



Expert Insights

PERSPECTIVE ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE

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Justice for All series: The economic legacy of Magna Carta

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**Foreword by
Alderman &
Sheriff Robert
Hughes-Penney**

*Justice for All
Series – The
economic legacy
of Magna Carta*



As I begin my year in office as a Sheriff of the City of London, I do so with a deep sense of reverence for the foundations of justice that have shaped our institutions, our economy, and our civic life. The Justice for All Series, hosted at the Old Bailey, seeks to explore how justice – ancient and modern – continues to underpin the prosperity and stability of our society. This paper, reflecting on the economic legacy of Magna Carta, is a timely contribution to that conversation.

Just over eight centuries ago, a group of barons gathered at Runnymede to challenge the unchecked authority of the Crown. The document they compelled King John to seal – Magna Carta – was not merely a political settlement. It was a foundational moment in the evolution of the rule of law. It introduced principles that would echo through the centuries: that no one is above the law, that property must be protected, and that justice must be accessible and fair.

Subsequently revised into the substantive version in 1225, these principles did more than shape our legal system – they laid the groundwork for economic confidence. Investors, merchants, and innovators thrive when

institutions are predictable, rights are protected, and disputes are resolved fairly. The Charter's insistence on lawful judgment, proportional fines, and fixed courts created the conditions for commerce to flourish. It is no coincidence that the economic growth of medieval England accelerated in the wake of these reforms.

Today, we face a different challenge. Sustainable Development Goal 16, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, calls for peace, justice, and strong institutions. It is, in many ways, a modern Magna Carta – global in scope, inclusive in ambition, and rooted in the belief that justice is a cornerstone for development. Yet, as this paper shows, SDG 16 remains underfunded and underprioritised. The private sector, which holds vast resources and influence, must step forward – not only as beneficiaries of stable institutions but as stewards of justice.

The City of London has always been a place where commerce and conscience meet. Our ancient privileges, including the election of Sheriffs, reflect a belief that civic duty and economic leadership go hand in hand. As Sheriff, I believe we must renew that commitment. We must invest in justice – not just in courts and prisons, but in fairness, transparency, and opportunity. We must ensure that the principles set out at Runnymede are not relics, but living guides for our future.

This paper invites us to reflect, not only on what Magna Carta achieved, but on what we must now do to ensure justice for all. It is a call to action – for policymakers, investors, and citizens alike.

In 2025, the world marks 800 years since the proclamation of the definitive text of Magna Carta in 1225 – a document that has come to symbolise the introduction of the rule of law in England. King John, the youngest son of Henry II, rose unexpectedly to the English throne in 1199 after a series of family misfortunes and shifting political alliances. His troubled reign was defined by unrest, including the loss of Normandy and Anjou in 1204, which led him to levy heavy taxes to fund unsuccessful military campaigns.

These burdens, coupled with his arbitrary and often ruthless rule, fuelled resentment among the nobility, culminating in a rebellion led by barons from the north of England. In June 1215, at Runnymede, King John was compelled to seal a charter recognising baronial rights and constraining royal authority. Known as Magna Carta – originally named simply to distinguish it from a shorter charter – it was the first document in England to codify limits on monarchical power and to affirm that even the sovereign was subject to the law.

What made Magna Carta unique in its thirteenth-century context was the assertion that royal authority must operate within a legal framework, a notion uncommon in a Europe dominated by feudal hierarchies and divine kingship. Although the document's immediate effect was limited and its provisions primarily applied to the nobility, its principles were reinterpreted and extended over time to underpin broader concepts of liberty, justice and accountable governance. These ideas profoundly shaped English common law and later influenced constitutional developments across the world, especially in countries drawing on the Anglo-American legal tradition. Today, the values embodied in Magna Carta – greater access to justice and the subjection of power to legal constraint – resonate with the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 16.

Nevertheless, any connection should be considered one of inspiration rather than direct continuity. While the Charter's medieval compromises differ significantly from modern democratic ideals, its legacy endures as an early milestone in the long evolution of the rule of law.

