

## **I. Summary**

The Fund for Global Human Rights is pleased to provide this final report for the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund. Officially launched on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020 - Nelson Mandela Day - the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund was a collective initiative of Namati, the Legal Empowerment Network, The Elders, the Justice For All campaign, and Pathfinders for Peace, Just and Inclusive Societies, hosted by the Fund for Global Human Rights.

The COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund was designed to provide emergency support to members of Namati's Legal Empowerment Network, a global community of 2,800+ grassroots justice organizations from over 170 countries. Intended to support and resource grassroots justice defenders on the frontlines of response to the injustices imposed and aggravated by the pandemic and the resulting crises in their local communities, the Grassroots Justice Fund ultimately awarded over \$880,000 in direct grants to 60 organizations.

## **II. Activities Undertaken**

### **1. Building a growing coalition of partners and donors**

Since its launch, the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund has garnered support from a diverse constituency of donors, including from KOICA (\$100,000), the C.S. Mott Foundation (\$250,000), the Ford Foundation (\$207,000), the Target Foundation (\$100,000), and a handful of individual donors. The COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund was also generously supported by Namati (\$441,360).

Global Citizen ([www.globalcitizen.org](http://www.globalcitizen.org)) has joined forces with the collection of partners behind the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund. As a global platform of engaged citizens, Global Citizen specializes in organizing campaigns and creating content to amplify the actions against the systemic causes of extreme poverty. They have featured the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund and some of its grantees on their website and remain committed to exploring concrete ways it can use its network and platform to help tackle the injustices and inequalities deepened by the pandemic.

### **2. Providing urgent financial support to inspiring grassroots justice groups (Grantmaking)**

Over its lifetime, the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund disbursed \$881,000 in direct grants to a total of 60 grassroots justice organizations. In December 2020, the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund announced the 30 inspiring groups to receive urgent financial support (roughly

\$13,000 per group, for a total of \$410,210) and soon after another three grantees were announced in July 2021 (roughly \$12,000 per group, for a total of \$35,080). In December 2021, a further 27 groups were awarded grants (roughly \$16,000 per group, for a total of \$435,774) in the second and final round of funding.

The groups supported by the Grassroots Justice Fund spanned over 30 countries across seven different regions, including groups from Bolivia and Yemen to Cameroon and Cambodia. These 60 grassroots justice groups work across a broad range of program areas, with varied response strategies to the justice challenges in their communities. Please see Annex I for further details.

### ***Selection process***

The initial sourcing and selection process was led by Namati and the Fund for Global Human Rights, prioritizing members of Namati's Legal Empowerment Network. To ensure rapid deployment of funds, applications for the first round of funding were limited to the nearly 600 groups that participated in the network's COVID-related peer-learning and community building activities earlier in 2020. The second round of funding was open to the nearly 850 members that had engaged in network activities since the start of 2021.

A team of experienced Namati staff members reviewed each application, informed by the following four core criteria:

- **Demonstrated necessity:** the application clearly identifies a concrete pandemic-related challenge or opportunity that the applicant is well-positioned to address.
- **Capacity to implement the proposed initiative:** the application clearly describes the activities to be undertaken and the applicant's track record.
- **Appropriateness of the requested amount:** the applicant has the financial capacity to manage the requested grant and the cost of proposed activities is justified.
- **Potential impact:** the application enables an important grassroots-led effort to address justice challenges caused or magnified by the pandemic and has the potential to provide important learning to the legal empowerment field.

Namati and Fund staff then referred a batch of vetted applications to an expert committee, which reviewed shortlisted applications and made the final grant recommendations. This selection committee included experienced grassroots justice leaders who have deep frontline experience and knowledge to review the programmatic strengths of applications. The first selection committee had six members, reflecting the geographic and thematic diversity of the Legal Empowerment Network. In the second round of grantmaking the selection committee was expanded to 12 members, including Network Advisory Council members (a group of legal empowerment leaders that guides the network's strategy) and six representatives of organizations that had received funding from the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund in the first round. Please see Annex II for a full list of selection committee members. This participatory approach to grantmaking, which places decision-making power in the hands of experienced activists, was important to the collective of partners involved in the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund.

