



# Why criminal justice reform is essential to the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development

In September 2015, the international community agreed a new set of development goals, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, comprising 17 goals and 169 targets, to replace and build on the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000-2015).

The number of people behind bars, whether on remand or serving sentences, has increased in most countries over the last 20 years, placing an enormous financial burden on governments and at great cost to the social cohesion of societies. In many countries, criminal justice systems are unfair and discriminatory. Instead of protecting society from crime and safeguarding the rights of those accused or convicted, they can cause, drive and deepen poverty and hinder social and economic progress.

PRI believes that justice and prison reform will underpin the achievement not just of Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice and accountable institutions, but several of the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda.



## No poverty

People who come into contact with the criminal justice system disproportionately come from poor and marginalised backgrounds. The social stigma of criminalisation often creates an inter-generational cycle of deprivation that people cannot break out of. Systems that use a variety of sanctions proportionately, with imprisonment used only for serious offences, are not only fairer but can help people to break the cycle of crime and poverty.



## Zero hunger

Many countries do not allocate sufficient budget to adequately feed their prison populations. Where food in detention is insufficient, unhygienic and lacks nutrition, prisoners face serious, if not permanent, health issues and even starvation. Adequate nutrition is of particular importance for vulnerable groups, including pregnant or breast-feeding women, sick prisoners, and children held in prison with a parent.



## Good health and wellbeing

Many prisoners receive healthcare of a far inferior standard to that available in the community, if they receive it at all. Existing medical conditions may be ignored or neglected, and prisoners often develop health problems in prison due to unhygienic conditions, lack of healthcare and poor control of infectious diseases, such as HIV or tuberculosis. Providing medical care not only contributes to the health of detainees, but also to the protection of public health as the vast majority of prisoners return to the community.



## Quality education

Lack of education and training opportunities causing unemployment and poverty are often drivers for offending. Developing self-worth and a chance of earning a livelihood after release are essential requirements for successful rehabilitation. Access to education, work and training while in prison – or while serving non-custodial sanctions – contributes not only to Goal 4, but also to Goals 1 and 8.



## Gender equality

Women and girls face discrimination in criminal justice systems in various ways, from gender-specific offences to lack of consideration of their particular circumstances (including children) and in their treatment in detention. Many systems fail to recognise the role that sexual abuse and domestic violence play in women's offending, and fail to protect women from violence when detained. Efforts to address gender inequalities have largely overlooked women offenders and prisoners.



## Clean water and sanitation

In many prisons poor infrastructure prevents sufficient access to clean water for drinking and hygiene. Water may also be withheld as a disciplinary measure and/or as a form of ill-treatment. Provision of water and sanitation in prisons also contributes to health and well-being (Goal 3).



## Decent work and economic growth

Providing work and training opportunities for prisoners is important to provide meaningful activity during the day and improve their job prospects following release. However, in many countries, there may be no opportunity for prisoners to work, the work may be of little vocational value, and prisoners may be required to work in unsafe or exploitative conditions. Former prisoners often struggle to find work on their release.



## Reduced inequalities

The Sustainable Development Agenda pledges to 'leave no one behind'. Prisoners often come from the most marginalised sections of the community and their needs are not always recognised by the criminal justice system. Indigenous peoples, foreign nationals, older persons, persons with disabilities and LGBTI persons all face particular discrimination.

Stigma and discrimination towards former prisoners – for example, limiting their civil rights or access to employment – reinforces their marginalisation. Ensuring access to justice for all and upholding the rule of law require the law to be applied in a non-discriminatory way.



## Peace and justice. Strong institutions

Access to justice for all requires criminal justice systems to be fair and effective. Prisons, by their very nature, are closed institutions hidden from public view, and therefore require particular attention with regard to external scrutiny, transparency and good governance. Prisons can also be part of more inclusive societies if they create prospects for rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders back into society.

**“ There is no peace without development, no development without peace, and there is no lasting peace or sustainable development without respect for human rights and the rule of law. ”**

United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon.

### Penal Reform International

Email: [info@penalreform.org](mailto:info@penalreform.org)

Twitter: [@PenalReformInt](https://twitter.com/PenalReformInt)

[www.penalreform.org](http://www.penalreform.org)

Penal Reform International (PRI) is an independent non-governmental organisation that develops and promotes fair, effective and proportionate responses to criminal justice problems worldwide.