This briefing is part of a series of five papers examining justice for all through four lenses: justice for the accused (exploring fair treatment and access to representation), justice for survivors (addressing support for victims of modern slavery and gender-based violence), justice for prison leavers (tackling rehabilitation, education and employment) and financing sustainable improvements to the justice system (justice funding for the next generation and the role of business in it).

Introduction

This paper reflects on the economic legacy of Magna Carta (or 'Great Charter'), focusing on its direct and indirect effects on fiscal governance and the broader economic implications of the legal principles it introduced. Originally proclaimed in 1215 as a negotiated settlement between King John and England's barons, Magna Carta set precedents for limiting executive power, protecting property rights and ensuring

greater access to justice. Over time, through reinterpretation and adaptation, these principles have shaped systems of rights and institutions that still underpin the delivery of justice, economic stability and sustainable growth in many parts of the world.

Against this historical backdrop, we consider whether Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which calls for peace, justice and strong institutions, could become

a similarly transformative milestone for the twenty-first century. Drawing on contemporary evidence, the analysis demonstrates that investment in justice delivers measurable economic returns, from sustained growth to increased foreign direct investment. Moreover, it outlines some of the practical steps needed to realise SDG 16's vision, including mobilising adequate financing, adapting proven funding models from other sectors and leveraging established benchmarks such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. In doing so, the paper invites reflection on what is needed to ensure that the principles set out over 800 years ago continue to inform and inspire contemporary strategies for sustainable economic and social development.

Foundations for constitutional government and the rule of law

Historians and legal scholars alike widely regard Magna Carta as a foundational document in the history of constitutional governance and the rule of law.

Although its initial impact was primarily to resolve a political crisis between King John and his barons, its legacy has endured for centuries, shaping legal, political and economic institutions in England and beyond.

At King John's insistence, Pope Innocent III annulled the Charter just two months after its initial proclamation.¹ However, it was reissued in 1216, 1217 and 1225.² The final version from 1225 became the definitive text, establishing the principle that the English government must be subject to the law.³ It also limited the King's ability to tax his

subjects by requiring prior consent. According to the 1215 version of the document, this consent was to be provided by a council of 25 barons,⁴ which later evolved into a form of Parliament that began resembling what we recognise today in the second half of the thirteenth century.⁵ Among various other measures, Magna Carta also stated that the monarch could no longer arbitrarily seize the property of his subjects and included provisions for returning previously dispossessed property to its original owners.^{6,7}

Direct and indirect economic impacts of Magna Carta

Evidence suggests that these changes generated both direct and indirect economic effects in the thirteenth century and beyond, but within and beyond England.

Driven by the expansion of commercial activity that began in the late twelfth century and continued into the early thirteenth century, England experienced significant economic growth during King John's reign.⁸ Several developments contributed to this prosperity, including transportation advancements like the widespread construction of bridges and the introduction of metal cartwheels.^{9,10} However, the lack of surviving source material from this period means that any correlations between these developments, Magna Carta and continued economic growth must remain speculative, since definitive claims of causality are impossible. In principle, concepts from the field of impact evaluation could help frame how one might assess the economic effects of a milestone intervention such as Magna Carta. Such approaches typically require a counterfactual, providing evidence of what *would* have occurred in the absence of the Charter to establish causality. However,

for an event of this nature and period, we cannot apply conventional evaluation methods; there are insufficient reliable data sources to construct a counterfactual and insufficient comparative data to conduct a cross-sectional analysis with other countries that did not introduce similar rights and limits on royal power.

Nevertheless, it is plausible that the processes already underway prior to the meeting at Runnymede were reinforced by the provisions of the Charter. **Several of its clauses appear to explicitly promote commercial activity.** For example, Clause 41 reads that ‘All merchants may enter or leave England unharmed and without fear, and may stay or travel within it, by land or water, for purpose of trade...’, while Clause 30 sets out that no one, including the sheriff and royal officials, may take the horses and carts for transport owned by a free man.^{11,12} Furthermore, Clause 35 proclaims the introduction of standard measures for wine, ale and corn throughout England.^{13,14}

However, to fully understand the economic impact of Magna Carta, we must look beyond the plainly commercial clauses. Although less readily discernible in the surviving historical records, **the legal reforms introduced by the Charter may have played a significant role in supporting the economic growth** observed by historians of this period. Indeed, Magna Carta also introduced a series of limits on royal authority. It stipulated that the King could no longer tax his subjects arbitrarily or without their consent (Clause 12) and could no longer seize land or rent in payment for debt if the debtor had sufficient means to pay it off (Clause 9).