## **Achievements**

The COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund mobilized flexible and rapid response support that allowed grassroots justice organizations to respond to different needs, to support vulnerable populations, and to weather the storm of the pandemic by sustaining their critical work and operations.

The 60 organizations that received funding from the Grassroots Justice Fund represent a geographically diverse portfolio of groups working on a wide range of justice challenges and legal empowerment approaches. Some examples of these organizations<sup>1</sup> and their achievements include:

- A **Malaysian** group, the Development of Human Resources for Rural Areas (DHRRA), worked in rural communities to provide **food aid, legal advice, and psychological counseling** for marginalized communities affected by COVID. A grant is enabling them to hire paralegals and disseminate information about how to access government assistance.
- The Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), built the capacity of **paralegals and mediators** with online training modules, disseminating vital information to vulnerable populations about COVID-19 counseling and resources and conducting awareness campaigns on legal remedies and COVID-19 prevention information.
- The Braveheart Foundation in **Myanmar** used community-based paralegals to reach **undocumented residents** through the purchase of Samsung tablets and video recording accessories to develop more “edu-tainment” in local languages to inform local ethnic communities about COVID-19.
- In **Uganda**, the Buikwe Disabled and Vulnerable Empowerment Association (BUDIVEA) worked closely with **women with disabilities**, who suffered greatly as a result of COVID-19. A grant enabled Budivea to organize a rapid capacity assessment on domestic violence and COVID-19 among women with disabilities.
- The Coalition des Volontaires pour la Paix et le Développement (CVPD) in eastern **Democratic Republic of the Congo** conducted **research on COVID-19 and detainees**: what are the conditions, what degree of risk are they facing, and what measures should be taken. The group plans to write a report and share it with the authorities and partners as well as train penitentiary authorities in association with the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights and the Ministry of Health.
- In **India**, the Development and Justice Initiative worked with marginalized communities, including refugees, minority communities, displaced people, and people at risk of statelessness, to empower them to access rights and services and protect their freedoms. It focused on the **loss of citizenship for millions of people in Assam state** and used funding

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<sup>1</sup> Some names of groups have not been included due to risks related to their work.

to support families with little education living in remote villages and unable to fully afford costs of litigation to file for recognition of their citizenship.

- In **Nepal**, the Advocacy Forum, refusing to be hindered by the pandemic, has used this opportunity to ***increase its advocacy efforts with local prison authorities to support detainees and their families***. Among their emergency response efforts, the Advocacy Forum worked closely with prison authorities to install video communication equipment, particularly in Child Correction Homes (CCH), to guarantee detainees' right to access legal counsel, and to communicate with their families and loved ones. The organization plans to train prison staff on using this equipment and guarantees equitable use among detainees through a signed memorandum.
- In **Sierra Leone**, the Network Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (NMDHR), had to rely on its community mobilization efforts to maintain operations with a reduced staff as a result of the pandemic. NMDHR ***led awareness raising campaigns around issues of health justice*** by hosting monthly radio discussion programs, distribution of informative educational materials, and using bikes for paralegal to get around and provide legal aid to people quarantined at home.
- In **Ecuador**, Corporación ECOLEX, a grassroots justice group concerned with promoting access to environmental justice, particularly among Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities, had noticed a deterioration in the safeguarding of environmental protections in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. With mobility restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, and as public institutions' attention to infringements on environmental protections waned, ECOLEX ***increased its efforts to prevent further environmental damage*** by coordinating closely with impacted populations to file complaints, with the local authorities to resume in site inspections, and with paralegals and lawyers to work remotely and safely as needed.
- In **Cambodia**, This Life Cambodia (TLC), applied its ***holistic approach to support juveniles in detention during the pandemic***, who lack protections, tailored to their own needs in the Cambodian justice system. By leveraging their trusted relationships with prison authorities, TLC was able to recommence in-person programs and visitations for juveniles, while following COVID-19 prevention protocols and safety guidelines. The organization also provided vocational training, reintegration and counseling support, cash assistance, legal aid, and case management to current and released juvenile detainees, and financial support to their families in an effort to prevent relapse caused by economic hardships.
- In **Nigeria**, the Women Safe House Sustenance Initiative is a grassroots justice group that addresses access to justice for female victims of sexual and gender-based violence. In response to the grave impact of the pandemic on women's access to justice around SGBV, especially in rural and remote communities where women often lack the technological means and equipment to report abuse, Women Safe House ***set up phone booths in existing local structures such as shops, pharmacies and religious houses for women to***

