

What is Legal Empowerment

More than **5 billion people** live at the margins – pushed or kept out, often silenced, without access to meaningful justice. Denied healthcare, citizenship or fair pay, those unprotected by law have challenges that are real and relentless, yet they are often forced to navigate complicated legal systems without essential resources and education.

Legal empowerment strives for a different world – a **rights-based methodology** that centers people in their own fight for justice and creates opportunities to **know, use, shape, and transform the laws and systems** that impact their lives. Central to these efforts is **democratization, disruption, and systems building from the grassroots.**



Legal Empowerment History

Insights from **trade union and feminist movements**, which saw the "emancipatory power of popular education and therefore embedded rights awareness with self-reflection and collective action"

Roots in **anti-apartheid movements**, where women community paralegals partnered with lawyers, NGOs, and churches to document violations, provide legal assistance, and bear witness to injustice

Emerged as principal strategy to increase **access to justice** and achieve sustainable development with the 2008 United Nations Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor. Commission's report anchored legal empowerment in human rights. SDG 16 rooted in "access to justice for all"



Today a global movement with **2800+ organizations** in at least **190 countries** committed to **community-led justice.**

Legal Empowerment Approaches

- Community Paralegal Programs
- Accompaniment
- Community-driven Litigation
- Know Your Rights/Popular Education
- Pro Se Legal Clinics
- Community-driven Campaigning

KEY: community in the lead, creating dynamic and diverse justice ecosystems

TODAY: Global movement with over 2800 organizations in 170 countries



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Why Legal Empowerment?



Legal Outcomes

Accountability
Access to Services
Judicial Outcomes



Non-Legal Outcomes

Agency
Empowerment
Community Mobilization

Impacts of Legal Empowerment

In a 2018 study by Vivek Maru and Laura Goodwin, **more than ¾** of the studies on legal empowerment pointed to an **increase in agency** - the desire to act and often actual action.

Community paralegals in the pursuit of justice

Found that community paralegals have the greatest impact in systems where there are "significant imbalances of power and information."

Community Land Controlled Study in Liberia, Mozambique and Uganda, with 3 outcomes studied:

- 1) full representation of a lawyer
- 2) community paralegal
- 3) pared down rights education approach



Community paralegal found most effective as they helped **navigate intra-community conflicts** and **communities gained a sense of ownership** that led to greater engagement and success

Impacts: Participatory Evaluation

Participatory Evaluation with an immigrants rights organization in NYC to study the impact of the organization's programs on immigrants and volunteers. Focus on empowerment and emotional impacts and conducted through a mix of interviews, small group discussions, journaling, and a survey.

Immigrants

Expressed a sense of family, security and safety that emerged, describing the organization as "family," a "home" and detailed the how they helped them "come out of the shadows" and leave "their fears aside (...) to keep on fighting." Many spoke of gaining a better understanding of their rights and the immigration system and how the organization facilitated access to material benefits (housing, ID card etc.)

Clinic: "I used to have a lot of wrong information based on the media and what people are talking about on the streets. After being part of the clinic, I know better how the immigration system works."

Accompaniment: "I learned about the immigration system, you see things, and it gives you a sense of security when they accompany you. . ."

Volunteers

Of those who responded to the survey:

- 96% said that participating increased their knowledge of the immigration system
- 53% percent of volunteers said that their work inspired them to increase their political participation
- 46% percent of the volunteers stated that they strongly believed that their presence affects the judge and leads them to act differently, and 41% said that this is also true of other immigration officials.

Saw as a "practical way to resist" the injustice of the immigration system and underlined the power of community and sense of purpose that emerged from volunteering. Volunteers also discussed how "politics have been made more personal", "puts flesh on what you read in the news" and is a way to bear witness to the "dehumanizing system".

Rebecca Sandefur

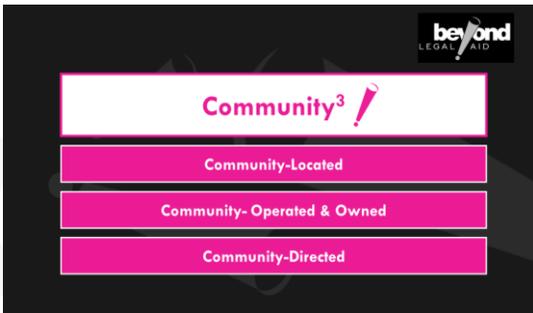
Bridging legal scholarship and practice to provide the empirical evidence necessary to guide and implement wide-scale reforms to address the civil legal needs of low-income people.



BEYOND LEGAL AID



Community-Cubed



Depower the Lawyer, Decenter the Law

Depower the Lawyer

Vulnerability Interrogate privilege
Humility Cede control
Collaboration Learn mutually
Transparency Enhance activism

Decenter the Law

beyond LEGAL AID

Immigration Advocates NETWORK

Litigating for Empowerment

1. Ethical, compassionate story-sharing (telling & listening)
2. Joint brainstorming with CMOs (community members and organizers) of legal and non-legal strategies
3. Shared understanding of problem(s) and goals
4. Step-by-step explanation of litigation steps, ensuring CMO's knowledge and preparation for potential pitfalls
5. Recognition and validation of CMO's skills, experience, and knowledge
6. Incorporation of CMO voice into legal process
7. Use of non-legal strategies
8. CMO involvement, review, AND approval/decision at each step
9. Transparency and accountability
10. Debriefing over result with mutual learning
11. Community member activation

Community Empowerment Lawyering Process

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Immigration Advocates NETWORK

DISCUSSION

Questions

Questions?

(Use the chat box on the right of your screen to ask questions.)



Join Us!

Join a community of over 9,000 advocates dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of immigrants in the United States.

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