

Policy Brief | July 2024

Evidence-based, people-centred justice in Uganda

This policy brief results from an eight-year partnership between The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiiL) and the Access to Justice (JLOS) Sub-programme, aimed at driving people-centred justice in Uganda through data and innovation. It aims to inform justice leaders, development partners, legal aid providers, justice innovators, and civil society organisations about the justice needs of Ugandans.

Based on the 2023 Justice Needs and Satisfaction (JNS) survey, which gathered insights from 6,300 randomly selected Ugandans, this brief highlights prevalent legal issues among Ugandans, the impact those problems have in people's daily lives, and the resolution strategies that people apply to their problems. The JNS survey follows the OECD's¹ legal needs survey guidelines, emphasising people-centred justice — a methodology HiiL has implemented in 19 countries.

The [findings were released](#) in March 2024 at the data report launch event and a 'Justice Leaders' Forum,' facilitating discussions among justice leaders and providers. This survey builds on previous studies conducted between 2016 and 2020, which influenced sectoral changes in Uganda's justice policies, including the Judiciary's Alternative Justice System (AJS) strategy, the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) policy, and the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF).

The 2024 JNS data report enriches the evidence base on access to justice in Uganda, informing policy and implementation and supporting development monitoring over time.

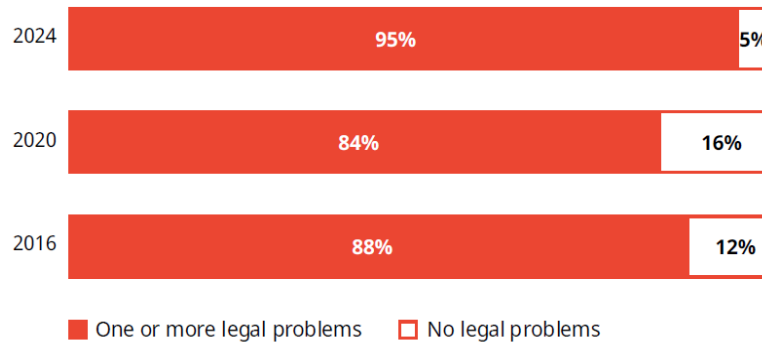
Insights to the data and the 'justice gap'

In 2023, about 95% of Ugandans reported experiencing at least one legal problem within the past year, with many facing multiple issues. Data comparison reveals that the resolution rate of legal problems has increased since 2020, after already improving

¹ The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

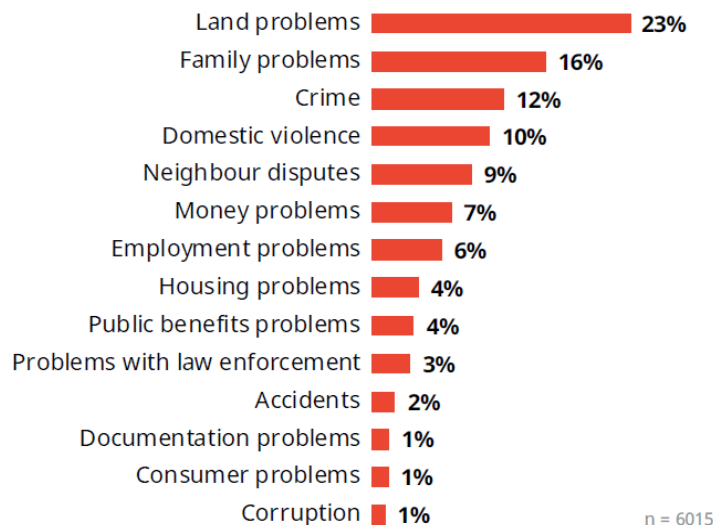
between 2016 and 2020. In 2023, around 55% of all problems are completely or partially resolved (compared to 48% and 40% in the previous studies).

PREVALENCE OF LEGAL PROBLEMS
year on year



The most serious legal issues in Uganda remain consistent: land disputes, family problems, crime, and domestic violence. Neighbour disputes, while common, are generally considered less serious in nature. Over the past eight years, these categories have persisted as the most prevalent.

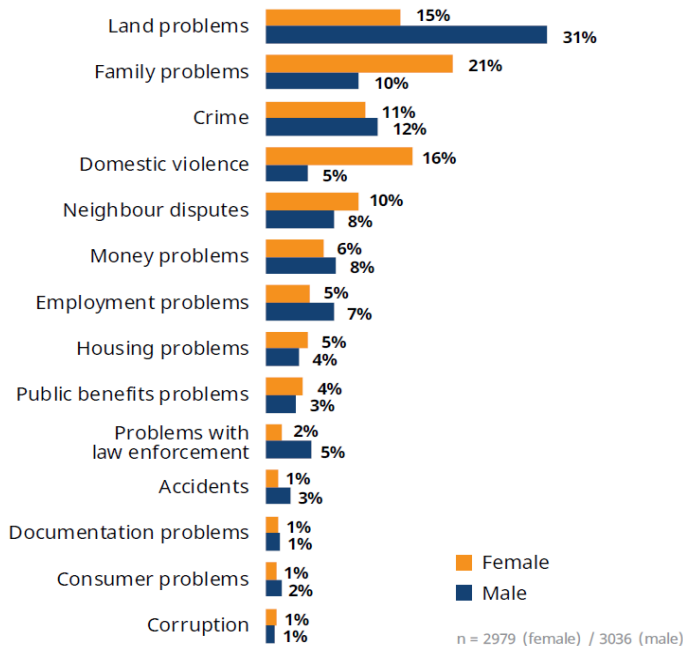
MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM CATEGORIES



