

# Annual Report

2023



**Be Just**  
Believe in Justice

## Dear Friends and Supporters of Be Just,

As the year 2023 comes to an end, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to each of you for your unwavering trust and support for Be Just and the efforts of this organization to promote judicial independence, access to justice, rule of law and the fight against corruption.

The complexities of the political, social, and legal landscape in Guatemala during 2023 required us to channel our efforts towards this nation. Your continuous support has propelled Be Just forward, and I am delighted to share our achievements and aspirations with you.

In our pursuit of solidifying strategic alliances with international organizations operating in Central America, we furthered our engagement with the International Observatory of Guatemala. We participated in a meeting in Mexico City with like-minded organizations allowed us to analyze the prospective situation in Guatemala and collaboratively plan strategies and coordination. Consequently, throughout 2023, we worked with several organizations to publicly advocate for democracy, the rule of law, and the full realization and respect for human rights.

Advocacy efforts were extended both in Guatemala and the United States, focusing on democracy, transparency, and the strengthening of Guatemala's justice systems. Noteworthy was our involvement in the November hearing of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights addressing the situation of justice operators in Guatemala. Additionally, direct advocacy with the Organization of American States aimed to shed light on Guatemala's complex situation in 2023, ensuring international accompaniment during the Presidential elections.

Be Just organized the first visit of President-elect Bernardo Arévalo of Guatemala, fostering crucial alliances with strategic players in the United States. The dialogue between President Arévalo and the Guatemalan migrant community in the United States marked a significant achievement.

In addition, I wish to highlight the diligent work of Be Just, its staff, and consultants throughout 2023. Their continuous monitoring of Guatemala's situation, preparation of reports, prospective analyses, and strategic litigation actions, such as the collaboration and partnership with other organizations that presented *amicus curiae* briefs before the Constitutional Court of Guatemala and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights underscored our commitment to effecting positive change.

Looking ahead, in response of the current favorable situation in Guatemala, we are strengthening our position in Guatemala as an organization that promotes the fight against corruption and the strengthening of the justice systems. To this end, we are articulating a strategy of communication and dissemination of Be Just's work on digital platforms and spaces of convergence with other organizations and collectives in Guatemala. Likewise, we will join the efforts that, from other Guatemalan civil society organizations, are already articulated for the oversight of the selection of Guatemalan Courts.

As we embark on the new year, we reaffirm our dedication to build more just societies where the rule of law and respect for human rights prevail. Your resolute commitment and support inspire us to redouble our efforts.

We deeply appreciate the backing you have provided; you are an integral part of our organizational growth and development. Thank you for your support.

With sincere gratitude,



**Claudia Escobar Mejía**  
President and Executive Director



## Be Just's statements

Be Just is a non-profit organization that advocates for the rule of law by strengthening justice institutions, supporting initiatives against corruption, and promoting respect for human rights.

Our **mission** is to be an organization that promotes the rule of law by strengthening justice institutions, supporting anti-corruption initiatives, and advocating for respect for human rights.

Our **vision** is to position ourselves as an organization actively working in the Central American region to modernize justice institutions, promote judicial independence, and combat corruption.

Our **objective** is to develop plans, programs, strategies, and initiatives to influence the strengthening of justice systems in the Central American region.

We work in the Central American region to ensure that its justice systems meet the needs of the population. We promote the strengthening of the justice sector institutions based on four pillars:

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## 1

### Judicial Independence

Judicial Independence is a crucial principle for the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law, as well as a necessary condition for the exercise of the right to effective judicial protection. This implies that judges act and decide on matters within their jurisdiction without any motivation other than observing legal precepts and parameters outlined in the current legal order. Those holding judicial positions should operate without political, economic, or any other influences.

## 2

### Access to Justice

Access to Justice is a fundamental human right for the consolidation of a rule of law and the human development of individuals. It involves the availability, use, and access (material and legal) to tools and mechanisms for the recognition and protection of rights, allowing for a peaceful and effective resolution of individual or collective conflicts. Access to justice implies an effective judicial protection system that works for all people fairly and equitably.

