
IDRC's Support to the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda Initiative

Final Evaluation Report

February 2025



lucid collaborative

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Acronyms

ACIJ: Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia

ALG: Alternative Law Groups

AMT: Akiba Mashanini Trust

CED: Center for Environment and Development

CHREAA: Center for Human Rights Education, Assistance, and Advice

CSO: Civil society organization

DIG: Democratic and Inclusive Governance Program

ELAC: Environmental Legal Assistance Center

FIMA: Fiscalía del Medio Ambiente

GJN: Grassroots Justice Network

IDRC: International Development Research Centre

JEI: Justice and Empowerment Initiative

KII: Key informant interview

LELA: Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub Initiative

LEMU: Land and Equity Movement Uganda

OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

PAR: Participatory Action Research

SALC: Southern Africa Litigation Center

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal

SLAPP: Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation

UN: United Nations

YLBHI: Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation

Executive Summary

The Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub Initiative (LELA), launched by the International Development Research Centre's Democratic and Inclusive Governance Program (DIG), aims to address the global justice gap that contributes to the ongoing marginalization of vulnerable people around the world. This initiative seeks to enhance research capacity and evidence on legal empowerment approaches that can foster democratic governance and tackle development challenges. As part of the LELA initiative, DIG supports a cohort of 13 action research projects focused on legal empowerment. By facilitating a collaborative environment among grassroots practitioners and researchers, LELA promotes the co-generation of comparative research findings through various activities, including peer exchanges and regional and global convenings.

Purpose of Evaluation

The evaluation assesses the effectiveness and outcomes of the LELA initiative, focusing on:

- **Outcomes for Cohort Members:** Evaluating how participation has influenced their legal empowerment practices;
- **Effectiveness of Hub Modalities:** Analyzing peer exchange mechanisms at the regional and global level and their role in knowledge sharing;
- **Strategies for Resilience:** Understanding how the initiative supported adaptation in contexts of democratic backsliding;
- **Research Quality:** Assessing the relevance and outcomes of produced research.

The key users of the evaluation include the Democratic and Inclusive Governance team, and IDRC senior management. Secondary users of the evaluation include DIG grantee partners Namati and the cohort of 13 action research teams.

Methodology

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing:

- **Analysis of project documents and outputs;**
- **Cohort Survey:** Gathering quantitative and qualitative data from grantees;
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** Engaging with key informants for deeper insights, including DIG program officers, research team members, Namati programming staff, and the LELA international advisory group;
- **Observation:** Assessing the implementation of activities during the 2024 global convening.

Key Findings

1. Knowledge Growth: Cohort members reported significant increases in their understanding of legal empowerment strategies, with **84%** indicating that peer interactions strengthened their practices. Ninety percent (**90%**) of survey respondents consider peer exchange to be either valuable or extremely valuable to their activism, leading to adoption of new tactics and strategies. Sixty-one percent (**61%**) report implementation of new strategies such as deploying grassroots paralegals and collaborating with authorities on issues such as child trafficking.

2. Opportunity for Comparative Learning: The hub modality enabled cohort members to gain insights from comparative case studies and experiences across countries within their region, and cross-regionally. The stewardship role of Namati as the global hub is integral to the synthesization of evidence generated by the cohort to fill knowledge gaps.

3. Community Engagement: Nearly **50%** of respondents noted enhanced community outreach due to LELA participation, highlighting a renewed commitment to involving communities in legal empowerment efforts. Seventy-four percent (**74%**) acquired valuable skills in Participatory Action Research (PAR), leading to more community-centered approaches among cohort organizations. This increased community involvement strengthens democratic participation at the grassroots level.

4. Organizational Transformation: Some organizations, like FIMA (Fiscalia del Medio Ambiente) and CHREAA (Center for Human Rights Education, Assistance and Advice), underwent significant changes in their approach to legal empowerment work, integrating community-centered principles more broadly into their operations.