***use to report cases of SGBV.*** The booths are also staffed by community volunteers and paralegals for support - trained by the organization for documentation and reporting - and coordinate with police and law enforcement agencies for follow up and arrest of perpetrators.

- In **Argentina**, Familias Diversas Asociación Civil (FDAC) utilized resources provided by the grant to ***combat the pandemic-related rise in the physical and sexual abuse of women, children, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.*** As a result, FDAC is currently building an online platform aimed at providing legal information and training to individuals at risk to learn how to access the law and protect themselves and their rights.
- In **Kenya**, a local group of paralegals educated the public on how to defend their rights ***against police brutality and extortion relating to curfew enforcement.***
- In the **Philippines**, where travel restrictions hamper the investigating ability of government regulators, an environmental organization trained local leaders on the use of ***cell phones and GPS to document and report illegal deforestation.***
- In **Guatemala**, a group of human rights defenders trained a network of grassroots health advocates ***to support Indigenous communities in accessing essential health services*** and holding health authorities accountable for rights violations.

### 3. Drawing attention to the pandemic as a justice challenge (Advocacy and Outreach)

The COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund is a small part of broader recovery and rebuilding efforts. Using the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund as a model - and amplifying the collective voice and inspiring leadership of the grantees - our partners advocated that long-term recovery efforts of all major donors and governments should incorporate support for grassroots justice groups.

To this end, Namati partnered with Global Citizen on "[A Recovery Plan for the World " campaign](#)". The campaign aimed to mobilize \$250 million to support organizations –including the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund–that are advocating for global justice and promoting human rights through their initiatives. Global Citizen hosted a series of high-profile global events and pledging moments in 2021, during which the world's political leaders, artists, philanthropists, CEOs, and activists called for equitable pandemic recovery and urged more investments. The campaign provided an opportunity to promote the critical role of grassroots justice defenders in equitable recovery efforts.

In addition, through social media posts, interviews, and statements, the coalition of partners behind the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund have amplified the vital work of grassroots justice defenders in the pandemic. This included calling on governments, private sector, and philanthropic leaders to develop comprehensive COVID response strategies that feature

increased financing for access to justice and legal empowerment efforts. Select examples include:

- **Ban Ki-moon's** keynote address at the International Bar Association's Virtually Together conference, highlighting the importance of financing for access to justice and the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund as an example. (November 2020)
- "Gender-based violence and COVID-19: Why justice is essential to response and recovery plans" and "Grassroots organisations are essential to empowering the communities they serve": featured by **The Elders** in support of the UN Secretary General's UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign. (November - December 2020)
- "Policing in a pandemic: Law matters in the COVID-19 response" by Catherine Cheney of **Devex**, referencing Namati CEO Vivek Maru's call for every COVID-19 response package to include an investment in the work of legal empowerment. (July 2020)
- "Justice coalition develops resources for Covid-hit communities" by **Climate Home News**, highlighting Namati's response to the pandemic and exploring the nexus of COVID-19 and the climate crisis. (July 2020)
- "The Covid-19 grassroots fund that invests in people-led justice solutions" by Abigail Moy, Director of the Legal Empowerment Network convened by Namati, in **Alliance Magazine** explaining the critical need for flexible, rapid-response funding to grassroots groups. (March 2021)
- "Sustaining grassroots activism through COVID-19 and beyond" by David Mattingly, the VP for Programs at the Fund for Global Human Rights, in **OpenGlobalRights** on what we have learned about how the funding community can better support the crucial work that needs to be done by grassroots partners. (August 2021)
- "9 Grassroots Justice Organizations You Can Support Globally" by Leah Rodriguez, on the **Global Citizen** website, sharing the work of nine grassroots justice organizations that received a grant in the first round of funding. (August 2021)
- "Global Justice Through Small Grants: What the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund Did Right" by the Legal Empowerment Network, **a guest blog on the website of Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies**. (December 2021)

### III. Lessons learned

Throughout 2021, Namati's Legal Empowerment Network team sought to provide timely peer support and facilitate the exchange of ideas and updates among COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund grantees via a private online space.