Using Magna Carta as an example, Douglass North (1990) argued that systems that limited the power of the executive – in this case King John – and provided for a

form of political representation for property holders (initially the 25 barons mentioned in the 1215 version) have historically supported economic growth by incentivising investment and trade.¹⁵ Reflecting on the economic impact of Magna Carta, **the limits placed on royal authority by Magna Carta and the protection of property rights may have contributed to a more favourable economic climate.** This thesis originated from the work of Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson on the importance of strong institutions for economic growth, for which they were awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2024.¹⁶ They argued that nations with strong, inclusive institutions consistently outperform those with extractive institutions in terms of long-run economic growth. The study references Magna Carta as the ‘foundation of England’s political institutions’, earmarking it as a key enabler of economic development.¹⁷ Notably, however, the rights proclaimed by Magna Carta primarily benefited the privileged classes, such as the nobility and the clergy. As Ogilvie and Carus (2014) argue, such systems do not guarantee broad economic growth.¹⁸ When only a limited group benefits, they may use their improved position to increase their own wealth rather than support broader prosperity.

Equitable access to justice as a driver of economic growth

Beyond securing property rights, Magna Carta also played a crucial role in promoting more equitable access to and dispensation of justice. It established that those involved in lawsuits no longer had to follow the royal court from place to place, but could be held in a fixed location, making legal proceedings more accessible (Clause

17). The Charter also required that fines be proportionate to the offence, extending this protection even to unfree peasants under the feudal system known as ‘villeins’ (Clause 20). It further stipulated that writs of inquisition, which were essential for initiating certain legal actions, could no longer be sold by the monarch but would be provided free of charge, reducing financial barriers to justice (Clause 36). Additionally, Magna Carta mandated that no individual could be placed on trial by a royal official without credible witness testimony and that no free man could be imprisoned without a lawful judgement, safeguarding against arbitrary prosecution (Clauses 38 and 39). Most importantly, it declared that no one would be denied or delayed the right to justice, laying the groundwork for establishing equal access to the law (Clause 40).

Decades of research in development economics have established a robust evidence base indicating that improved access to justice can be a key driver of economic growth globally.¹⁹ While noting that there is no universally accepted methodology for measuring the impact of gaps in access to justice,²⁰ studies by the OECD highlight that the rule of law and effective justice systems are fundamental to creating market stability, which enables businesses and investment to thrive.²¹ By fostering a more level playing field and safeguarding property rights, effective justice systems help to minimise business disruptions, alleviate concerns about the costs and uncertainties of legal proceedings and reduce the risk of income loss.²²

These findings are underscored by research conducted by other stakeholders, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF)²³ and the European Central Bank.²⁴ By establishing more easily accessible mechanisms for enforcing contracts and resolving commercial disputes

while also making provisions against arbitrary prosecution, **Magna Carta thus had the potential to underpin the functioning of markets and the growth of business.**

Institutional legacy and influence on economic reforms

In the centuries that followed King John’s reign, **the principles introduced by Magna Carta regarding the rule of law and access to justice contributed to the emergence of several key institutions.** These institutions include the assemblies of representatives from counties and boroughs, alongside bishops and nobles, that would become known as ‘parliaments’,²⁵ and trial by jury, as the Charter refers to the need for judgement by one’s peers for a punishment to be considered lawful (Clause 39).²⁶

Were it not for several external factors, these institutions may have solidified the development of a more prosperous economic climate. Triggered by overpopulation and accelerated by the outbreak of the plague in 1348 and subsequent epidemics throughout the second half of the fourteenth century, however, the country experienced a significant economic downturn from the end of the thirteenth century.²⁷ Estimates of real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and real GDP per capita suggest that pre-plague economic growth levels were not regained until the seventeenth century.²⁸

Nevertheless, the institutional foundations laid by Magna Carta continued to shape the evolution of governance and legal systems in England and beyond. **The principles outlined in the Charter informed subsequent legal and economic reforms,** contributing to the

establishment of parliamentary oversight of taxation and the safeguarding of individual economic rights.

Reinterpretations of Magna Carta across pre-modern times and modern democracies

Indeed, the legacy of Magna Carta is defined less by its original clauses and more by how it has been reinterpreted and adapted over time. While the Charter granted certain freedoms to the nobility and clergy, its direct impact on most of the English population, who were unfree peasants, was limited. Instead, its reinterpretation and adaptation in subsequent centuries for multivarious purposes constitute its true importance today.

Magna Carta was reissued and reaffirmed multiple times after 1225, ensuring its continued relevance as a key legal document. Its principles influenced later political and legal developments in England and other countries. During the fifteenth century, common lawyers continued to use the Charter at the Inns of Court to restrict royal power.²⁹

The Charter also played an important role in criticising the divine right of kings, as they were voiced in the seventeenth century and used to accuse Charles I of treason.^{30,31} The Petition of Right (1628) was built on the principles laid down in Magna Carta regarding the rule of law, including prohibiting arbitrary taxation and imprisonment by royal authority.³² Later, the Habeas Corpus Act (1679), which protects individuals from unlawful or arbitrary imprisonment, took similar inspiration from the Charter when putting forward the principle that no

subject could be unlawfully detained, echoing Clause 39 of Magna Carta.³³

Moreover, although initially limited to a small segment of society, the principle of no taxation without some form of representation outlined in Magna Carta became important during the American Revolution.

American colonists used the Charter as an economic instrument by invoking its principles to justify resistance to arbitrary taxation and protect property rights.³⁴ These principles subsequently shaped the economic and legal foundations of the United States (US), influencing both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.^{35,36} Magna Carta introduced the idea that government authority is not absolute and that rulers must be subject to the law, a concept that was central to the drafting of these two documents. Its guarantees of due process, trial by jury and protection of individual rights from arbitrary power are evident in the emphasis on limited government and the protection of personal liberties.

Magna Carta continued to inspire a range of social and political movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. English suffragettes invoked the Charter in their campaign for women's suffrage. They cited Clause 40, which states that 'right or justice' cannot be denied to anyone,³⁷ as a basis for their argument that the British government was unjustly withholding the right to vote from women.³⁸

Most of Magna Carta's provisions were repealed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the Statute Law Revision Acts, with just three key clauses remaining in force in the United Kingdom (UK), excluding Scotland: those guaranteeing the freedom of the Church of England, the 'ancient liberties' of the City of

London and the right to due legal process. Despite this, the Charter's legacy continues to inform debates about justice, the rule of law and economic development, both in England and abroad.

Indeed, while we can trace Magna Carta's most direct institutional descendants through the English common law tradition into the US Constitution, Commonwealth legal systems and other jurisdictions shaped by British colonial governance, its principles – particularly those relating to the rule of law, limits on arbitrary authority and protection of certain rights – have also found echoes in civil law systems and post-colonial constitutional frameworks. For example, Magna Carta was mentioned several times during the Constituent Assembly Debates, a series of discussions held between 1946 and 1950 to draft the 1950 Constitution of India, demonstrating the Charter's symbolic influence.³⁹ Finally, some scholars argue that the Charter served as inspiration for the constitutions of various European states, including the Western Balkans,⁴⁰ as well as in other regions, such as the Pacific states.⁴¹

Magna Carta and Sustainable Development Goal 16

Since 2015, debates on access to justice have also included discussions around the targets set with the adoption of SDG 16 by the United Nations (UN), as part of the 17 global goals introduced in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁴² SDG 16 seeks 'to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'.⁴³ Developed in 2015 as a global framework with twelve specific targets, including

promoting the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice, substantially reducing corruption and bribery, ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms and developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions, SDG 16 positions justice not as a peripheral ideal but a foundational driver of social cohesion and prosperity.

Although published 800 years apart, Magna Carta and this UN goal share parallels in their emphasis on improved access to justice and accountability of institutions. SDG 16's calls for 'effecting, accountable and transparent institutions' (Target 16.6), finds an echo in the Charter's principle that the monarch is subject to the rule of law and must justify his actions, such as in relation to taxation.

Furthermore, while Magna Carta's provisions were initially limited in scope, its requirements that legal proceedings be held in fixed locations and that 'writs of inquisition' no longer be sold contributed to more equitable access to justice. In this respect, there are parallels with SDG 16's target to 'promote the rule of law and ensure access to justice' (16.3) and to 'substantially reduce corruption and bribery' (16.5). Finally, by taking the first steps to participatory decision making in the establishment of a council of barons to hold the King accountable, Magna Carta introduced a principle that is deeply rooted in SDG 16's emphasis on participatory and representative governance (16.7).

However, there are also significant differences between the two documents' context and scope. Magna Carta was a product of medieval England, addressing the specific grievances of the nobility against the monarchy. In contrast, SDG 16 is a global initiative that reflects the

collective aspirations of the international community in the twenty-first century. While Magna Carta's protections were primarily confined to a privileged segment of English society, SDG 16 seeks to ensure access to justice for all, regardless of status or wealth. Moreover, the influence of Magna Carta gradually extended over time, fluctuating according to the societal context of the era and the degree to which its principles, at least in their interpretation, aligned with the political objectives of influential actors. Through this process, Magna Carta contributed to shaping legal and political institutions in the UK and, over time, in the US and broader Commonwealth. In contrast, SDG 16 was explicitly designed as a universal framework, intended to apply to all countries and contexts regardless of their legal traditions or stages of development. Moreover, its ambition is not limited to privileged social groups, but to securing better justice outcomes for all individuals, including vulnerable sections of society.

The investment gap

Developed with this global scope in mind and reflected in twelve specific targets set by the UN in 2015,⁴⁴ SDG 16 has the potential to advance peace, justice and strong institutions worldwide. However, annual UN reports indicate that, despite progress on several SDG 16 indicators, significant challenges persist.^{45,46} As 2030 approaches, critical threats continue to impede progress toward achieving universal access to justice. A 2019 study conducted by the World Justice Project (WJP) estimated that around five billion people continue to face obstacles in accessing justice.⁴⁷ As of 2025, for example, one third of the world's prison population is being held without a conviction in their

case, a proportion that has remained stable since 2015 and amounted to 3.7 million people in 2025.^{48,49} Furthermore, data from the last five years suggests an increase in the number of children who are victims of human trafficking.⁵⁰

These trends align with findings from the WJP, which evaluates data from 142 countries and jurisdictions relating to various SDG 16 indicators, including the number of people who can access and afford civil justice and the extent to which the right to life and security of the person are effectively guaranteed. In 2024, the WJP noted that, globally, the rule of law had weakened for the seventh year in a row, a phenomenon they refer to as the 'Global Rule of Law Recession'.⁵¹

One key challenge is securing adequate public and private sector investment. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) published a report in 2018 demonstrating that aid funding allocated to providing legal and judicial services and supporting initiatives seeking to end violence against women and girls had fallen by 40 per cent in 2018 compared to 2012.⁵² Five years on, the ODI published an update to these figures showing that such funding continued to decrease.⁵³ More recently, a working paper from the same institute warned that aid budget cuts in the US and several European countries, including the UK and the Netherlands, are likely to drive justice funding even lower in the years ahead.