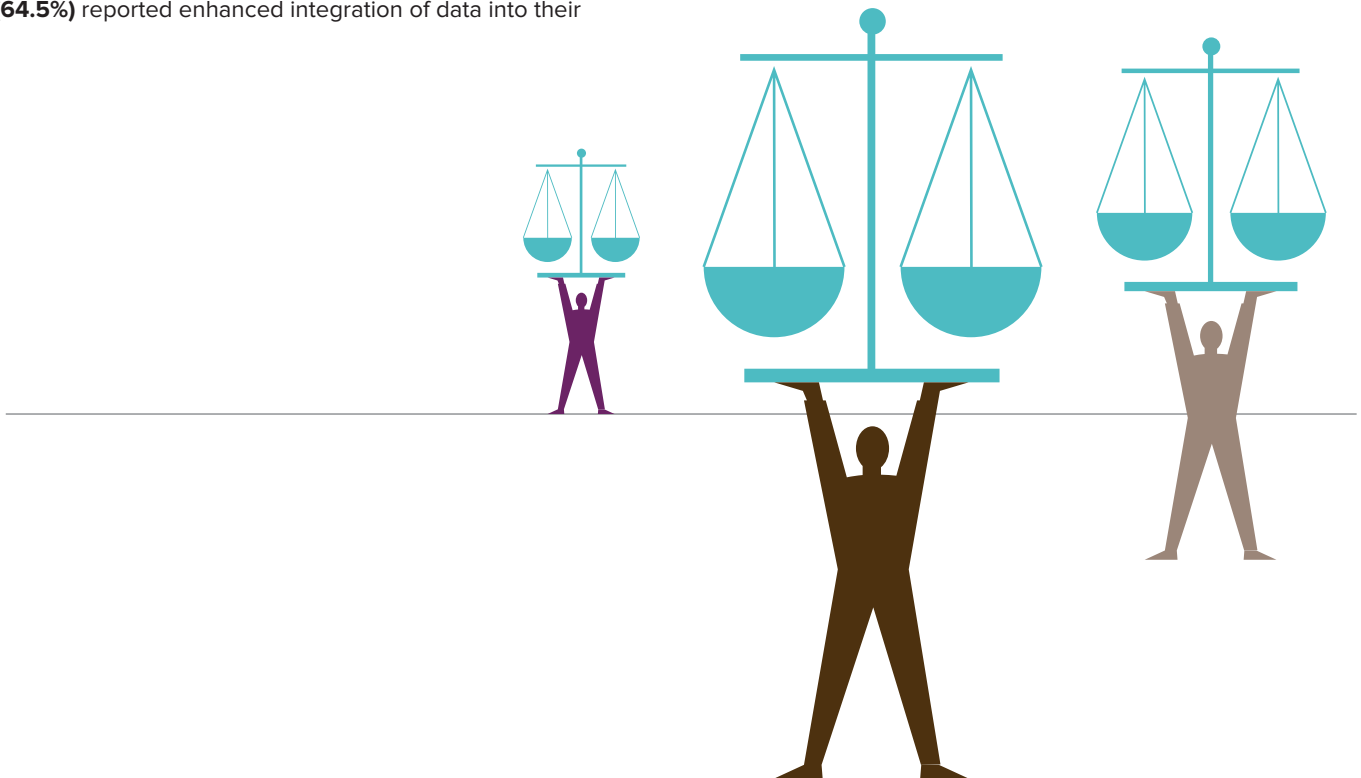
5. Strengthened Policy Advocacy: Participation in the LELA cohort improved cohort researchers' ability to share research findings with policymakers (**68%**); a similar percentage (**64.5%**) reported enhanced integration of data into their

legal empowerment activism. Cohort members have a new appreciation for the power of evidence-based arguments in influencing policy changes. This data-driven approach strengthens evidence-based policy-making, a key aspect of democratic governance.

6. Policy Advocacy Challenges: While there are indications of improved capacity to engage with policymakers, many cohort members operate in repressive environments where advocacy is risky. In situations of democratic backsliding, organizations learned to reframe their goals, focusing on securing existing rights and building community power for long-term democratic resilience.

Conclusion

The LELA initiative has effectively fostered knowledge sharing and community engagement among its cohort members, contributing to their professional development in legal empowerment practices. However, challenges remain in translating this knowledge into actionable strategies within repressive contexts. The evaluation highlights the need for ongoing support and adaptation strategies to strengthen resilience against democratic backsliding while continuing to build community power and influence policy reform.



I. Introduction

Background

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) launched the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub Initiative (LELA) in 2020 in response to the growing global justice gap that contributes to the ongoing marginalization of vulnerable people around the world. This initiative aims to strengthen the evidence base and research capacity on legal empowerment approaches that can contribute to democratic governance and address development challenges. The initiative employed a global and regional knowledge hub modality centered around a shared learning agenda, bringing together grassroots practitioners and researchers from around the world to co-generate comparative research findings. