, including the digital ones, justice literacy programmes, trauma-informed approaches, and vulnerable groups responsive approaches. Highlights of these broad areas are expounded as follows.

3.2.1 Community Awareness and Empowerment Programmes

Community awareness programmes aim to reduce procedural, linguistic, digital and psychological barriers that undermine equitable access to justice. Community awareness also seeks to build legal capability, particularly among marginalised populations. It enables communities to navigate justice mechanisms through trusted intermediaries, such as community paralegals (Manuel & Manuel, 2021). Another example is community conferences that facilitate open discussion among affected parties to find solutions (Van Ness & Strong, 2010).

Empowerment occurs through direct and indirect community-based interventions, as well as the sharing of knowledge and information. Empowerment through knowledge and skills promotes autonomy and active participation in the justice process (Goodwin & Maru, 2017). According to Goodwin and Maru (2017), enhancing legal literacy, supporting community-based paralegals, and ensuring that people are aware of their rights are examples of empowerment. Further, UNDP (n.d.) asserts that providing legal advice, representation and education forms part of community empowerment. These innovations enhance the speed of accessing information, contributing to procedural fairness (Onṭanu & Tjong Tjin Tai, 2025).

3.2.2 Alternative Justice Programmes

The use of alternatives to the formal justice approaches is an application of PCJ. These alternatives bridge the gap between customary and community-based dispute-resolution mechanisms and formal justice frameworks. They also improve access to justice, reduce case backlogs, and foster trust by respecting local customs.

Notable examples of the alternatives exist. In Kenya, for instance, Alternative Justice Systems enable communities to resolve disputes locally (Judiciary of Kenya, 2025). Court mediation programs are also vital alternatives as they ensure parties retain ownership of the process and its outcomes (Moore, 2014). In Sierra Leone, courts work alongside customary chiefs to adjudicate cases (Institute for Security Studies, 2009). In Papua New Guinea, village courts blend customary norms with statutory procedures, and are supported by government training programs (Australian Government, 2017). In the upstream of the justice system, the police could strengthen police bail as an alternative, while in the adjudication, the prosecutors could strengthen the diversion and plea bargaining.

3.2.3 Participatory Justice and Accountability Programmes

Establishing a strong feedback system is vital for identifying challenges and addressing grievances faced by justice seekers. The participatory justice and accountability programmes exemplify democratic justice governance and amplify citizens' voices in monitoring and reforming the justice systems (OECD, 2021 & 2025). Thus, participatory and accountability programmes strengthen institutional legitimacy and transparency.

For communities to participate effectively in justice programmes, they need encouragement and support. This can be realised through community scorecards, court user committees, digital platforms and needs surveys (Chapman et al., 2021). In Kenya, court users' committees provide avenues for fostering community justice mechanisms (National Council on the Administration of Justice [NCAJ], 2025). Other community engagement initiatives include town hall meetings where community members express their needs and concerns, strengthening user committees, creating interactive dashboards, having security and justice centres, and entrenching participatory audits and citizen-generated scorecards.

3.2.4 Accessibility Innovations

Digital innovations leverage technology to make justice systems more accessible, efficient and people-centred. Additionally, digital platforms such as SMS helplines, WhatsApp-based legal support, voice applications for visually impaired users, and online document automation help reduce barriers to accessing justice (Dylag, 2024).

In court administration, digital case management platforms simplify filing, scheduling and document access, reducing delays and increasing transparency. Also, virtual court hearings enhance access to justice. Other accessibility actions are offering multilingual resources (Davis & Isaacson, 2017).

3.2.5 Justice Literacy Programmes

The justice literacy programmes seek to instil a culture of civic responsibility. One of the long-term vision of justice literacy, as Goodwin and Maru (2017) argued, is cultivating a critical mass of empowered leaders who can strengthen accountability and champion systemic change. Additionally, there is a need for a cultural shift to enhance professional development of people-centred performance (Boyle et al., 2022).

Literacy also encompass the formation or strengthening of justice clubs and moot court initiatives, enabling young people to experience the legal process. For instance, a national justice and civic education curriculum can be embedded within schools and youth programs (Goodwin & Maru, 2017). Raising awareness of fundamental rights and strengthening local dispute-resolution capacities are other examples.