In addition, recognizing the extraordinary challenges imposed by the pandemic, the Fund for Global Human Rights minimized administrative and reporting requirements to ease the burden on the 60 grantees receiving funding and to ensure they could focus their resources and capacities on their critical work. Grantees were requested to complete a short questionnaire that focused on four learning questions. To date, grantees that received funding in the first round have submitted these learning reports. Below is a summary of some themes that emerged from these responses to the four learning questions:

*1. How has the funding enabled you to sustain and/or expand the work of your organization?*

It is clear from responses from the first round of grantees that the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund enabled grassroots justice groups across geographies to sustain their essential work and to adapt in response to the needs of vulnerable groups in their communities, despite restrictions posed by the pandemic and government measures to contain it. Most grantees developed contingency plans so that they could continue operating while taking precautionary measures to protect their staff and the constituencies they work with.

Some grassroots justice organizations pivoted to respond to the direct impact of the pandemic, including supporting remote or underserved communities that are often neglected by government responses or international aid efforts. Other grassroots groups deepened their activism by adopting innovative approaches to address existing injustices that were exacerbated by the onset of the pandemic. All grantees played some role in advocating for the rights of vulnerable and often marginalized communities in the context of the global health crisis, and the socio-economic crises that accompanied it.

*2. How has the funding contributed to your efforts to address injustices that resulted from or have been made worse by the impact of COVID-19 and/or the government measures in response to it?*

The support provided by the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund resourced a diverse array of legal empowerment solutions and strategies to respond to injustices. This included organizations providing legal aid and representation in response to the needs of people in detention, including children; groups monitoring and documenting human rights violations; organizations working to increase public awareness of their rights, including through community awareness approaches and the media; activists reporting violations to their land and resource rights; and groups supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, with rising levels of abuse and violence reported in many countries at the height of the pandemic. Most organizations were advancing several strategies, to provide a rounded response in their communities. Some groups also used the grant towards their critical research, networking, and exchange efforts, to enhance their programming in the long-term.

Many grantees apply an intersectional approach to their work, recognizing the intersection of inequalities and issues. Grassroots justice groups worked across areas including

environmental justice, disability rights, Indigenous peoples' rights, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and refugee rights.

3. *What lessons emerged as you engaged in your planned activities? Is there anything you would do differently? Please let us know how you plan to use these lessons in your work going forward.*

Grassroots groups that received an award in the first round of funding cited a number of lessons learned as they took forward planned activities:

**The need to make legal information and justice mechanisms more accessible to marginalized communities:** Grassroots organizations working towards bringing justice mechanisms and legal empowerment services to marginalized communities during the pandemic quickly realized the gaps in understanding of legal procedures, and the reliance on misleading sources of knowledge for legal matters among marginalized and rural communities. These organizations aim to develop methods to make legal information and laws more accessible and warn against misinformation through multiple platforms that reach the communities they work with and within.

**The uncovering of deeply rooted injustices and the intersectional nature of these challenges:** The pandemic further exposed the gaps in the system in access to services, support, and justice, disproportionately impacting vulnerable and marginalized groups, particularly individuals at the intersection of these injustices.

**The importance and effectiveness of engaging community members in the response efforts in their local communities:** Many grassroots groups are led by or have trusted relationships with members of the community they serve. The pandemic showed that this trust and the locally-rooted efforts of grassroots groups was critical. As restrictions were imposed to contain the pandemic, many grassroots groups were able to easily adapt as they come from and live within the communities they work or have deep relationships with community members. This was necessary in order to adapt and sustain their work in a time of crisis, when other actors were not able to access or work with these communities.