Similarly, a recent report on justice expenditure in England and Wales since 2008 projects that spending by the Ministry of Justice in this field will be around 14 per cent lower in 2025–2026 than it was in 2007–2008 in real terms.^{54,55} These findings are mirrored in the private sector, as research by the Impact Investing Institute (2024), based on evidence from 40 market actors, found that

SDG 16 receives the lowest level of funding through social impact investment in the UK compared with other SDGs.⁵⁶

However, investing in SDG 16 makes economic sense. As previously highlighted, some of the measures introduced by Magna Carta had the potential to facilitate economic growth by establishing more easily accessible mechanisms for enforcing contracts and resolving commercial disputes while also making provisions against arbitrary prosecution, as demonstrated through the work of North, Acemoglu and Robinson. However, in the case of Magna Carta, the scarcity of primary evidence means that any correlation between its provisions and the economic growth of the next century can only be inferred. In contrast, SDG 16 benefits from tangible, modern data that substantiates this link.

A 2025 study by researchers from Aix-Marseille University, the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) and UC Louvain shows that increased access to justice, measured as a growth in the number of judges per capita, is accompanied by ‘a sizable positive effect on economic growth’.⁵⁷ Research by Zhang et al. (2021) furthermore demonstrates that **greater adherence to the rule of law generally has a positive effect on inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)**. By mapping data on the ‘Rule of Law Index’ report, published annually by the WJP,⁵⁸ against data on FDI from the IMF, the authors were able to establish specifically that effective regulation enforcement, the presence of an open and transparent government that allows for civic participation and complaint mechanisms and the absence of corruption had a positive effect on inward FDI.

This result reaffirms earlier findings, including a 2011 study by Mengistu et al., which looked at inward FDI in 15

Asian economies between 1996 and 2007 and found that greater FDI inflows often accompany greater adherence to the rule of law.⁵⁹ Conversely, a 2024 study by Umunna Godson Nwagu attributes declines in inward FDI in Nigeria to persistent barriers to effective justice delivery, underscoring the economic costs of a failure to deliver progress on the indicators for SDG 16.⁶⁰ Taken together, these studies highlight that, more than ever before, we have the empirical evidence to demonstrate that robust justice systems and accountable institutions are not only key drivers of social equality but also measurable investments in economic stability and growth.

The funding gap for SDG 16 thus poses both a challenge and an opportunity. It demonstrates that businesses and financial institutions have the potential to play a more active role in driving transformational change in justice initiatives. Indeed, with the private sector controlling a far greater proportion of the world’s liquid assets than the public sector, we cannot rely only on governments and public institutions to close the funding gap for SDG 16.⁶¹ By increasing investment in this area, private sector actors can help strengthen the rule of law and promote more equitable access to justice – both key ingredients for economic growth. In doing so, they can ensure that the positive changes towards SDG 16 echo the transformative impact that Magna Carta set in motion over eight centuries ago.

Opportunities for transformative change

A natural point of departure is the use of established, globally recognised benchmarks for responsible conduct, which provide clear frameworks within which to anchor corporate actions. For example, the OECD

Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises⁶² articulate principles for sustainable operations that extend beyond economic performance to encompass respect for human rights, environmental stewardship and ethical governance. The guidelines outline measures to prevent businesses from causing or contributing to human rights infringements and set out practical steps for remediating adverse impacts when these occur. Moreover, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights outline the corporate responsibility to protect human rights, prevent harm, and provide remedies where abuses occur, a framework directly aligned with SDG 16's goals on justice and accountability.⁶³

To accelerate investment in justice initiatives, it is essential to provide clear, comprehensive information on the spectrum of available funding mechanisms and opportunities within the sector. The absence of such clarity can inhibit private sector engagement, whereas well-structured pathways facilitate the mobilisation of resources. Investing first in developing a realistic, operational framework for investment for private sector actors, similar to that framework currently being developed for the public sector by the ODI in collaboration with Pathfinders for Justice and the Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiiL), will support investors in identifying strategic engagement opportunities and in forming effective partnerships in the sector.⁶⁴ Such a framework should include initiatives like the Innovating Justice Fund, co-founded by HiiL and the investment advisory firm FOUNT,⁶⁵ which provides funding for startups working to improve access to justice for vulnerable groups in developing countries.

