LEARNING AGENDA

FOR LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

Learning to Power our Movement

Across the global movement for grassroots justice, legal empowerment practitioners face common challenges. The Learning Agenda aims to deepen impact and improve practice by sharing learning about "what works" in different contexts. By learning together, we will generate and test new ideas, address the most burning questions and grow the global movement for justice.

Why a learning agenda? Why now?

Legal empowerment is diverse, encompassing a range of methods: legal literacy, accompaniment and legal representation, strategic litigation, organizing and collective advocacy. Legal empowerment is also applied in different sectors, including housing, health, gender-based violence, labor rights, land and environmental justice to name just a few. What unites this diverse field is a focus on helping communities to know, use, and shape the law. The methods are varied but the goals are the same: to democratize the law and give people more power over the decisions that directly affect them.

Despite the very different geographies and contexts, there is much that practitioners can learn from each other. For example, an analysis of who holds power, how to influence them and how to use data to drive changes to laws and policies, are relevant to any practitioner that leverages grassroots legal empowerment for systemic change. Similarly, how an organization mobilizes a diverse set of groups in Kenya to fight against citizenship discrimination together, is also relevant for those advancing refugee protection in Thailand. And the experience of one country with public recognition of paralegals could be instructive for others who are currently advocating for the same. The learning agenda offers a common framework and shared language for comparing experience across issues and places.

There is evidence of legal empowerment leading to a range of changes: communities have greater awareness of their rights and participating in decision-making, disputes being resolved, health outcomes improving and laws and policies being changed for the better. Our field has had big wins, including in the areas of land rights, environmental justice, and health justice. However, we still need to capture the impact of our efforts across different places and issue areas in a systematic and robust way. This stronger evidence-base is crucial not only to refine our practice and deepen our impact, but also to make the case for why growing legal empowerment efforts should be a public priority around the world.

Finally, around the world, democracy is under threat, repression is on the rise and the work of advancing social and environmental justice is increasingly dangerous. Legal empowerment offers a powerful set of strategies to confront these challenges. By embedding systematic research and learning into our work, we can build a more powerful movement for justice that is capable of countering these anti-democratic trends.

The frontiers of learning

In 2018, the Legal Empowerment Network launched a collaborative effort to create a learning agenda for the field. It captures the most pressing issues facing our movement across the globe, over the next 10 years. These are the frontiers of legal empowerment - the areas where collective inquiry can generate new solutions to the challenges that keep us at night.

- **Building power and systems change**: at the heart of the learning agenda is an exploration of how legal empowerment strategies can achieve structural change. The core challenge is how to translate grassroots efforts focused on specific rights violations into broader reforms that advance justice for everyone. Combining law and community organizing offers incredible potential.
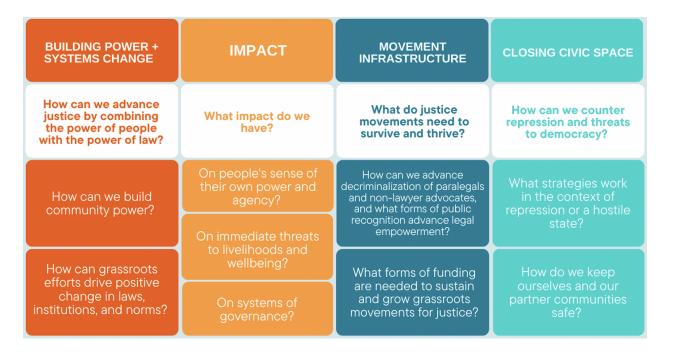
> *"We continue to face the same justice challenges. If anything, we're seeing more and more people coming to us because of the same rights violations. We need to do more to address the core problems that lead people to us in the first place"*
>
> *- Annette Mbogoh, Kituo cha Sheria*

- **Impact**: understanding our impact helps us get better over time. And by generating evidence about the impact of legal empowerment, we can make the case for why legal empowerment should be a public priority around the world.

- **Movement Infrastructure**: to shift the status quo of injustice we need lasting structures for community organizing and movement building over the long term. Public recognition and innovative forms of financing are two issues that are central to the sustainability of our movement.

- **Democracy and closing civic space**: legal empowerment efforts embody a deeper version of democracy– everyday people using the rules to make public institutions work better. But with authoritarianism on the rise, our work is increasingly difficult and dangerous. There is an urgent need to adapt to shifting political contexts and find effective strategies to keep ourselves and our communities safe.

The collective learning priorities for the legal empowerment field:

BUILDING POWER + SYSTEMS CHANGE	IMPACT	MOVEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE	CLOSING CIVIC SPACE
How can we advance justice by combining the power of people with the power of law?	What impact do we have?	What do justice movements need to survive and thrive?	How can we counter repression and threats to democracy?
How can we build community power?	On people's sense of their own power and agency?	How can we advance decriminalization of paralegals and non-lawyer advocates, and what forms of public recognition advance legal empowerment?	What strategies work in the context of repression or a hostile state?
How can grassroots efforts drive positive change in laws, institutions, and norms?	On immediate threats to livelihoods and wellbeing? / On systems of governance?	What forms of funding are needed to sustain and grow grassroots movements for justice?	How do we keep ourselves and our partner communities safe?

Learning together on these issues can build solidarity across our movement and offer practical insights on how to achieve transformative change for the communities most impacted by injustice.

What do we mean by learning?

Learning is often narrowly equated with research but that is not the only path. The Learning Agenda takes a big-tent approach to learning, which includes different approaches including practitioner reflection, using program data, and formal research studies using various qualitative and quantitative methods.

Three principles underpin the learning agenda, and help ensure that learning is both practically useful and reflects the ethos of legal empowerment. First, learning should be linked to practice. By grounding learning in key questions for program strategy, we can identify what works, under what

conditions, and use that knowledge to achieve transformative impact. Second, it is only through collective and comparative learning that we can address knowledge gaps that face the field as a whole. Comparative learning also builds solidarity among practitioners and lays the groundwork to use learning to drive collective action. For this reason, the learning agenda reflects an intentional choice to distill lessons across countries, diverse issues, and populations.

Finally, learning is most powerful when done in partnership with communities. Currently most research on legal empowerment relies on case studies, often using interviews and focus group discussions. Surprisingly, participatory methods remain relatively rare in studies and evaluations of legal empowerment. Reflecting the guiding ethos of legal empowerment, our learning should generate knowledge and evidence that builds power, and helps to reimagine justice in radical new ways.

Akiba Mashinani Trust is using participatory action research to understand how legal empowerment strategies can promote equitable change in informal settlements.

Members of the Legal Empowerment Network are taking up learning in different ways. A group of organizations in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America are using participatory action research to understand how legal empowerment efforts achieve broader reforms and build community power. Network members are coming together in regional and thematic groups to engage in deep reflection and set agendas for collective action. And a number of learning opportunities, such as the Legal Empowerment Leadership Course and Legal Empowerment 101 are ways for members to learn new skills, deepen their knowledge and share learning with each other.

Read more about the Learning Agenda and how you can participate here.