3.2.6 Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative justice programmes prioritise dialogue between victims, offenders and community members. As Zehr (2015) notes, these practices repair harm and restore relationships rather than punish offenders. The practices are effective in reducing recidivism and fostering community engagement (Latimer, Dowden & Muise, 2005). The practices also contribute to healing by giving victims a voice and promoting offender accountability (Braithwaite, 2002).

For example, the use of victim-offender dialogue allows affected parties to reduce post-traumatic stress in victims and reduce recidivism among offenders (Sherman et al., 2007). During sentencing, restorative justice programs enable victims to share experiences (Zehr, 2015). According to Sherman et al. (2007), participants in restorative justice processes often report higher satisfaction and a greater fairness.

3.2.7 Trauma-Informed Approaches

A key application of PCJ is the integration of trauma responsiveness to ensure that institutional processes do not re-traumatise justice seekers but instead support healing and empowerment. Trauma-informed approaches acknowledge that many justice system users may have experienced psychological trauma, which needs to be addressed. These approaches recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma and integrate that knowledge into policies and practices.

According to WHO (2022), trauma-informed care should be integrated as a core principle in medical, legal and support services, rather than a peripheral consideration. Therefore, having a trauma-informed approach as a PCJ imperative would restore dignity, rebuild trust, and empower users to engage appropriately in the justice process. It is also essential for the justice institutions to train their staff to identify and respond to trauma sensitively (SAMHSA, 2014).

4. LITERATURE ON PEOPLE-CENTRED JUSTICE

4.1. Highlights of Theoretical Frameworks and Approaches

The practice of PCJ is grounded in multifaceted theoretical frameworks, approaches and perspectives. Among these are the human rights-based framework, the capabilities approach, legal empowerment theory, intersectionality theory, restorative and relational justice theory, deliberative democracy theory, systems approach and legal pluralism theory. Each theoretical perspective enriches the conceptualisation and operationalisation of PCJ. Brief highlights of these theories are provided below.

4.1.1 Human Rights-Based Framework

A human rights-based framework for PCJ conceptualises justice through the lens of international human rights laws. It draws from authoritative legal instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, among others. Furthermore, the framework incorporates SDGs, particularly goal 16, which emphasises the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and the development of effective, accountable institutions. In modern justice systems, Edwards and Cram (2026) advocate that justice system institutions should put PCJ at the centre of AI governance practices that cover human rights obligations and local contexts.

4.1.2 Legal Pluralism

The legal pluralism theory is underpinned by the coexistence of multiple legal and normative systems, such as statutory, customary, religious and informal practices, within a single socio-political order (Griffiths, 1986). The theory challenges the dominance of state-centric legal frameworks by acknowledging that, in many societies, justice is regularly sought outside formal courts. In PCJ, legal pluralism expands access to justice, particularly in rural, post-conflict, and resource-constrained settings where formal systems may be absent, mistrusted or inaccessible (Denney & Domingo, 2023). According to Ubink and van Rooij (2011), legal pluralism enables hybrid justice models that combine formal institutions with customary and community-based mechanisms. It promotes local ownership, cultural legitimacy and responsiveness.

4.1.3 Capabilities Approach

The capabilities approach represents a normative shift from formal equality to substantive freedom (Nussbaum, 2011). It defines justice as the expansion of individuals' capabilities to achieve valued goals. Thus, it prioritises the empowerment of individuals affected by justice processes, enabling them to function with dignity and autonomy within legal contexts (Manuel & Manuel, 2021). In PCJ, the capabilities approach guides the design of legal and institutional interventions that remove structural barriers to accessing justice. This includes the capability of justice seekers to access legal information and services, navigate the justice system and achieve other socio-economic goals.

4.1.4 Systems Theory

Systems theory highlights the interdependence between legal structures and the broader social, political and economic environments within which justice problems emerge and are resolved. It provides a holistic way of analysing and solving problems by focusing on the entire system, the relationships among its parts and its interaction with the external environment. Hence, PCJ applies systems thinking by conceptualising justice not as a linear or siloed process within a particular institution, but as a dynamic system. Therefore, PCJ operates within an adaptive ecosystem composed of diverse justice actors and agencies, including both formal and informal mechanisms (Manuel & Manuel, 2021).

4.1.5 Legal Empowerment Theory

Legal empowerment is the process through which individuals and communities, especially those historically excluded from the justice system, gain the ability to understand, use and influence the law to improve their lives. As a theoretical foundation for PCJ, legal empowerment shifts the focus from top-down approaches to the active participation of ordinary people in justice processes. Golub (2003) critiques formal rule-of-law models for their technocratic orientation. He advocates for community-driven strategies, including legal literacy initiatives, grassroots legal aid, paralegal networks, and community-based dispute resolution. Informed by legal empowerment theory, the justice system is thus expected to be more accessible, responsive and accountable, with an emphasis on local ownership rather than externally imposed solutions.

4.1.6 Intersectionality Framework

Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical framework for understanding how overlapping systems of discrimination, including those based on race, gender, class, disability and geography, intensify exclusion from access to justice. Within PCJ, intersectionality challenges universalist assumptions by promoting tailored responses and sensitivities that address interconnected vulnerabilities. This approach requires participatory and multisectoral collaboration to advance justice outcomes alongside other societal needs.

4.1.7 Restorative and Relational Justice Theory

The restorative and relational justice theory focuses on repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than punitive measures. It promotes dialogue among victims, offenders and the community to foster shared understanding and restore social harmony (Zehr, 2015). In contrast to retributive justice, which centres on punishment, restorative and relational justice emphasise accountability, dialogue and the rebuilding of relationships (Zehr, 2015). The PCJ incorporates restorative practices to prioritise reconciliation, restitution and reintegration over adversarial

adjudication. The theory also acknowledges the value of indigenous and customary justice systems that emphasise relationships and collective responsibility.

4.1.8 Deliberative Democracy Theory

The deliberative democracy theory articulated by Habermas (1996) holds that the legitimacy of legal and institutional norms is grounded in reasoned deliberation among citizens. The PCJ is founded on a participatory ethos that seeks to enable justice users to co-create policies, provide feedback on services and hold institutions accountable during deliberations. Therefore, this form of democratic engagement ensures that justice is negotiated through deliberative processes that reflect community values and needs, rather than being imposed from elsewhere.

4.2. *Empirical Literature on People-Centred Justice*

In addition to the theoretical frameworks through which PCJ is anchored, numerous empirical work by scholars and global institutions exist. Highlights of empirical literature are given below.

One of the primary focus areas of PCJ is the needs of justice seekers, including their satisfaction. Empirical surveys on these needs exist in various countries. For instance, diverse user needs and satisfaction surveys have been conducted in many countries (Hiil, n.d.-a). Among the countries covered are Niger, Tunisia, Honduras, Nigeria, Colombia, Iraq, Burkina Faso, USA, Ethiopia, Ukraine, Morocco, Mali, Syria, Kenya, Uganda, Lebanon, Jordan, Fiji, UAE, and Bangladesh. These surveys yield recommendations on innovations and interventions that can be employed to address the challenges faced by justice seekers.

Manuel and Manuel (2023) examined front-line justice services in 12 lower-income countries. The coverage included Bangladesh, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda. The results showed that paralegal support, village mediation and alternative dispute-resolution services at the local level offer accessible and cost-effective means of addressing justice problems. The study highlights the value of linking formal justice with community-based mechanisms, while also noting the need for stronger evidence on impact, scale and long-term sustainability (Manuel & Manuel, 2023).

Manuel and Manuel (2021) argue that access to justice in low-income countries can be expanded through people-centred, community-level justice assistance and paralegal services. Their analysis shows that such services can be delivered at relatively low cost. These services enhance access for populations that are underserved by formal justice systems (Manuel & Manuel, 2021).

Hiil's Poverty and Access to Justice study examined the relationship between poverty and justice outcomes using data from justice needs and satisfaction survey (Gramatikov et al., 2021). The data were drawn from 13 mostly low and middle-income countries. Applying multivariate statistical techniques, the study found that while poverty does not necessarily determine the occurrence of legal problems, it significantly shapes the nature, severity and resolution of justice problems. Poorer populations were found to experience more impactful legal problems, relying more heavily on informal and social sources of advice. They also face greater barriers in accessing formal justice institutions, and record less favourable outcomes in their justice journeys. These findings underscore the importance of people-centred justice approaches that prioritise affordability, accessibility, fairness, responsiveness and effective problem resolution for vulnerable and underserved groups (Gramatikov et al., 2021).