## 3

### Anti-Corruption Measures

Anti-corruption Measures include all plans, actions, and strategies aimed at preventing, detecting, and punishing corruption. These may include mechanisms for promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation; strategies for education and the promotion of integrity, as well as the promotion of regulatory adjustments to strengthen the comprehensive approach to this scourge.

## 4

### Rule of Law

Rule of Law includes a set of values and behaviors that guides individuals, collectives, or people to develop social practices of compliance and obedience to law and justice. The Rule of Law is essential for the consolidation of solid, transparent, democratic institutions that respect human rights.

## Achievements & Impact

During the year 2023, due to the unique circumstances in Guatemala, Be Just focused its activities on that country. The coopted public institutions, particularly those in the justice sector such as Ministerio Público and the Supreme Court of Justice, and the development of the presidential elections throughout 2023, constituted a scenario in which the presence of civil society organizations was deemed crucial and necessary. These organizations could act as a counterbalance and strive for the respect of the rule of law and human rights in the country.

In light of these considerations, throughout the past year, Be Just carried out actions, activities, and direct interventions in Guatemala. Simultaneously, the organization engaged in political advocacy with key stakeholders in the United States, the Organization of American States, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. This was undertaken with the aim of positioning the social, legal, and political situation of the Central American country.

Be Just sustained its active participation in various initiatives organized by the "International Observatory of Guatemala." This coalition comprises international organizations such as the Due Process of Law Foundation (DPLF), American Jewish World Service, Article 19, International Platform Against Impunity (IPAI), Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA (GHRC/USA), Protección Internacional Centroamérica, Latin America Working Group, Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional (CEJIL), Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Impunity Watch, Luis von Ahn Foundation and Jotay Actuando Juntos Guatemala, among others.

Within the framework of our work at Be Just, our personnel participated in an in-person meeting of the "International Observatory of Guatemala". This gathering took place in Mexico City and occurred following the first round of the presidential elections in Guatemala. The primary objective of the meeting was to analyze the current situation in Guatemala, anticipate potential scenarios, and articulate a common advocacy strategy among the participating organizations.

Therefore, Be Just actively participated in meetings of the International Observatory of Guatemala throughout 2023 and endorsed various analyses and statements drafted by the Observatory to conduct social audits of the political events unfolding in Guatemala. Notable among these were statements aimed at raising awareness about the imprisonment of the prisoner of conscience Virginia Laparra, denouncing the apprehension and criminalization of journalist José Rubén Zamora, providing support for the unjust persecution of lawyer Claudia González, and issuing various statements to promote and uphold democracy and the rule of law in response to numerous violations and attempts to undermine the constitutional order that occurred in Guatemala during 2023.

During the 188th period of sessions of the IACtHR, in November, Be Just Executive Director, Claudia Escobar participated in the hearing titled: "Human Rights Defenders and Justice Operators facing the Criminal Justice System in Guatemala." This hearing shed light on how the co-optation of the justice system has led to the criminalization of justice operators, exposing them to attacks and violations of their human rights.

It is also important to highlight the advocacy efforts undertaken by Be Just during 2023 to bring attention to the state co-optation in Guatemala, the numerous attacks on democracy and the rule of law the country faced during the election period, and the regrettable situation of attacks and criminalization against those advocating for transparency (prosecutors, judges, journalists, human rights defenders) in the country. To achieve this, meetings were held with the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, and Commissioner Esmeralda Arosamena de Troitiño of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Be Just played a pivotal role in facilitating one of the inaugural visits of President-elect Bernardo Arévalo to the United States, significantly strengthening ties with key strategic partners. A notable highlight was orchestrating a meeting with the Guatemalan migrant diaspora, where President-elect Arévalo, Ambassador Villagrán, and Be Just members engaged in meaningful dialogue with Guatemalan migrant community.