The Judiciary’s Annual Performance Report for FY 2022/2023 aligns with these findings, highlighting that the Land and Family Divisions of the High Court handle the highest caseloads.²

The specific types of land problems people experience are diverse but often involve boundary conflicts and land grabbing, which are also seen as serious problems. Theft is the most common crime, constituting about 60% of reported problems, followed by cybercrime and online fraud at 11%. Family issues typically involve child support and divorce, while domestic violence cases predominantly feature physical and emotional abuse.

MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM CATEGORIES
by gender



The JNS data highlights distinct justice needs among Ugandan men and women.

Land issues predominantly affect men, older individuals, those with no or only primary education, and those able to meet their basic needs, particularly in the Northern and Central regions.

Conversely, family problems are more prevalent among women, those with limited education, and individuals struggling to meet basic needs, especially in the Western region.

Crime affects all demographic groups fairly equally, with the highest rates in the Eastern region. Notably, 93% of those experiencing legal issues take action to resolve them, a significant increase from 80% four years ago.

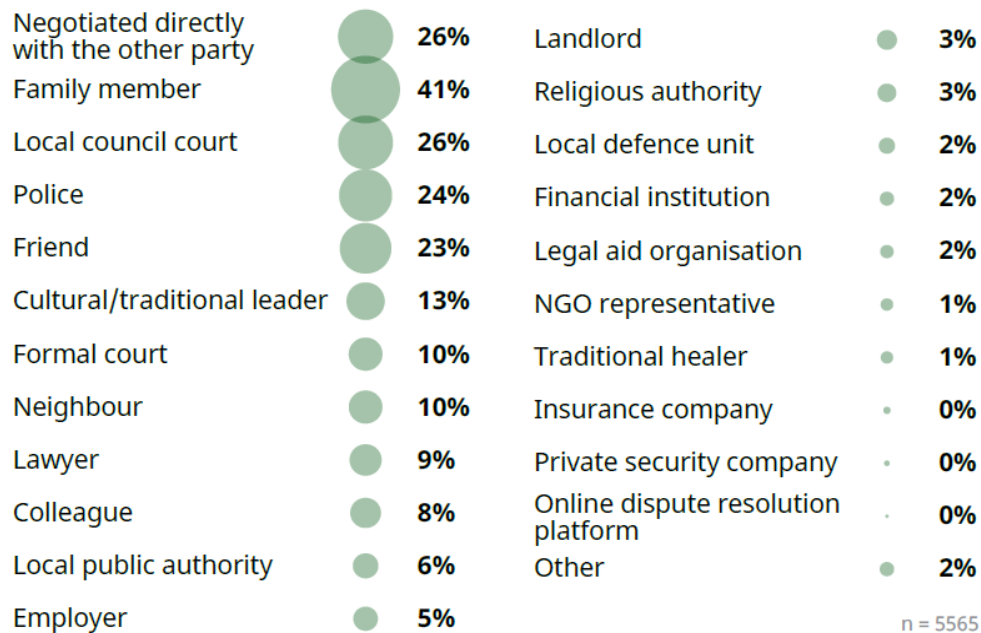
² Speech by the Honorable Principal Judge, representing the Chief Justice, during the JNS report launch 2024.

Physical and sexual abuse against women within the household context

Domestic violence is notably higher among women and young people (ages 18-39), with the Eastern region showing the highest incidence. Approximately 41% of Ugandan women who report legal problems have experienced domestic violence in the past year, equating to about 39% of all Ugandan women. In other words, four out of ten Ugandan adult women have experienced some form of domestic violence in the past year.

People often seek help from family members (41%), friends (23%), neighbours (10%), colleagues (8%), the police (24%), and local council courts (LCCs) (26%).

MOST COMMON SOURCES OF HELP as % of people who take action



Compared to four years ago, the number of people seeking help from Local Council Courts (LCCs) for serious problems has doubled. LCCs and cultural leaders are more frequently consulted in rural areas, with cultural leaders particularly prominent in the Northern region.

Cultural and traditional leaders assist about 13% of those taking action, while 10% seek help from lawyers or formal courts. Consequently, nine out of ten legal issues are handled outside the formal justice system. This trend is reflected in Judiciary statistics, which show a rise in case registrations, reaching 274,792 in 2023—a 35,194 increase from 2022.