For its part, the World Justice Project (2023b) incorporated an access-to-justice module into its Rule of Law Index, as part of empirical analysis of access to justice. Drawing on perception surveys and expert assessments across 128 countries, the study emphasised accessibility, affordability and user satisfaction. The results showed that user-responsive and transparent justice services significantly boost public trust and satisfaction.

McKay (2022) argues that justice for peace and development requires a shift toward people-centred, context-responsive and transformative justice approaches. The brief emphasises the need to rethink traditional justice models, address structural inequalities and strengthen justice systems to be responsive to justice needs.

Denney and Domingo (2013) conducted field research in fragile and post-conflict contexts in Sierra Leone and Nepal. Using community focus groups and interviews, the research documented how users perceive success in justice. The result indicated that people value respectful treatment and the outcome more than the legal procedures (Denney & Domingo, 2013). The study recommended a shift of focus from legal formalism to problem resolution.

Maru, Braima and Jalloh (2018) explored community paralegals in Sierra Leone through the experience of Timap for Justice, showing how paralegals supported communities in addressing everyday justice problems, including land, family, governance and service-delivery issues. Their analysis highlights the value of combining legal empowerment, mediation, advocacy and institutional engagement in contexts where formal justice systems are weak or inaccessible. They emphasise sustained investment in training, recognition and integration of paralegals within broader justice mechanisms.

4.3. Literature on Challenges and Critiques of People-Centred Justice

Although PCJ has gained prominence in contemporary justice reform debates, its practical implementation has sparked challenges and critiques. Scholars and practitioners have raised concerns about its operationalisation across diverse contexts, questioning its scalability, adaptability and effectiveness. Some of the challenges and critiques of PCJ are as follows.

4.3.1 Legal Minimalism and De-Judicialisation

A salient critique of PCJ is that it fosters a minimalist interpretation of rights by prioritising informal resolutions over enforceable legal remedies. By emphasising cost-efficiency, accessibility and cultural appropriateness, some reforms affect the protection of due process. In contexts dominated by formal justice systems, this can lead to a preference for expedient yet potentially discriminatory frameworks, particularly against women, ethnic minorities and youth (Isser, 2011). Some empirical studies illustrate that community-based dispute resolution mechanisms may reinforce patriarchal norms, exerting pressure on women to accept resolutions that contravene human rights standards (UNDP & UN Women, 2018).

The OECD (2023) points out that while speed, affordability and user satisfaction are essential considerations, they should not undermine legal guarantees. In post-conflict states, some governments have leveraged people-centred approaches to deflect calls for substantive structural and legal reforms, substituting community mediation for more profound transformations (International Development Law Organisation [IDLO], 2023). There is also a concern that the PCJ may be co-opted by formal justice systems that aim to maintain the status quo while superficially adopting restorative practices, rendering it symbolic rather than substantive (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 1998).

4.3.2 Weak Clarity on the Contextual Definition and Contents of PCJ

A recurrent critique in the discourse on PCJ is the lack of definitional precision, which leads to varying and inconsistent interpretations across jurisdictions and institutions. The term is frequently employed interchangeably with related concepts such as legal empowerment or user-centred design, despite the inherent distinctions and differing institutional implications (Santos, 2020). Bosio (2023) argues that PCJ risks oversimplifying structural barriers and may become a buzzword. As Golub (2003) cautioned, the proliferation of buzzwords can obfuscate policy trajectories unless they are explicitly defined. In the absence of universally accepted criteria on people-centred initiatives, there exists a substantial risk that reforms may be more symbolic than structural, perpetuating the status quo under the guise of progressive reform.

4.3.3 Weak Measurement of PCJ Impacts, Outcomes and Outputs

Evaluating the success of PCJ initiatives is challenging. Proponents of PCJ emphasise outcome-focused indicators, such as user satisfaction and fairness. For instance, justice and legal needs surveys often incur high costs. The surveys also rely on users' perceptions of their justice journeys, including assessments of process fairness, outcome fairness, costs and resolution (HiiL, n.d.-a). In countries with inadequate data, a lack of baseline information on informal justice systems hinders comparative analysis (IDLO, 2023). Furthermore, formal success metrics may not adequately capture the full scope of restorative outcomes, including community healing and victim satisfaction.

4.3.4 Resource and Capacity Constraints to Support PCJ

The successful implementation of PCJ requires adequate funding and other resources. However, institutional capacities are usually constrained, particularly in low and middle-income countries. With limited funding, PCJ may ultimately fail to achieve its intended goals. Pilot initiatives may initially thrive under donor financing but face substantial challenges in scaling or sustaining them without national integration. An example is the Justicia 2020 reform platform, which witnessed considerable engagement in Argentina, but lost momentum following a political transition (OECD, 2021).

4.3.5 Divergent Cultural backgrounds and Contexts

The application of PCJ varies across different jurisdictions and cultural contexts. There is a risk of overlooking significant cultural contexts and undermining the principles of inclusivity and equity. Furthermore, employee resistance to change presents a barrier to adopting PCJ practices. The resistance can stem from a lack of understanding, fear of change or institutional inertia (Shapland et al., 2024).

4.4. Summary of Literature

The existing literature on the theoretical foundations of PCJ is multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary. However, theoretical perspectives converge on a common premise, that justice systems should be centred on human rights and dignity, participation and lived experiences of justice seekers. Despite this convergence, significant gaps still exist, undermining the coherence, analytical and operational robustness of PCJ. A key gap is the absence of a unified

theoretical paradigm that systematically integrates these varied perspectives into a cohesive PCJ model. The gap has resulted in weak and underdeveloped conceptual clarity contributing to inconsistencies in interpretation and practice.

Empirical literature demonstrates that PCJ improves access to justice, enhances user experience, and increases the likelihood of effective dispute resolution. Evidence from diverse jurisdictions shows that legal empowerment, community-based mechanisms and digital innovation address justice needs, particularly for marginalised populations. Further, users value fairness, respect and problem resolution over procedural formalities. However, there is limited empirical work on PCJ. For instance, literature does not sufficiently analyse how institutional inertia and intentional and non-intentional resistance influence or constrain the implementation of PCJ, often presuming straightforward reform pathways. Additionally, many studies have not adequately examined long-term impacts such as institutional trust and systemic transformation.

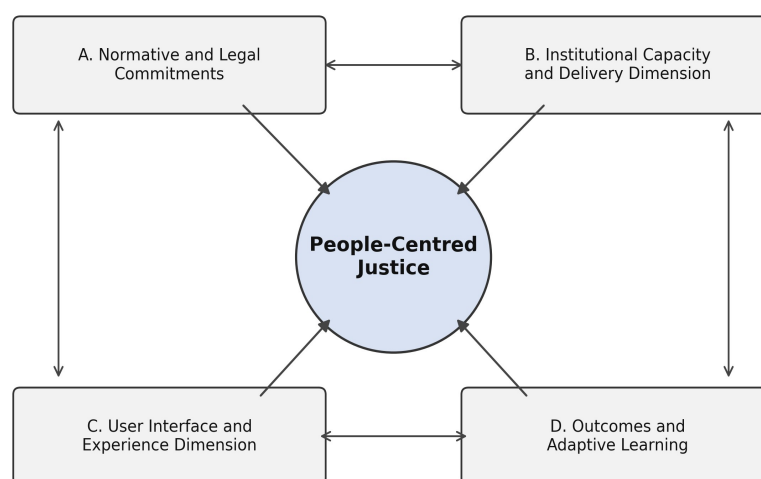
Although PCJ is a progressive approach, it is inconsistently understood and therefore confused with some of the pre-existing reforms on access to justice. This imprecision weakens its analytical utility invites avenues for less strategic reforms. Without well-defined parameters, institutions may adopt the language of PCJ without altering underlying practices. Moreover, vagueness may impede efforts to design effective interventions tailored to distinct contexts. Another critique is that informal or alternative mechanisms may undermine the enforcement of formal rights and legal protections. It is also argued that governments may avoid addressing major structural challenges and focus on quick-win PCJ intervention. The measurement of implementation, limited use of data and resource constraints present additional challenges. Further, cultural and contextual differences influence how PCJ is interpreted and applied, making standardisation challenging.

5. ASSESSING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PEOPLE-CENTRED JUSTICE

5.1. Conceptual Framework for Assessing the Implementation of People-Centred Justice

The benefits associated with people-centred justice require systematic assessment. Without extensive assessment, PCJ risks remaining aspirational rather than transforming society. In assessing the benefits, the core assumption is that justice systems should transition from institution-centred to people-centred design. In this regard, PCJ becomes the dependent construct whose scaling requires diverse programmes as ingredients. Since there are many PCJ programmes, it is imperative to group them into main pillars. This implies that the pillars are vectors, each comprising a set of observed and unobserved drivers or PCJ.