A private event at the National Endowment for Democracy was organized, bringing together organizations from the International Republican Institute (IRI), National Democratic Institute (NDI), Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), and the Solidarity Center. The gathering was further enriched by the presence of delegates from the OEA's observation mission, marking a significant stride in fostering crucial alliances and discussions between President Arévalo and key representatives from international organizations.

As a result of this meeting, Be Just became involved in a new cooperation initiative with migrants' organizations. This initiative brings together various organizations and collectives with diverse interests and causes, all united by the commonality of being composed of Guatemalan residents in the United States. The purpose of this newly forming organization is to strengthen the ties between migrants and the population residing in Guatemala, thereby conducting social audits from abroad to combat corruption and promote improved living conditions. Additionally, they collaborate to advocate for better services from Guatemalan consulates and embassies for the Guatemalan population residing in the United States.

It is also worth mentioning that Francisco Villagrán de León, member of Be Just's Board, and Andrea Rabanales, the Organization's Project Director, accompanied Elected President Bernardo Arévalo in his meetings and personal interviews during his visit to Washington in November, facilitating networking and providing the necessary context and support to consolidate mutually beneficial strategic relationships with stakeholders in the United States.

Additionally, during the year 2023, Be Just held various political advocacy meetings to position Guatemala's situation on the agenda of interest and concern for foreign governments and international entities. Meetings were conducted with justice operators in exile, including a notable encounter with Judge Miguel Angel Galvez during his visit to Washington D.C. in March 2023.

Be Just participated in activities and meetings at the United States Department of State and in events organized by USAID. For instance, the Executive Director, Claudia Escobar took part as a panelist in the session scheduled by the USAID Anti-Corruption Task Force on Accelerating Anti-corruption Progress and Moving to Action.

Various meetings were held with executives from the Bush Institute, specifically addressing support for research. There was also participation in the Human Rights Award to Guatemalan Organizations organized by the Robert Kennedy HR Foundation and involvement in various activities with Due Process of Law Foundation, particularly focusing on transparency in justice systems and collaborative efforts to advocate before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Be Just supported the handling of a strategic case on judicial independence before the CIDH, and meetings were held with CEJIL lawyers to align efforts and advocate within the inter-American system for the protection of human rights, specifically those related to justice and judicial independence.

Specifically on the topic of the fight against corruption, meetings were held with strategic actors. For instance, a meeting with Richard Nephew, Coordinator on Global Anti-Corruption, Department of State, United States of America; with Chris Kowalewski from Transparency International, Germany and with Samantha Feinstein, Staff Attorney/Director of International Program Government Accountability Project, among others.

To address the tense situation that Guatemala faced after the first round of elections, during which corrupt power groups attempted to undermine democracy, Be Just took the initiative to organize an event at the National Endowment for Democracy. The purpose was to present and explain the circumstances to leaders of international organizations. The event featured prominent figures such as Alejandro Morales Bustamante, a distinguished constitutional lawyer; Tara Tobar, a businesswoman and member of the National Business Council; and the renowned journalist José Zamora.

In addition, Be Just prepared a detailed report on the political situation, which was distributed to various decision-makers and opinion leaders. This effort played a crucial role in enhancing international understanding and support for the situation in Guatemala, underscoring Be Just's commitment to promoting the Rule of Law and Democracy.

Be Just also participated in the webinar organized by the Vance Center and the International Legal Assistance Consortium (ILAC) to contribute and comment on the identification of systematic patterns of criminalization against independent judges and prosecutors who pursued high-level corruption cases involving government officials and other groups. Emphasis was placed on how this strategy has led to impunity in Guatemala.

Active involvement was maintained in various events related to the pillars of the organization, such as: the participation in a dialogue to fight corruption and money laundering to defend democracy against authoritarianism, confront hubs of illicit trade, and safeguard human rights and security organized by the Summit for Democracy, Working Group on Kleptocracy and Illicit Finance.

Be Just took part in the roundtable on 'Assessing the Cost of Counter-Crime Strategies in Central America,' coordinated by the Center of Strategic and International Studies. The objective was to analyze the impacts of states of exception and the abrogation of civil and political rights throughout Central America from the perspective of security experts, civil society representatives, and human rights defenders.