Women typically turn to family, friends, or neighbours for help, whereas men are more likely to approach LCCs, the police, cultural leaders, lawyers, and formal courts. In urban areas, formal justice system resources such as the police, lawyers, and courts are more commonly used.

From the data, the study made the following recommendations to address the ‘justice gap’ in Uganda – meaning, people who experience a justice problem but are unable to resolve it:

- Continue collecting people-centred justice data on a regular basis.
- Prioritise preventing and resolving the most serious legal problems.
- Adapt prevention and resolution mechanisms to the target population.
- Strengthen the link between customary and informal justice actors and the formal justice system.
- Pay specific attention to improving access to justice for vulnerable groups.
- Apply best practices to help justice providers work evidence-based.
- Create space for innovative justice services that can help to improve access to justice for all.
- Join the movement for people-centered justice.

From data to action: Recommendations by the Ugandan justice leaders to bridge the justice gap

The data from the JNS plays a crucial role in providing evidence for policy change and improving the complex agenda for people-centred justice in Uganda. When the [findings of the JNS report were released](#) in March 2024, a dialogue event called the 'Justice Leaders' Forum' was facilitated for discussions among justice leaders and providers to discuss the recommendations from the data and to formulate responses to bridge the justice gap. The justice leaders comprised stakeholders across Uganda's Justice Sector, including:

- The Principal Judge of Uganda representing the Chief Justice;
- The Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs;
- Honourable Justices from various courts of Judicature and registrars of courts;
- Members of the JLOS leadership and Steering Committees;
- Members of the JLOS Development Partners Group (DPG);
- Representatives from the legal aid service providers;
- Actors from the justice innovation community;
- Civil society organisations.

To implement the JNS recommendations and enhance people-centred justice, the forum resolved to undertake the following strategic interventions:

1. Identify and assess what have been **the key persisting problems** in the justice sector over the last 15–20 years and have Government, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and development partners deliberate and agree on a harmonised strategy designed to provide targeted solutions to these challenges.
2. Carry out more **deep-dive (dedicated) studies** that examine specific critical issues raised in the JNS that relate to prevalent justice needs and services. Further, maintain the rhythm to have the JNS assess the people's justice needs every three (3) years.
3. Strengthen the formal justice system by **identifying bottlenecks** in the service delivery architecture that currently present access challenges for the public –

especially the marginalised and the poor who should be empowered to choose the best resolution pathway – either in the formal or informal justice system.

4. Re-think and re-model justice delivery to bridge the justice gap by **investing in innovative/new models and mechanisms** of justice delivery – that are tailored to the unique justice needs of the people. This should inform the findings of the future JNS.
5. **Legal aid services** are a key intervention for access to justice and need to be prioritised (statistics show that many legal aid service providers are closing operations due to lack of funding). There is a need for Legal Aid Service Providers (LASPs) to help bridge the gap between justice institutions and the people
6. The report highlights critical issues in Uganda’s justice system and should therefore serve as a sobering wake-up call for all actors and stakeholders. The Judiciary should come up with **innovative actionable solutions**, including capacity-building of the community justice providers, towards better justice services.
7. Address the aspects of **customer and public relations** as a mechanism for building a people-centred and user-friendly justice system. In addition, **examine the aspects of affordability, usability, efficiency and effectiveness** of the justice system and their impact on access to justice service delivery.
8. Integrate survey data with administrative data as building blocks of a **justice data ecosystem** that accurately (and objectively) speaks to the demand and supply side of justice in Uganda. Leverage an integrated data dashboard to creatively present and visualise data that can be effectively used for decision-making by justice actors and stakeholders.
9. Invest in access to **justice user empowerment** through innovative and pro-active information dissemination mechanisms targeted to the diverse needs of communities, the justice challenges they experience, and the unique environment they operate in. Specifically, there is a need for community empowerment and public sensitisation on broader aspects of **Gender-based Violence** (GBV) through targeted information dissemination campaigns.

10. Undertake a **comparative analysis** – in terms of how Uganda fairs from a regional and international context when it comes to access to justice.³

Conclusion

Over the past eight years, the most common legal issues in Uganda have been land disputes, family problems, crime, and domestic violence. Justice practitioners and development partners should explore innovative strategies to address these issues as part of a people-centred justice agenda. The Justice Needs and Satisfaction (JNS) survey provides detailed data on justice needs, resolution processes, and demographic indicators, enabling targeted analysis for various groups and locations. It offers a deeper understanding of the legal challenges and justice journeys of Ugandans. The JNS, along with forums like the Justice Leaders' Forum, helps policymakers, justice providers, legal innovators, and donors set priorities and focus on improving access to justice services that most benefit people and society. These initiatives are crucial for driving policy changes to enhance access to justice in Uganda.

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³ Reference: *Eurostat* - <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>.