**The reliance on community leaders to understand their realities and inform decisions related to needs:** Organizations recognized the importance of community leaders as sources of information and expertise, and the vital role they can play in promoting informed decisions that impact the livelihood of their own communities.

**The investment in community members' capacity to inform and report:** With restrictions on mobility and lockdowns, organizations found themselves increasingly reliant on community members to report and document violations, and act as spokespeople for their own needs and rights.



4. *Please tell us about one strategy you have found particularly effective in reaching one or more of your goals, and briefly explain why you think it has been successful. If possible, please highlight what legal empowerment methods and tools you used to achieve your goals, or any new or innovative approaches used in your project.*

Many grassroots groups that received an award from the first round of the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund shared similar strategies to implement their planned activities and work towards their goals.

One imperative strategy that grantees reported on was their **collaboration with local authorities** during the pandemic to effectively continue their work. With restrictions on mobility, and safety measures in place, organizations working on the ground needed the support and engagement of local authorities to access facilities, travel to communities, and more. For example, in the DRC, CVPD collaborated closely with local prison authorities to access detention facilities and used this opportunity to engage police officers and prison staff on the rights of detainees and what constitutes violations of those rights.

While in Guinea, Les Mêmes Droits Pour Tout reported that the most effective strategy for implementation of their work had been to **train and deploy volunteers from the community to monitor and report on rights' violations**. MDT believes that this not only empowered the community members and built their capacity, but also contributed to the sustainability of these efforts because community members were trained to identify and report on violations of human rights.

Other strategies mentioned by grantee organizations as effective and successful in reaching their goals despite the challenges of the pandemic, included: **the use of technology and digital means** to reach people efficiently without the need to travel to remote areas and/or increase their risk of exposure to COVID-19; **the ability to increase popular outreach** and diversify their audience through radio and social media to disseminate information, promote their justice agenda, and mobilize local communities; and **the involvement of community members in implementation of direct support services** to their fellow constituencies in the absence of the organization's ability to travel to the local communities.

#### **IV. Future Plans and Sustainability**

The COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund was formed following a May 2020 survey of Legal Empowerment Network members which showed that grassroots groups were struggling to sustain their work while also taking on the injustices exacerbated by the pandemic. The grants that were subsequently awarded to 60 organizations were critical to the operations and impact of these grassroots groups, and its heartening that a diverse group of funders have mobilized to make this possible through the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund.

However, it is clear that there remains significant demand from grassroots justice actors for flexible, responsive funding that allows them to sustain their work, to respond to the injustices exacerbated by the pandemic, and to pivot to new needs and opportunities. The collection of partners that formed the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund remains committed to advancing the need of grassroots justice actors and to mobilizing investment of resources at the frontline.

The Grassroots Justice Fund has helped to set the stage for a broader, longer-term investment in grassroots justice activism, through the Legal Empowerment Fund (LEF). Launched in September 2021, the Legal Empowerment Fund is a bold new initiative established by the Fund for Global Human Rights in partnership with Namati, the Mott Foundation, and the Hewlett Foundation. It will award grants and convene frontline groups using legal empowerment strategies with the goal of achieving systemic change, as well as enabling frontline groups to successfully employ existing laws to benefit communities.

Achieving this will require marshalling the resources necessary to bolster grassroots justice groups who are best placed to work with local communities and build pathways by which people neglected by the law are able to secure its protection. We have the ambitions of mobilizing \$100 million over 10 years for the Legal Empowerment Fund to close the global justice gap. Without consistent, long-term investment in grassroots justice and legal empowerment, and a shift towards a people-centered approach to justice, people will continue to be failed by existing justice systems and their rights will continue to be violated. We are thankful for our partners, funders, and grassroots organizations for taking on this fight and for their commitment to a more just world.

The demand for frontline resourcing was made further evident following the launch of the Legal Empowerment Fund's first global call in January 2022. Launched in five languages and open to any grassroots group regardless of geography or thematic area of work, the call subsequently attracted more than 4,000 applications. It is expected that 50 groups will receive a grant in this first round, following the conclusion of a participatory grant-making process that involves application screening by the Fund for Global Human Rights and Namati, before final decision-making by a selection committee of experienced activists, lawyers, and academics.