During 2023, the network of cooperation and support with other organizations sharing common purposes and objectives was expanded. In this regard, participation occurred in the regional Central American network platform led by the National Democratic Institute.

Another noteworthy achievement in the year was securing the support of PADF for the development of a consultancy on strategic litigation. This initiative is led by justice operators in exile: Juan Francisco Sandoval, Andrei Gonzalez, and Rudy Herrera. They underwent training on strategic litigation for obtaining international sanctions, and throughout 2023, they gathered information to promote the imposition of international sanctions on specific corrupt actors in Guatemala.

Be Just, through its Executive Director, Claudia Escobar, participated in the United Nations Convention Against Corruption Conference held in Atlanta in December 2023. During the event, titled 'Exploring Multi-faceted Approaches to Prevent Corruption and Enhance Accountability,' active participation took place in discussions on how cooperation among and assistance between states in investigative and prosecutorial strategies to combat corruption has progressed significantly. The focus was on exploring lessons learned that could be applied globally in judicial terms, particularly in advocating for the establishment of a standing and specialized International Anti-Corruption Court

In 2023, given the circumstances in Guatemala, Be Just elaborated reports and situational analyses to keep key stakeholders in Guatemala and other countries informed about the unfolding events in the Central American nation. Additionally, Be Just collaborated among other individuals and organizations in strategic litigation in the Constitutional Court of Guatemala to help prevent a constitutional crisis in the country.

Furthermore, during 2023, Be Just underwent an internal strengthening process. This involved the addition of personnel in Guatemala to increase the organization's staff, with the goal of reinforcing on-the-ground activities and advocacy. Andrea Rabanales de la Roca, a Guatemalan lawyer specializing in constitutional law and human rights, joined the team as the Director of Projects. In addition, and with the purpose of institutional strengthening, Be Just participated in the Central American Donors Forum, establishing strategic connections to strengthen the organization and enhance its influence in Central America.

## Stories of Impact

In the context of Be Just's participation in the in-person meeting of the 'International Observatory of Guatemala' held in Mexico City a couple of weeks after the first round of elections in Guatemala, the Be Just staff and representatives from other organizations forming part of the International Observatory of Guatemala shared a moment of hope. It reminded all those present that behind our struggles and advocacies, there are human beings.

Following an analysis of the possible scenarios amidst the prevailing situation in Guatemala at that time, and after articulating a joint strategy among organizations to support and foster democracy in Guatemala, a meeting was convened with Guatemalan individuals in exile.

In a casual gathering, over a meal and in a familial atmosphere, each person present introduced themselves and shared a bit of their story. Life stories, stories of struggle, stories of exile. But most importantly, stories of hope were recounted and shared. To the sound of 'viva la esperanza,' Guatemalans in exile and those involved in the observatory organizations merged in a space where tears were not absent. Large figures in the pursuit of justice shed tears of sorrow for being away from their homeland, but primarily shed tears of hope in the face of the distant possibility that Bernardo Arévalo might ascend to the presidency; a possibility that now is a reality and a challenge.

Prosecutors, judges, journalists, activists, and even members of the political party Semilla, who have faced persecution, realized they were not walking alone.

Memories were recounted, the essence of Guatemala — the food, the smells — was revisited, and the activity concluded with the firm conviction that sooner rather than later, we will embrace each other in Guatemala; a free and just Guatemala.

Those from Be Just who had the privilege of participating in this moment reaffirmed their commitment to working towards restoring dignity to those who have been criminalized and to building a state that respects human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. We recall that Be Just exists to champion just causes.

## Our supporters



Our revenue for the fiscal year 2022-2023 was sourced primarily from generous contributions by the Luis Von Ahn Foundation and Pan American, totaling \$111,000. These partnerships are vital to our operations, and we are grateful for their continued support. The consistency of these funds into the latter part of 2023 signifies a strong vote of confidence in our mission and activities.