Consequently, the study proposes a robust conceptual framework to support the assessment of the adoption and advancement of PCJ. The framework, which draws from the principles, broad focus areas, normative and legal frameworks and literature on PCJ, provides the context that comes into play.



A. Normative and Legal Commitments Pillar

This dimension focuses on international, regional and national normative and legal obligations that define the foundational principles of PCJ. It establishes the moral and legal baseline upon which all other justice interventions are constructed. The assessment of this dimension should, therefore, focus on the extent to which justice systems are grounded in internationally, regionally and nationally recognised legal and policy obligations, especially human

rights standards. The assessment should also determine whether the foundational instruments yield practical and enforceable provisions.

B. User Involvement and Institutional Capacity Pillar

The user involvement and institutional capacity dimension covers the mechanisms by which the normative aspirations of PCJ are operationalised within justice systems to enhance users' involvement and the capacity of institutions to respond to the needs of justice seekers. The dimension covers integrating justice and legal empowerment strategies, expanding legal aid, decentralisation of justice institutions, accountability, inclusive infrastructure, among others. The dimension also covers designing hybrid justice models that appreciate the unique and supportive roles of diverse partners. The dimension also entails strengthening coordination and administrative services. In addition, embedding accountability mechanisms, including scorecards, justice audits and user oversight mechanisms, is central.

C. User Interface and Experience Pillar

The user interface and experience dimension centres on how individuals encounter and engage with the justice system. For instance, navigating the justice system should be simple, affordable and timely. Also, improving trust for the justice actors is essential. Restored relationships and community harmony. Also, improving trust for the justice actors is essential. Restored relationships and community harmony post-dispute are also crucial indicators. Further, equity in outcomes, especially for vulnerable groups, is a key aspect. Other indicators in this dimension include user understanding, confidence and ability to act on justice problems. This would entail measuring procedural fairness from the user's perspective, and assessing navigation complexity, including cost, time and bureaucratic burden. Moreover, capturing user experience of dignity, respect and recognition in justice processes is vital. It is also necessary to reflect on what steps people take, why they disengage, and whom they rely on. In addition, there is a need to enhance digital inclusion in justice platforms and strengthen grievance redress pathways.

D. Adaptive Learning and Sustainability Pillar

The adaptive learning and sustainability dimension covers what PCJ actually achieves in people's lives and how systems should adapt based on those results. In this dimension, justice sector institutions should empower justice seekers and enhance public trust. In this case, public trust is a critical measure of legitimacy and determines future engagement with justice systems, thus fostering sustainability. User satisfaction and empowerment are also evidenced by increased knowledge, confidence and willingness to engage post-intervention. The realisation of outcomes also informs system learning. The dimension is also manifested through reduction in harm, violence and prolonged stress associated with unresolved disputes. Additionally, aligning budget allocations with PCJ requirements and training justice personnel on PCJ are also sustainability priorities.

5.2. Proposed Criteria for Assessing the Implementation of People-Centred Justice

The method proposed in this study provides a framework for assessing how PCJ is implemented across the four dimensions identified in the conceptual framework. For proper assessment, deliberate adoption of PCJ ought to have occurred.

The justice sectors and their institutions should, at the outset, have a well-grounded theory of change that links their existing practices to the desired PCJ practices. The foundational assumption for the theory of change is that justice systems should move from institution-centred justice to PCJ. The theory of change should draw from the pillars and be structured to reflect the interdependence between PCJ principles, legal and normative frameworks, theories, empiricism and real-world justice practices. It should also capture the transition from inputs to outputs, outcomes and impacts.

To ensure a comprehensive assessment of PCJ, the use of descriptive analysis, econometric analysis, or both, as the assessment objectives may dictate, is crucial. Both methods are useful when adequately grounded in a proper conceptual framework and a set of elaborate objectives and assessment questions. The OECD (2025) and HiiL (n.d.-b) provide useful methodological guidance for contextualising people-centred justice objectives and developing assessment questions, particularly through self-assessment tools, evidence-based planning frameworks and justice-needs survey methodologies.