The Legal Empowerment Fund has already attracted a high-level of visibility. It was launched [on stage at Global Citizen Live](#) in September 2021, with Atieno Odhiambo, Director of the LEF, on stage with Vivek Maru, Founder & CEO of Namati, and Ridgway White, President & CEO of the Mott Foundation. The Global Citizen Live concert was viewed by an estimated 1 billion people over its 24-hour broadcast. The launch of the LEF was also accompanied by a range of communications material, including:

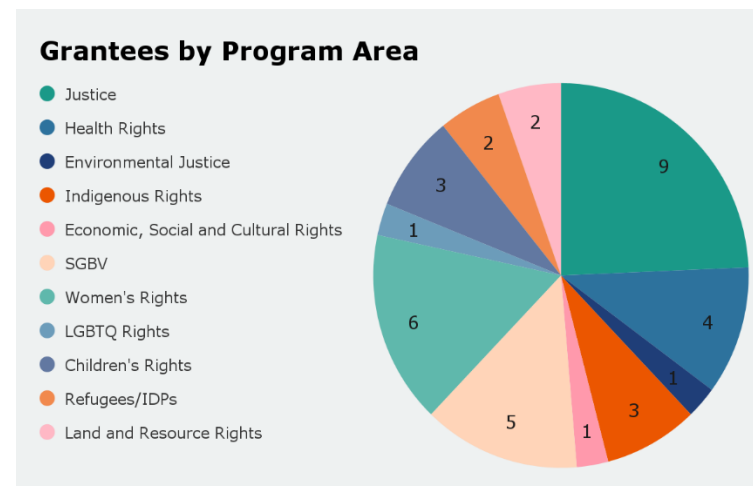
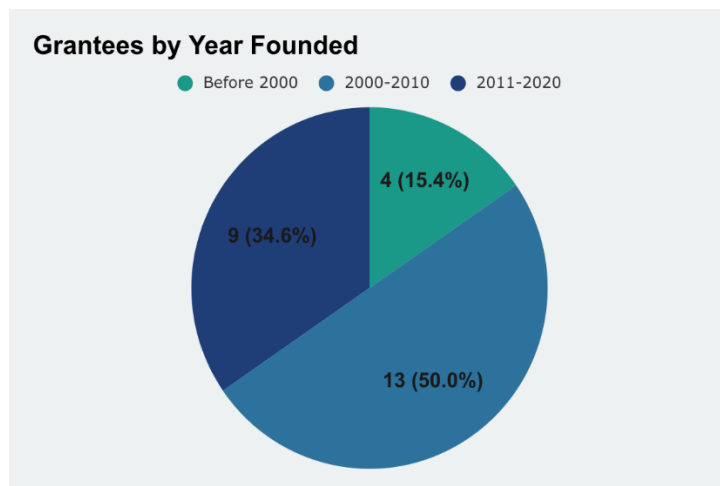
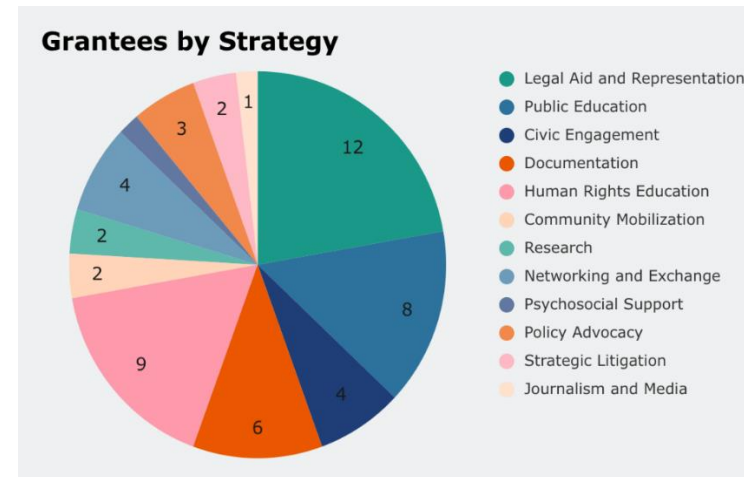
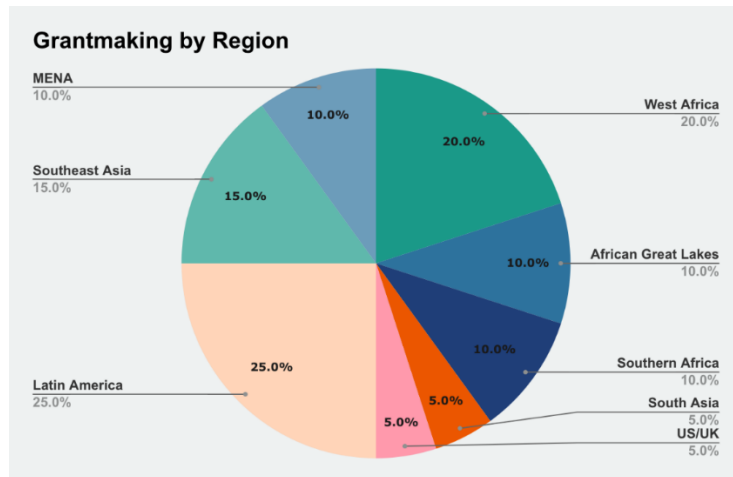
- A [press release](#) on the day of the launch,
- A [video explaining the Legal Empowerment Fund](#),