Luis von Ahn Foundation:

US\$50,00.00 (October 14, 2022)

US\$55,000.00 (September 26, 2023)

Pan American Development Foundation:

US\$6,000.00 (March and July 2023)

Total: US\$111,000.00

These funds enabled us to participate in training workshops, various advocacy activities, and hire consultants in Guatemala and the United States. The support and trust from these organizations allowed us to prepare reports and analyses that proved to be strategic for monitoring and informing the situation in Guatemala throughout the year 2023.

\*After the close of the current fiscal year, Be Just received support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund US\$75,000 (December 13, 2023).

## Goals and Plans

We want to share with enthusiasm some of the plans, goals, and ideas we have for 2024. These plans reflect Be Just's ongoing commitment to promoting justice and transparency in Guatemala, emphasizing the importance of citizen participation and collaboration with diverse stakeholders to bring about positive change in the country's justice system.

### Expansion of Presence in Guatemala:

- Increase Be Just's visibility in Guatemala through social media strategies.
- Organize and participate in local events to communicate our mission and objectives directly to the population.

### Social Media Awareness Campaigns:

- Conduct informational campaigns on social media to educate the population about processes strengthening the justice system.
- Emphasize informing about the selection process for Judges of Appeals Courts and the Supreme Court of Justice.

### Virtual and In-person Panels and Forums:

- Develop panels and forums to engage civil society organizations on various topics, highlighting the importance of independence and transparency in the judiciary.
- Host events both virtually and in-person across the country.

- Participate in the International Anti-Corruption Conference and host a roundtable during the event to shed light on the situation in Guatemala, specifically to show how the population, along with justice operators, journalists, and steadfast human rights advocates, played a pivotal role in driving a profound change to foster the rule of law.

↳ **Strengthening Networks with Lawyers and Justice Operators:**

- Establish stronger connections with ethical lawyers and justice operators.
- Encourage active participation of these professionals in the processes of selecting Courts.

↳ **Monitoring and Periodic Reports:**

- Conduct ongoing monitoring of the social, political, and legal situation in Guatemala.
- Produce periodic reports to guide and inform strategic stakeholders within and outside the country about Guatemala's situation.

↳ **Advocacy for Institutional Strengthening:**

- Continue advocating before international bodies and other governments to strengthen justice sector institutions in Guatemala.



### **Collaboration with Governmental Anti-Corruption Efforts:**

- Engage with governmental efforts in Guatemala aimed at combating corruption.
- Seek opportunities for collaboration and constructive dialogue with authorities in Guatemala.



### **Active Participation of the Population:**

- Invite and motivate the Guatemalan population to actively participate in our events and initiatives.
- Foster a culture of citizen participation in matters related to justice and transparency.

## Join our purpose

Be Just values the collaboration and commitment of individuals and organizations interested in supporting our mission.

Every step we take, however small, can contribute to positive change in Guatemala's justice system. With the support of our dedicated team, partners, donors, and collaborators, we are resolute in pursuing a more just and equitable society. Together, we can work towards a brighter future where the rule of law prevails.

If you share our vision of promoting justice, transparency, and respect for human rights in Guatemala, we invite you to join us. There are various ways to get involved, from volunteering to making donations. Your contribution makes a difference.

For more information on how to join Be Just, visit our website [www.be-just.org](http://www.be-just.org), where you'll find details on available opportunities and steps to actively participate in our work.

## Contact information

If you wish to get in touch with Be Just for inquiries, collaborations, or to learn more about our activities, feel free to contact us. We are here to answer your questions and explore potential ways to work together. We encourage open dialogue and collaboration and welcome anyone interested in learning more about our initiatives. To reach our organization, please feel free to contact us via the following channels:

- Email: [info@bejust.org](mailto:info@bejust.org)
- Website: [www.bejust.org](http://www.bejust.org)

We appreciate your interest and look forward to collaborating with you to build a fairer future.

**... for standing with us in this  
journey, GRACIAS**

**Be Just.**

