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THE WHITE HOUSE LEGAL AID INTERAGENCY ROUNDTABLE AND GOAL 16 - ONE YEAR ON

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Courtesy of Principal Deputy Associate Attorney General Bill Baer

“Here in this country, the wealthiest nation on Earth, we’re still working every day to perfect our union, and to be more equal and more just, and to treat the most vulnerable members of our society with value and concern. That’s why, today, I am committing the United States to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.”

– President Obama, Remarks on Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations, Sept. 27, 2015

On Sunday evening, I had the honor of representing the United States at a gala reception on *Leveraging the Sustainable Development Goals for Inclusive Growth: Delivering Access to Justice for All*, held to celebrate the first anniversary of the United Nations Summit for Sustainable Development (UN Summit). This event, hosted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Open Society Foundations (OSF), included a panel discussion on access to justice and inclusive growth in which I participated with the Ministers of Justice from Austria, Ireland, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Ukraine, and the Director of Justice, Security and Governance from Colombia.

As co-chair of the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable (WH-LAIR), I was proud to share the work of this interagency collaboration with leaders from across the globe and explain how it demonstrates the United States’ commitment to ensuring access to justice for our citizens. Almost a year ago, on the eve of the UN Summit, Samantha Power, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, and Roy Austin, Director of the Office of Urban Affairs, Justice and Opportunity of the White House Domestic Policy Council and my WH-LAIR co-chair, announced that President Obama had signed a Presidential Memorandum establishing this interagency effort. Among other things, the Presidential Memorandum charged WH-LAIR with helping the United States implement Goal 16, the access to justice goal, of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN Agenda).

Since the adoption of the UN Agenda last year, the international access to justice community has been breathing life into Goal 16 through international gatherings, working groups and meetings. The OECD has been at the forefront, including by hosting two roundtables on access to justice last fall. And OSF, through the work of the Open Society Justice Initiative, has been supporting advocates across the globe – including here in the United States – to connect Goal 16 to domestic access to justice reform movements. The U.S. government is both participating in this international activity and working through WH-LAIR to fulfill the aspirations of Goal 16 domestically.

Comprised of 21 federal partners, WH-LAIR works to identify how and when legal aid can improve federal programs that serve our nation’s vulnerable and underserved populations. By integrating civil legal aid into a wide array of federal programs designed to improve access to housing, health care services, employment and education, and enhance family stability and public safety, the programs are strengthened and objectives better met. Similarly, Goal 16 and its call for *equal access to justice for all* might be viewed as a necessary component to fulfilling the other Sustainable Development Goals. WH-LAIR, like the UN Agenda, reflects an understanding that access to justice is both a worthy goal in and of itself and necessary for the success of other societal objectives, including inclusive growth.

This fall, WH-LAIR will issue its first annual report to the president. This report will detail the history of this interagency effort and provide concrete examples of how civil legal aid has been integrated into federal programs across the executive branch. It helps fulfill WH-LAIR's annual reporting obligation to the president, but it will not be our only effort to track the progress toward fulfilling Goal 16 – and specifically Target 16.3, which calls on countries to “promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.”

That's why at this week's event, I announced the United States' commitment to identifying national indicators for Target 16.3. This activity, co-led by the department's Office for Access to Justice and Bureau of Justice Statistics, and which includes federal agency experts from across the WH-LAIR agencies, is working to identify national criminal and civil access to justice indicators and related data for this target. But we know that we can't do it alone. Just last week, the working group participated in a civil society consultation organized by Columbia Law School's Human Rights Institute and Fordham Law School's National Center for Access to Justice and hosted by OSF in Washington, D.C. The consultation allowed members of the working group to hear from over 30 experts on access to justice from across the country as we undertake the difficult and necessary task of measuring justice.

All of the countries participating in Sunday's event agreed that measuring justice is difficult, but essential, because access to justice is the foundation for more inclusive societies. As OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría aptly observed, fulfilling the goal of ensuring access to justice requires not only effective planning, but also effective implementation. And one key to effective implementation is for all nations to rigorously measure justice within their borders. The WH-LAIR working group looks forward to doing just that. I am excited about what we will produce and the ongoing exchange of lessons learned and best practices gleaned.

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