- An article by the Director of the LEF published in [Inside Philanthropy](#), and
- A [Q&A explaining legal empowerment](#) authored by the LEF Senior Program Associate.

Following the launch, the LEF was covered by multiple outlets, including the [Philanthropy News Digest](#) and the [Chronicle of Philanthropy](#). The Director of the LEF was featured in several articles, including this [Pathfinders Q&A](#) and this [Global Citizen interview](#), with the Global Citizen website also publishing an [explanatory article introducing the LEF](#). Allies and advocates have also begun to reference the LEF in policy fora and other public spaces.

The Fund for Global Human Rights and Namati welcomes collaboration with other funders and allies as we work to strengthen the people-centered justice movement and develop the Legal Empowerment Fund.

## Annex I – Analysis of second round of grantmaking (27 groups, in December 2021)



## **Annex II – Selection committee members**

The selection committee for the first round of grantmaking included:

- Lulu Ng'wanakilala, Chief Executive Officer, Legal Services Facility (Tanzania)
- Sheila Grace Formento, National Coordinator, Alternative Law Groups (Philippines)
- Sebastián Pilo, Co-Director, Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (Argentina)
- Yevgen Poltenko, Executive Director, Legal Development Network (Ukraine)
- Sabrina Mahtani, Co-Founder of AdvocAid, and Senior Advisor to The Elders (UK)
- Sukti Dhital, Executive Director, Bernstein Institute for Human Rights, New York University School of Law (USA)

The selection committee for the second round of grantmaking included:

- Ala Iatco, President, Union for HIV prevention and Harm Reduction (Moldova) - first round grantee
- Annette Mbogoh, Executive Director, Kituo Cha Sheria - Legal Advice Centre (Kenya) - first round grantee
- Celeste Fernández, Deputy Director, Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ, Argentina)
- Denise Dora, Executive Director - Regional Director, Article 19 South America / board member, Themis - Gender Justice and Human Rights (Brazil)
- Foromo Frederic Loua, Founding President/Lead Attorney, Les Mêmes Droits pour Tous (MDT, Guinea) - first round grantee
- Jocelyn Soto Medallo, Deputy Director, International Accountability Project (Global) - first round grantee
- Maalini Ramalo, Director for Social Protection, Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (DHRRA, Malaysia) - first round grantee
- Sheila Formento, National Coordinator, Alternative Law Groups (Philippines)
- Stephen Golub, Democracy and Development Expert/Commentator, (USA)
- Sukti Dhital, Executive Director, Bernstein Institute for Human Rights, New York University School of Law (USA)
- Timothy Mwachigi, Program Officer, Legal Resources Foundation Trust (LRF, Kenya) - first round grantee
- Yevgen Poltenko, Executive Director, Legal Development Network (Ukraine)