Descriptive statistics play a foundational role in summarising complex justice information into practice or policy-relevant insights. Descriptive methods are invaluable for mapping justice experiences, mainly where data limitations constrain inferential analysis. The use of descriptive statistics is evidenced in diverse justice and legal needs surveys. For instance, access to the justice dashboard relies heavily on descriptive indicators (HiiL, n.d.-b). Moreover, descriptive analyses validate theoretical assertions (World Justice Project, 2023b).

For their part, econometric techniques are useful for addressing the interconnectedness of the justice phenomenon. The PCJ, with its diverse constructs, lends itself to multivariate econometric analysis. As Wooldridge (2010) explains, cross-sectional and panel-data methods allow researchers to model relationships among multiple variables

and examine variation across units and over time. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is also suitable for PCJ assessment, as it allows the estimation of multiple interrelated relationships. Further, justice system institutions often evolve iteratively in response to user feedback and policy changes. In such circumstances, drawing on Wooldridge (2010) and Asparouhov, Hamaker and Muthén (2018), dynamic SEM could play an important role in assessing the interactions over time.

Given the need for continuous learning and adaptation during PCJ implementation, Bayesian modelling provides a useful framework. The Bayesian modelling updates estimates and incorporates new evidence as it becomes available, thereby supporting adaptive decision-making and programme refinement (Gelman et al., 2013).

Since justice outcomes, such as trust, satisfaction, accessibility and perceived fairness, may be measured separately but remain statistically interrelated, Seemingly Unrelated Regression (SUR) can be considered for analysis. The SUR estimates multiple outcome equations simultaneously while accounting for correlations among their error terms (Wooldridge, 2010). Due to the interconnected nature of the justice system institutions, a systems-oriented analytical approach is appropriate for assessing sectoral PCJ interventions.

During assessments, broad and specific hypotheses to support tests are necessary. For instance, normative commitments can be hypothesised to positively influence the delivery of PCJ. Furthermore, an improved user interface and experience are hypothesised to yield stronger outcomes, with adaptive learning yielding legitimacy, trust and empowerment.

From the foregoing, the general structure of the PCJ assessment model can be expressed as;

$$\text{People Centred Justice} = f(\text{NLC, UIC, UIE, ALS}) \quad \dots (1)$$

Where:

- NLC - Normative and Legal Commitments
- UIC - User Involvement and Institutional Capacity
- UIE - User Interface and Experience
- ALS - Adaptive Learning and Sustainability

The PCJ dependent construct on the left-hand side of (1) above can also be contextualised to be a particular PCJ principle, innovation or programme as per the assessment objectives and scope. An appropriate assessment of PCJ requires the consideration of nested equations inside each pillar on the right-hand side of (1). This is suggested in equations (2) to (5) below. However, the variables are not exhaustive as their inclusion would be guided by the objectives and context of a particular assessment.

Consequently, each pillar can be expanded as follows.

$$\text{Normative and Legal Commitments} = f(\text{LAR, HRF, EQT, SDG, LEG, POL}) \quad \dots (2)$$

Such that;

- LAR – Legal alignment with international and regional human rights frameworks
- HRF – Human rights-based safeguards in laws
- EQT – Equality and non-discrimination guarantees
- SDG – Integration of Sustainable Development Goal 16
- LEG – Existence of enabling legal aid
- POL – Policy coherence with PCJ principles

$$\text{User Involvement \& Institutional Capacity} = f(\text{LAS, PAR, HJS, DIG, DEC, ACC, TRN}) \quad \dots (3)$$

Such that;

- LAS – Legal aid service coverage and effectiveness
- PAR – Integration of paralegals and community-based justice actors
- HJS – Hybrid and customary justice systems
- DIG – Digitisation and innovation in justice delivery
- DEC – Decentralization of justice services
- ACC – Accountability mechanisms such as audits and ombudspersons
- TRN – Staff and institutional training on PCJ principles

$$\text{User Interface and Experience} = f(\text{PF, RES, ACC, TIM, AFF, TRU, PAR, AWR, INC, DIG, VUL, EMP, SAT}) \quad \dots (4)$$

Such that;

PF – Procedural fairness (impartiality, voice, neutrality)
RES – Respectful and dignified treatment of justice seekers
ACC – Physical and informational accessibility to users
TIM – Timeliness of case resolution
AFF – Affordability of services
TRU – Public trust and confidence in justice actors
PAR – Participation of users and sense of being heard
AWR – Awareness of rights and available remedies
INC – Cultural and linguistic inclusivity
DIG – Access through technology and digital channels
VUL – Inclusion of vulnerable groups
EMP – Empowerment of users post-resolution
SAT – User satisfaction with justice outcomes

