



World Justice  
Project

WJP  **FOCUS NOTES**

## **Why Human Rights Measurement Needs Institutional Indicators**

# Why Human Rights Measurement Needs Institutional Indicators

By Santiago Pardo

**WJP's innovative approach to Human Rights Measurement tracks institutional performance and lived experience across 20 indicators including due process, labor rights, and free expression.**

Human rights rely on the effective functioning of state institutions. The ability to express opinions, access information, seek justice, and work in safe conditions depends not only on legal commitments but on how courts, police, administrative bodies, and oversight mechanisms operate in practice. When these institutions weaken, rights begin to erode gradually, often before legal frameworks change or violations become visible.

**Most traditional monitoring tools rely on legal analysis or incident-based reporting.** While useful, they provide only partial insight into the functioning of institutions responsible for guaranteeing rights. This gap creates three main challenges:

- fragmented data that is difficult to compare across countries or years;
- a disconnect between legal commitments and lived experience;
- and limited early-warning capacity to detect institutional vulnerabilities before they escalate into systemic problems.

The WJP Rule of Law Index addresses these gaps by measuring more than twenty indicators directly tied to human rights protections, including freedom of expression, access to information, due process, labor rights, and judicial impartiality. By capturing both institutional characteristics and people's lived experiences, these indicators enable governments and oversight bodies to identify emerging risks, track progress, and communicate findings using consistent and comparable data.

# Measurement Methodology: Institutional Indicators for Human Rights Assessment

WJP's measurement of human rights relies on indicators that capture both institutional performance and people's lived experiences. Rather than producing a separate human rights index, this approach monitors the conditions that shape individuals' ability to exercise their rights in practice. Drawn from the WJP Rule of Law Index, the indicators assess the performance of courts, police, administrative bodies, and oversight institutions. They also recognize that rights are shaped by wider social and civic dynamics—including norms, civil society engagement, and other non-governmental factors.

WJP integrates two complementary data sources:

- **Expert surveys** assess the operation of key institutions, evaluating aspects such as impartiality, transparency, independence, and procedural fairness.
- Nationally representative **population surveys** provide the counterpart, by capturing how individuals experience these institutions directly—through access to information, equality of treatment, accountability mechanisms, and perceptions of security.

Together, these inputs offer a comprehensive view of how rights are upheld in day-to-day interactions with the state, enabling governments and oversight bodies to identify risks, track progress, and ground their decisions in consistent and comparable evidence.

A core strength of this methodology is its **consistency across more than 140 countries, enabling the use of comparable, longitudinal data** to assess how rights are protected and experienced over time. The same conceptual definitions, survey instruments, and scoring procedures are applied worldwide, allowing policymakers and national human rights bodies to monitor trends and benchmark performance across countries. By combining insights on institutional practices with rights-holders' experiences, the WJP Rule of Law Index provides a robust foundation for understanding where human rights are upheld, eroded, or unevenly realized within a country.

## Rights-Based Indicators Grounded in Rule of Law Methodology

Building on this methodology, WJP organizes its human-rights indicators into a four-pillar framework. This framework moves beyond treating rights as abstract legal commitments. Instead, it groups WJP Rule of Law Index subfactors into coherent domains that illustrate how institutional practices and people's experiences interact to either enable or restrict the effective exercise of rights.

The first pillar, **civil and political rights**, captures whether individuals can express opinions, practice their beliefs, associate freely, enjoy personal security, and live without discrimination or unwarranted interference from the state. It incorporates subfactors related to freedom of expression, belief, assembly, equality, privacy, and protection from violence, providing insight into the openness and safety of civic space.

The second pillar, **participation and access to information**, examines the mechanisms that allow people to engage with public life and monitor government actions. This includes subfactors on civic participation, access to complaint mechanisms, media freedom, civil society oversight, and the right to information. Together, these elements assess whether individuals can influence decisions and hold authorities accountable.

The third pillar, **labor and property rights**, focuses on institutional guarantees that protect economic security and dignity. It integrates subfactors related to fair working conditions, freedom of organization, protection from forced or child labor, and safeguards against expropriation without due process. These measures reflect how administrative and regulatory institutions affect workers, businesses, and communities in daily life.

The fourth pillar, **fair and impartial justice**, assesses whether civil, criminal, and administrative justice systems operate independently, impartially, and efficiently. Subfactors in this pillar capture access to civil justice, due process rights, judicial impartiality, protections against improper influence, and the fairness and timeliness of administrative proceedings. Collectively, these indicators show whether individuals can resolve disputes and seek redress through consistent and non-discriminatory procedures.

Together, the four pillars offer a structured way to understand how institutional performance shapes the realization of human rights, allowing analysts and policymakers to identify strengths, weaknesses, and trends across different rule of law domains.

## Case Study: Thailand's Model

Thailand provides a clear example of how this approach can strengthen national monitoring of human rights. For the second consecutive year, the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand has incorporated WJP indicators into its assessment and reporting processes, allowing it to track trends more systematically, identify risks earlier, and base its recommendations on measurable evidence rather than individual cases. This collaboration has also improved the clarity of national discussions by shifting attention toward consistent and comparable trends. Together, these developments show how rule-of-law-based human rights measurement can be integrated into national systems in ways that enhance early-warning capacity, highlight institutional strengths and weaknesses, and support more targeted policy dialogue.

Thailand's experience offers a model that can be adapted by countries seeking to strengthen their human rights monitoring efforts. Rather than replacing existing systems, the use of rule of law indicators complements national monitoring by quantifying selected dimensions of human rights and providing consistent benchmarks over time. This approach enables oversight bodies to track progress more systematically, compare performance across years, and ground reporting and policy dialogue in a stable analytical framework.

As more countries adopt similar methods, broader regions stand to benefit from more harmonized monitoring practices and a clearer understanding of shared institutional challenges. The partnership with the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand demonstrates how integrating independent and internationally comparable data can enhance transparency, support accountability, and sharpen the evidence base for recommendations to parliament and government agencies. Together, these elements show how a rule-of-law approach to measurement can strengthen national efforts to protect human rights in practice.

### How to cite

Pardo, S. (2026). Why Human Rights Measurement Needs Institutional Indicators, World Justice Project.