



**Keynote address: *“Towards a Joint Platform for Innovative Access to Justice:
Global Stakeholders in Action”***

Mr. Christophe Soulard, First President of the Cour de cassation

Washington DC, 5 November 2025

Mr. President of the World Bank,

Your Excellencies,

Fellow Chief Justices,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank you for this invitation. It is fitting that we are here to launch the Access to Law and Justice Working Group. This initiative by the World Bank’s Global Forum is essential. In a world where our legal foundations are challenged, a global platform for scalable innovations is a necessary project. The mission to strengthen access to law and justice for all resonates deeply with the work of every judicial institution. In this spirit, I wish to share some reflections from the French experience.

We are a global community united by common challenges. Across the world, public trust in our democracies is being tested. Now, the very principles of the rule of law are questioned with new intensity. Judges are caught in a crossfire of criticism: accused one day of being too lenient, the next too severe, or even of usurping the role of parliament.

In this environment, we who serve the law must reflect on our fundamental mission. We must reaffirm our purpose and explain, with renewed clarity, how our role contributes not only to justice and legal stability, but also to societal and economic development.

This leads to a guiding question, one every society must ask: What truly makes a good judge?

Is a good judge simply a master of legal texts, or someone with innate wisdom? These qualities are valuable. But I offer the conviction that has shaped our journey in France: a judge's qualities cannot be separated from the institution's values. We believe good judges are the product of a good system. A good system is the foundation of a nation that favors social justice, peace, and sustainable economic development.

In France, our revolutionary heritage gave us a clear mandate: Justice is not a distant power, but a fundamental public service. This foundational belief has guided our reforms and is the root of our conception of the "good judge."

I share our experience in a spirit of dialogue, not as a model. Our system is the product of our history and constant improvement. I will illustrate this by exploring three core commitments that make a good judge: a stable institution, a reachable judge, and an understood judge.

First, we all agree a good judge must be independent. As Montesquieu wrote, "There is no liberty," he wrote, "if the power of judging be not separated from the legislative and executive powers."

Nations secure this separation in different ways. Our path is the career judiciary, the *magistrat de carrière*. Judges are recruited via apolitical examination and trained for three years at our National School for the Judiciary. This forges a common judicial culture centered on the ideal of an impartial public servant.

This corps is protected by the High Council for the Judiciary, which I preside. Composed largely of peer-elected judges and other appointees, this council manages judicial careers and discipline. It is the mechanism that insulates judges from political pressure, allowing them to serve the law, not the powerful or an electorate.

Finally, our method is rooted in the depersonalization of justice and our commitment to collegiality. Our old French traditions, from robes to ceremonies, emphasize the institution over the individual. It is not one person who judges, but the Court. No momentous decision is made alone; they are the product of structured, group deliberation. This is our essential guarantee against arbitrariness and an exercise in institutional humility. It replaces individual power with the collective strength of shared reason. A good judge understands their fallibility and trusts the group's wisdom, aiming to contribute to justice, social cohesion, and economic development.

The focus of the working group we are launching today is access to law and justice. And so this brings me to my second reflection: A good judge is one who can be reached.

In a fair society, courthouse doors must be open to all. Unresolved legal disputes are a barrier to societal and economic development. They trap families in poverty, prevent small businesses from enforcing contracts, and erode the social trust necessary for economic growth.

Our French approach to access is a national system of *aide juridictionnelle*, or legal aid. This robust, state-funded system ensures no one is deprived of a defense due to cost, whether in civil, criminal, or administrative law. This is not charity; it is a democratic investment, a legal infrastructure as vital as roads or a power grid.

If the rule of law is not accessible to all, it becomes a privilege. A judge presiding over a system open only to the wealthy cannot be a truly good judge, as the justice dispensed is inherently unequal.

Access is not only financial. A remote judiciary feels alienating. We bring justice closer through our *Point-Justice* network. These are places of mediation and early intervention to resolve conflicts before they escalate.

Reaching the judge is only the beginning. This brings me to the third vital commitment: A good judge is one who makes himself understood.

For centuries, the Cour de cassation's style was austere: our rulings were a single, technical sentence. This was born of a post-revolutionary suspicion of judges; we sought to make them merely "the mouth of the law." The judge was to speak the law, not explain it, for fear they might remake it. But this tradition made justice opaque. A decision that cannot be understood is an act of authority, not persuasive reason.

We therefore undertook a profound reform, culminating in what we call "enhanced reasoning": *la motivation enrichie*. Our major decisions now follow a clear, didactic path.

First, we lay out the full context, including relevant European and international law, showing the judge operates within a hierarchy of norms. Second, we walk the reader through the court's reasoning, making explicit the balancing of competing interests: the *contrôle de proportionnalité*. Third, we explain the decision's normative scope, providing clear guidance to lower courts and enhancing legal certainty.

This is amplified by our "Open Data" policy: the massive, free, online publication of all court decisions: 3 million per year! These are accessible to all, thanks to our investments in data science and AI at the Cour de cassation.

This publication invites scrutiny, which a good judge welcomes. By making our reasoning public, we invite critique from scholars, creating a feedback loop. A judge's legitimacy derives not from mystery, but from the persuasive force of their reasoning.

French courts also use tools like press releases, podcasts, and social media. These are accessory to our rulings, but they build bridges with the public, fostering comprehension and countering misinformation...an important goal in our troubled times.

So, what are the qualities of the good judge? In our view, a good judge is empowered by a good system. A system that strives to be better. A system that helps a judge be accessible to all, not just a few. A system that demands a judge be understood, not just obeyed. And a system that allows a judge to be independent, yet humble, placing collective wisdom above individual authority.

This is our vision of justice as a public service. It is a demanding vision, requiring constant effort and the embracing of modern methods. You can have red robes *and* artificial intelligence; solemn hearings *and* explanatory videos. I share our experience as an invitation to continue this crucial dialogue in our common search for accessible justice.

Allow me to end on a note of hope. The rise of distrust in public institutions is not a fatality. The era of state building and social justice is not over. If we hold true to our fundamental values, we can ensure a more just society and development for all.

I have great confidence that the Access to Law and Justice Working Group will be a powerful engine for progress. The collaborative spirit of this initiative is precisely what is needed. I trust the work you produce, including practical resources like the "Lawyer's Cookbook," will provide invaluable guidance. I wish the working group every success in its crucial work, which will contribute to more just societies and sustainable development.

Thank you.