Adaptive Learning and Sustainability = f (EQF, HR, LEG, LEARN, ADP, COO, BUD) (5)

Such that;

EQF– Equity and fairness in outcomes
HR – Harm reduction and prevention of recurrence
LEG – Legitimacy and trust in the justice system
LEARN – Institutional learning from monitoring reviews
ADP – Adaptive policy reform based on user feedback
COO – Cross-institutional coordination mechanisms
BUD – Enhancement of justice Budget

Questions to help assess the extent of PCJ adoption and implementation, whether targeting justice seekers or duty-bearers, should, in the main, draw from the models above. Prior determination of weights for each issue or programme under each pillar is desirable to support robust assessment.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Conclusion

Although global attention to justice reform is increasing, substantial barriers continue to impede access to fair, inclusive and responsive justice systems. Conventional justice approaches, characterised by procedural rigidity, formalism and institutional complexity, often fail to address the lived realities and needs of justice seekers. In response, people-centred justice has emerged as a transformative framework that emphasises accessibility, inclusivity, fairness, accountability and meaningful participation within justice systems.

This study conducted a comprehensive examination of PCJ using an exploratory approach, examining its foundational principles and the legal and normative frameworks that support its legitimacy and operationalisation. The study further reviewed theoretical and empirical literature and suggested a criterion for assessing the adoption and implementation of PCJ.

The findings indicate that PCJ has gained significant recognition within international and national justice discourse, policy frameworks and academic scholarship. The study further established that people-centred justice is underpinned by a set of foundational principles that collectively define its content and intent. These principles form the core of putting people first, emphasising human dignity, participation, equity and meaningful justice outcomes.

A key feature of PCJ is the extension of justice reform beyond formal adjudication to include how individuals resolve disputes within local contexts. Justice problems are seldom limited to strictly legal disputes, as they often form part of broader social issues. Consequently, justice is inseparable from social welfare and should intersect with health, education, housing and social protection. Hence, PCJ is a transformative paradigm that shifts justice systems from institution-centred approaches to those grounded in responsiveness to the needs and realities of justice seekers.

Despite its increasing prominence, significant conceptual and assessment gaps remain. The literature on PCJ is fragmented across disciplines and jurisdictions, resulting in varying conceptualisations and interpretations. Furthermore, measuring PCJ outcomes is challenged by limited data availability and utilisation. Resource constraints, institutional limitations and contextual differences also affect how PCJ is operationalised and assessed across jurisdictions.

6.2. Recommendations and Implications to Policy and Practice

The growing prominence of PCJ within justice discourse underscores the need for justice systems that respond promptly to the lived realities, needs and expectations of justice seekers. Therefore, effective implementation of PCJ requires enhanced institutional commitment, robust and context-sensitive assessment frameworks and sustained responsiveness.

Strengthening the conceptual clarity, philosophical grounding and methodological rigour is essential for enhancing PCJ coherence, assessment and long-term institutional relevance within justice systems. For instance, integrating PCJ principles into national justice policies, institutional strategies and governance frameworks is critical for strengthening accountability, inclusivity and responsiveness within justice systems. Such integration would reduce fragmentation in justice reforms and reinforce alignment with constitutional values, human rights standards and sustainable development priorities.

There is also a need for a robust, context-sensitive and evidence-based assessment of PCJ outcomes. A multi-method approach to PCJ assessment that integrates qualitative and quantitative methods, institutional performance indicators, and user feedback mechanisms is recommended. Indicators relating to accessibility, procedural fairness, public trust, user satisfaction, responsiveness, resolution rates and recurrence of legal problems should be strengthened to support systematic assessment of justice systems.

In addition, justice institutions should institutionalise regular monitoring, audits, performance reviews and user-centred surveys to strengthen the measurement and evaluation of PCJ. Comprehensive data collection on justice seekers, including demographic characteristics and intersecting social needs, would further strengthen understanding of justice experiences and outcomes. The appropriate selection of indicators, variables, analytical methods and measurement tools is essential to support effective PCJ assessment. In particular, there is a need for a deeper examination of contextual variations in the understanding, interpretation and assessment of PCJ across jurisdictions.

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