



# BUILDING POWER FOR JUSTICE A LEGAL EMPOWERMENT LEARNING AGENDA



# WHY DOES POWER MATTER IN LEGAL EMPOWERMENT?

At the [Legal Empowerment Fund \(LEF\)](#), we believe that justice isn't just about laws on paper—it's about people having the power to shape the systems that impact their lives. Around the world, millions of people—especially those from marginalized communities—are denied access to justice, not because laws don't exist but because those laws are out of reach, inaccessible, or unevenly applied.

In 2023, after surveying grantee partners and consulting with our core team, we identified building power for justice as a key theme for learning. We asked: *How do legal empowerment groups strengthen their communities' ability to push for justice? What challenges stand in their way?* Through conversations with grantee partners, we identified building power for justice as a key learning theme—and together, we created a learning agenda to deepen our understanding.

How do legal empowerment groups **strengthen** their communities' ability to push for justice?

What **challenges** stand in their way?

# A LEARNING AGENDA LED BY GRASSROOTS GROUPS

Rather than a top-down research project, this learning agenda was designed with and for grassroots groups. To answer these questions, the LEF worked with **15 grantee partners across Latin America, Africa, and Asia** to co-design a learning agenda—a process that helps groups share knowledge, reflect on challenges, and strengthen their work. The agenda focused on big questions:

How are LEF grantee partners contributing to more **accessible** justice institutions?

How are LEF stakeholders **building power** for themselves and others?

What are **common successes or barriers** they face in building power?

# METHODOLOGY

Facilitated by IWORDS Global, the **15 grantee partners** played a key role in shaping the learning agenda through a participatory approach. Over three virtual sessions, they shared their experiences, exchanged insights, and explored strategies for legal empowerment.

To ensure inclusivity, participants were divided into groups based on language and time zones. Each organization was encouraged to have at least two representatives, ensuring continuity in discussions. Through this peer-driven process, the agenda surfaced real-world solutions, challenges, and common themes across different regions.

# LEARNING OUTCOMES: TWO THEMATIC AREAS FOR LEARNING

## 1. ACCESSIBLE JUSTICE INSTITUTIONS

The LEF grantee partners envision justice institutions that truly meet the needs of the communities they serve by being responsive, user focused, and adaptable



### What makes justice institutions accessible?

Accessible justice institution remove barriers and provide multiple entry points to ensure that all people—regardless of their personal characteristics and circumstances—can effectively and equitably access justice services.

LEF grantee partners highlighted justice institutions at different levels when envisioning more accessible justice systems. Institutions ranged from international to national entities, including regional courts and country-level judiciary bodies. They also noted community-based or alternative dispute resolution entities as important actors in the justice system. Finally, they considered security bodies and administrative control entities linked to the justice system.



## 2. BUILDING POWER

The LEF grantee partners explored what it takes to build power within their communities and movements. They identified key challenges, including:



**Limited legal knowledge**, which prevents people from using the law to protect their rights



**Deep mistrust in institutions**, fueled by corruption and impunity



**A disconnect between laws and local realities**, making legal frameworks ineffective



**Violence against justice defenders and discrimination** that keeps marginalized groups excluded from justice

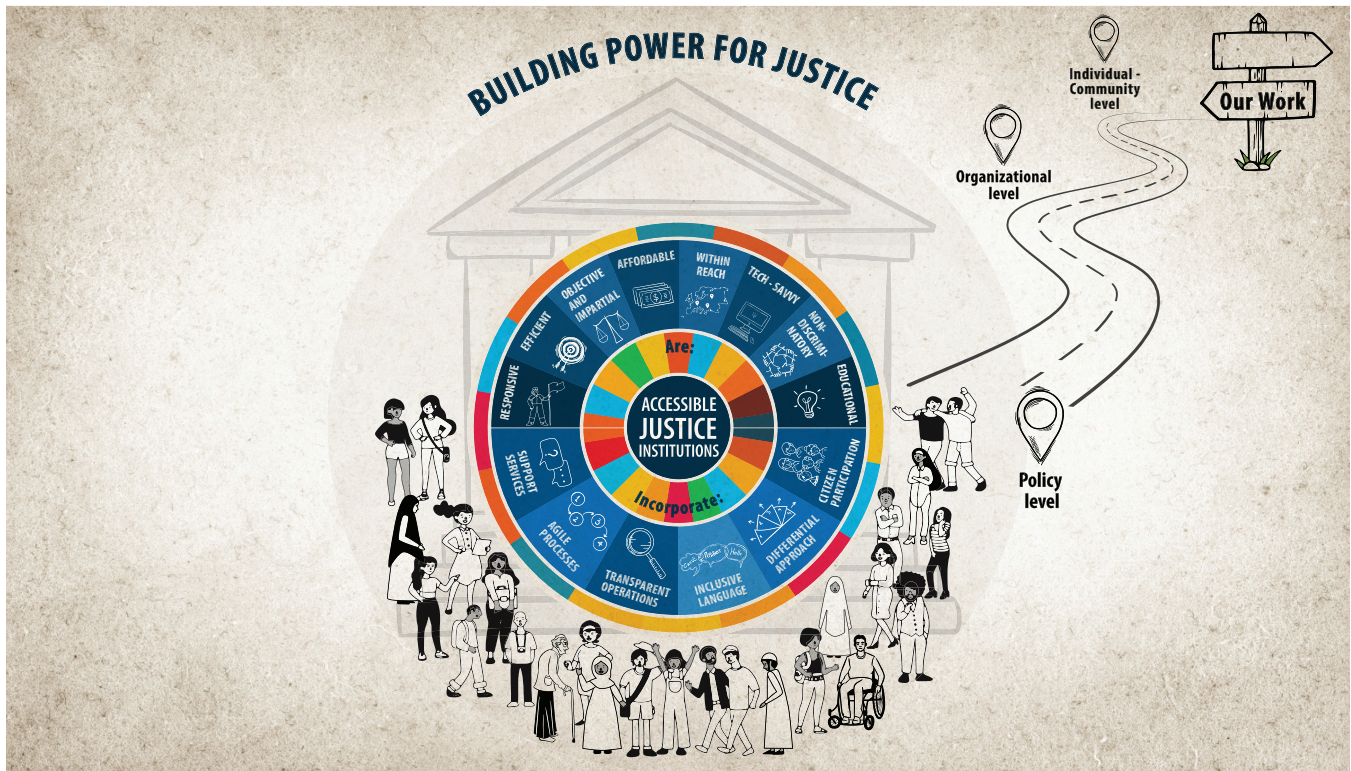
To address these challenges, grantees developed a **shared definition of power building** and strategies to strengthen their movements at multiple levels.





## HOW GRANTEE PARTNERS ARE CONTRIBUTING TO ACCESSIBLE JUSTICE INSTITUTIONS

Through the learning agenda, partners shared real-world strategies they use to make justice institutions more accessible—at the community, organizational, and policy levels.



### Individual–Community Level

- **Legal and human rights education:** Equipping communities with knowledge to navigate legal systems and advocate for their rights.
- **Community organizing and mobilization:** Driving collective action to demand justice.
- **Alternative dispute resolution:** Helping marginalized groups resolve conflicts outside traditional courts.
- **Recognition of customary justice systems:** Ensuring that justice solutions reflect local cultures and needs.

### Organizational Level

- **Legal aid and case representation:** Providing free or low-cost legal support to protect vulnerable groups.
- **Strategic litigation:** Using key legal cases to create systemic change.
- **Research and documentation:** Gathering evidence to expose injustices and push for policy reforms.
- **Human rights monitoring:** Training community members to track and report abuses.

### Policy Level

- **Advocacy for legal and policy reforms:** Pushing for justice systems that serve the people.
- **Accountability and transparency efforts:** Engaging with justice administrators and policymakers to enforce commitments and improve governance.
- **Budget monitoring:** Ensuring justice sector funding is used effectively to expand access.

## **BARRIERS LEF GRANTEE PARTNERS FACE IN CONTRIBUTING TO MORE ACCESSIBLE JUSTICE INSTITUTIONS**

Beyond the successes and concrete experiences reported, throughout the implementation of activities to achieve more accessible justice institutions, LEF grantee partners face various barriers.

### **At the institutional level**

- Fragile justice institutions, inadequate resources, and corruption hinder the justice system's effectiveness, prolong victims' suffering, and erode public confidence. Additionally, judicial reluctance to undergo training and budgeting challenges complicate the application of justice for socio-environmental issues.

### **At the community and civic level**

- Communities face significant barriers to accessing justice due to limited knowledge, high legal costs, and distant justice institutions. Activists and human rights defenders encounter harassment and reprisals, while nongovernmental organizations struggle with limited financial and human resources.

### **At the policy level**

- The lack of political will, or in some cases overt resistance, from governments and corporations hinders addressing root causes of injustice and protecting community rights. Additionally, inadequate legal frameworks fail to tackle socio-environmental issues and lack mechanisms for community participation.





## LEF GRANTEE PARTNERS ON THE JOURNEY TO BUILDING POWER FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS

In addition to the strategies identified for contributing to more accessible institutions, participants identified other strategies that contribute to building power for justice. This section highlights strategies and successes achieved through these strategies at the individual-community, organizational, and policy levels.



### Individual–Community Level

- Conduct legal empowerment and leadership training to equip communities to independently handle human rights cases and seek justice.
- Collaborate with the media to make human rights violations visible in communities.

