

The Amsterdam Declaration:

A Declaration by Civil Society on Prison Reform

March 2026

We, the 46 civil society organisations of experts, advocates, activists, innovators, and practitioners, including with lived experience of imprisonment, founding members of the Global Alliance of Civil Society on Prison Reform, working across all regions, make the following declaration:

1. We come together in Amsterdam at a time of profound global upheaval. Across regions, we are witnessing mounting pressures on legal, criminal/ justice systems, the erosion of the rule of law, and deepening inequality. These challenges are reflected acutely on prison systems, where systemic injustices continue to undermine human dignity, underscoring the urgent need for a prioritisation of the human rights situation in prisons – as well as the broader systems they operate in.

Our concerns

2. We express our collective alarm that at least 11.5 million people are imprisoned worldwide on any given day, of which 733,000 are women and 19,000 children with their caregivers, and approximately 259,000 children. Millions more pass through prisons each year. The impact extends far beyond individuals: it affects their children, families and loved ones, communities, and the very fabric of society.
3. We reject punitiveness as a default response to social challenges, recognising that punitive approaches lead to more people being impacted by harmful prisons. This deepens inequality and fails to deliver safety or justice. Prisons do not operate in isolation, they reflect and reinforce broader social, economic, and political failures.
4. We believe that, in their current state, prison systems fail to fulfil the purposes set out in international human rights standards to which governments have committed, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
5. We collectively identified the following urgent concerns relating to experiences before, during, and after imprisonment, including the use and conditions of detention:
 - In contexts of democratic backsliding and the erosion of the rule of law, safeguards are weakened, accountability is diminished, and the risk of abuse within legal and prison systems is heightened.
 - We, as civil society, increasingly operate in environments marked by shrinking civic space, conflict, political polarisation, and persistent underfunding. These

conditions threaten our work and the rights and safety of people affected by imprisonment and their communities.

- Poverty, inequality, and discrimination, along with over-reliance on punitiveness are driving criminalisation and imprisonment
- Stigmatisation and limited support to people who are in or have been imprisoned create punitive traps
- Prison systems remain places where people's rights are violated daily
- Prisons are neglected in settings affected by war, internal conflicts or natural disasters, leaving people without any form of protection for their safety or basic needs
- People who have lived experience and affected communities continue to be excluded from decision spaces
- A stigmatising culture, including the use of a derogatory language about people in prison and after release, continues to be normalised, reinforcing discrimination.

Our call

6. We call on governments, international organisations and donors to urgently address the human rights and humanitarian crisis affecting many of the world's prison systems. Urgent action must be taken in full compliance with international human rights standards, including those protecting children, women and other vulnerable groups. Reforms must be guided by the leadership of those with lived experience, evidence, transparency, and alongside civil society.
7. Drawing on our deep and wide-ranging expertise as civil society, we point to overwhelming evidence that over-reliance on imprisonment does not reduce crime and does not make societies safer; instead, it causes harm, perpetuates cycles of disadvantage and exclusion, imposes substantial social and economic burdens on society, and fails to support individuals.

Our pledge

8. As civil society, we remain committed to challenging harmful narratives, stigma and discrimination caused by imprisonment. We will hold governments and institutions to account for upholding human rights and advocating for a reduction in the over-reliance on imprisonment. We urge governments to build and strengthen their partnerships with civil society towards prison reform. As a united collective of experts, innovators, and practitioners, including with lived experience, we bring our expertise and evidence to demand real, transformative change.
9. This declaration is not an endpoint, but a shared commitment to action and meaningful change. Together, we will continue to build a global movement for prison reform.

Signed by:

1. A.O. Gulagu Net (Republic of Moldova)
2. AL-monqith organization for Human Rights (M.O.H.R) Iraq
3. Al Haq – Defending Human Rights / Palestine
4. American Civil Liberties Union
5. Antigone (Italy)
6. Asociación Costarricense para el Estudio e Intervención en Drogas (ACEID)
7. Association Tunisienne pour Accompagnement Familial
8. Center for Detention Studies (CDS) - Indonesia
9. Center for Legal Initiatives NGO (Republic of Armenia)
10. Center for Legal Support and Inmate Rehabilitation (CELSIR)
11. Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) - Argentina
12. Centre for Human Rights Education, Advice and Assistance (CHREAA) - Malawi
13. Clean Start Africa
14. Collectif des Associations Contre l'Impunité au Togo (CACIT)
15. Corporación Mujeres Libres
16. Egyptian Foundation for Advancement of the Childhood Conditions
17. Elementa DDHH – Colombia
18. Elementa DDHH - México
19. EQUIS Justicia para las Mujeres (México)
20. European Prison Litigation Network
21. Fundación Pájarx Entre Púas (Chile)
22. Hungarian Helsinki Committee
23. I.Care asbl (Belgium)
24. India Vision Foundation
25. Iniciativa para la Investigación y la Incidencia (México/Cuba)
26. Instituto Terra, Trabalho e Cidadania – ITTC (Brazil)
27. Irish Penal Reform Trust

28. Justice Collective e.V. (Germany)
29. Korea Future (North Korea)
30. Libyan Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (LCDHR)
31. Observatoire international des prisons – section française (OIP-SF)
32. Penal Reform International
33. Prison Insider
34. Public Awareness on Rights and Rehabilitation of Vulnerable Persons Initiative (PAR-RVP-INITIATIVE)
35. RESCALED
36. Réseau des Entrepreneurs Contre La Peine de Mort (RECPM)
37. Richtungswechsel (Austria)
38. RUBIKON Centre (Czech Republic)
39. Sails Of Hope Organization (SHO) - Sudan
40. The Justice Project Society (Pakistan)
41. The Palestinian Centre for Child Rights
42. The Restore: Justice, Healing, Hope Trust (South Africa)
43. This Life
44. Together Foundation for Development and Human Rights
45. Women Beyond Walls
46. Young Perspectives (YOPE)