We can also draw lessons from other sectors where private finance has been successfully mobilised to support development towards other SDGs, including

environmental sustainability investment mechanisms, such as green bonds, green gilts and other environmental finance instruments.⁶⁶ The justice sector can adapt similar models: issuing 'justice bonds' or 'justice gilts', whose proceeds are earmarked for expanding support for the accused, prison leavers and survivors, and whose impact is tracked against agreed SDG 16 indicators.^{67,68}

Magna Carta's enduring influence grew over centuries through reinterpretation, adaptation and integration into new contexts. It serves as an early example of how, when societies come together and make bold choices, they can set changes in motion that bring benefits for generations. Eight centuries after the proclamation of the definitive text of Magna Carta, its legacy continues to reverberate through legal and political systems worldwide. What began as a thirteenth-century response to baronial grievances evolved into one of history's most enduring statements on the rule of law: that power must be exercised within a framework of accountability. Over time, the principles first articulated at Runnymede inspired constitutional developments across continents, embedding the notion that justice and lawful governance are essential foundations for stable and prosperous societies. Today, SDG 16 continues that legacy, recognising that justice, transparency and strong institutions are essential for a stable and fair society. It reimagines these same ideals for a globalised world, going beyond the limited scope of Magna Carta by striving towards better justice outcomes across the globe. Ensuring access to justice for all, therefore, is not simply a continuation of Magna Carta's legacy; it is a reminder that the pursuit of access to justice remains as vital today as it was eight hundred years ago. However, **if SDG 16 is to match and even exceed this legacy, its principles must**

also be put into practice, not just enshrined in policy. Current figures suggest that this is only possible if funding for justice-related initiatives increases significantly in the coming years.

Notes

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² Carpenter, D. 2015. *Magna Carta*. Penguin UK.

³ Bogdanor, V. 2015. 'Magna Carta, the Rule of Law and the Reform of the Constitution'. *Magna Carta and its modern legacy*, pp.23-41. Cambridge University Press.

⁴ 'Clause 61', in Hazell, R. & J. Melton. 2015. 'English Translation of Magna Carta (1215)'. *Magna Carta and its Modern Legacy*, pp.243-262. Cambridge University Press. See also Leeson, P. T. and P. A. Suarez. 2016. 'An economic analysis of Magna Carta'. *International Review of Law and Economics*, 47, pp.40-46.

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⁷ Carpenter, D. 2015. *Magna Carta*. Penguin UK.

⁸ Masschaele, J. 2010. 'The English Economy in the Era of Magna Carta'. *Magna Carta and the England of King John*, pp.152-167. Boydell & Brewer.

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¹¹ Hazell, R. & J. Melton. 2015. 'English Translation of Magna Carta (1215)'. *Magna Carta and its Modern Legacy*, pp.243-262. Cambridge University Press.

¹² Masschaele, J. 2010. 'The English Economy in the Era of Magna Carta'. *Magna Carta and the England of King John*, pp.152-167. Boydell & Brewer.

¹³ Hazell, R. & J. Melton. 2015. 'English Translation of Magna Carta (1215)'. *Magna Carta and its Modern Legacy*, pp.243-262. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Masschaele, J. 2010. 'The English Economy in the Era of Magna Carta'. *Magna Carta and the England of King John*, pp.152-167. Boydell & Brewer.

¹⁵ North, D. C. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ Acemoglu, D. & J. A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. Crown Business.

¹⁷ Acemoglu, D. & J. A. Robinson. 2012. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. Crown Business.

¹⁸ Ogilvie, S. & A.W. Carus. 2014. 'Institutions and economic growth in historical perspective'. *Handbook of Economic Growth*, 2, pp.403-513.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Deseau, A., A. Levai, and M. Schmiegelow. 2025. 'Access to Justice and Economic Development: Evidence from an International Panel Dataset'. *European Economic Review*, 172/104947, pp.1-17.

²⁰ OECD. 2019. *Equal Access to Justice for Inclusive Growth: Putting People at the Centre*. OECD Publishing.

²¹ OECD Economic Surveys. 'Portugal 2019' and 'Slovak Republic 2018'. As of 20 October 2025: <http://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/>

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