### Organizational Level

- Train community paralegals to bridge the gap between communities and the legal system, empowering them to understand and utilize the law. Additionally, train staff and volunteers, and build coalitions with organizations to support specific cases and achieve their goals.

### Policy Level

- Promote civic engagement to influence government decision and policies.
- Hold strategic dialogue with community leaders and policymakers to address emerging issues and human rights violations.



# BARRIERS TO BUILDING POWER FOR JUSTICE

LEF grantee partners identified the following barriers when reflecting on their daily work toward building power for themselves and others.

Institutional Level	Community and Civic Level	Policy Level
Legal and bureaucratic obstacles, corporate pressure, and limited capacity of justice providers hinder the effective exercise of justice and the protection of community rights.	The lack of legal knowledge, violence against human rights defenders, government repression, and cultural and gender norms hinder collective organizing and power-building efforts in communities.	Some donor funding includes agendas that do not align with the power-building needs of communities.

# LEARNING AGENDA

1	BUILDING POWER FOR JUSTICE					
2	How Are LEF grantees contributing to more accessible justice institutions?			How are LEF grantee partners building power for themselves and others?		
3	Individual – Community Level	Organizational Level	Policy Level	Individual – Community Level	Organizational Level	Policy Level
4	1. What practices have you found promising to mitigate the risks faced by human rights defenders?  2. What practices are you using to invite community participation in your efforts?  3. What practices have you found promising to elevate the voices of marginalized or vulnerable groups in your work?	4. What practices have you found promising to develop/strengthen a movement that contributes to accessible justice?  5. What innovative mechanisms or practices have been integrated in justice institutions as a result of your work?  6. What efforts have you made to use technology in your work to make justice institutions more accessible?	7. What advocacy strategies have you found promising to create an enabling policy environment for accessible justice institutions?  8. What practices have you found promising to hold legal institutions and other duty bearers accountable?  9. What practices have you found promising to build support for more accessible legal institutions? (media, academia, lawyers, other)  10. How does the generation of evidence feed into your other strategies to achieve an enabling environment for accessible justice?	1. What tools and methods are you offering to put the power of the law in the hands of people, especially of marginalized and vulnerable communities?  2. What practices have you found promising to level the playing field where communities engage with the state and powerful private actors?  3. What practices have you found promising to cultivate grassroots leadership that can lead to direct action and drive community efforts?	4. What practices have you found promising to engage different stakeholders and strategies to secure and expand rights?  5. How are you and other legal empowerment organizations mitigating risks to protect justice defenders as they take action?  6. What successes and barriers have you faced in building power?	7. What practices have you found promising to address the structural causes of injustice and exclusion based on grassroots experience?  8. What practices have you found promising to ensure people understand, use, and participate in creating and reforming public policies, rules, and institutions that affect their daily lives?
5	Learning Stakeholders / Who			Learning Stakeholders / Who		
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CSOs working on legal empower and/or justice and human rights defenders</li> <li>CSOs working on legal empowerment and/or justice and community leaders</li> <li>CSOs working on legal empowerment and/or justice, community leaders, and representatives or marginalized/vulnerable groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CSOs working on legal empower and/or justice</li> <li>CSOs working on legal empowerment and/or justice, justice institutions at different levels, and community leaders</li> <li>CSOs working on legal empowerment and/or justice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CSOs working on legal empower and/or justice and community leaders</li> <li>CSOs working on legal empowerment and/or justice, journalists, lawyers, and researchers</li> <li>CSOs working on legal empowerment and/or justice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Representatives of marginalized groups, community leaders, and legal empowerment organizations</li> <li>Members of the community include vulnerable populations, paralegals, community leaders, and legal empowerment organizations</li> <li>Community leaders and legal empowerment organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paralegals, community leaders, journalists, researchers, and legal empowerment organizations</li> <li>Justice defenders, community leaders, and legal empowerment organizations</li> <li>Legal empowerment organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legal empowerment organizations, community leaders, and justice advocates</li> <li>Community leaders, paralegals, and representatives of the community, including marginalized groups</li> </ul>
7	Learning Activities			Learning Activities		
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluation of past programs and projects</li> <li>Learning workshops</li> <li>Consultations</li> <li>Reflection workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brainstorming</li> <li>Interviews</li> <li>Survey or polls</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consultations with the community</li> <li>Reflection workshops</li> <li>Brainstorming sessions</li> <li>Focus group discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews</li> <li>Needs assessments</li> <li>Surveys or polls</li> </ul>	
9	Learning Products					
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Papers with policy recommendations</li> <li>Podcast episodes</li> <li>Blogs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Webinars</li> <li>Educational videos</li> <li>Online forums</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compilation of good practices</li> <li>Case studies</li> <li>Articles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Infographics</li> <li>Short video/Reels for social media</li> <li>Consultations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>E-learning course</li> <li>Learning collective (transnational) spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Materials for social media campaigns</li> </ul>



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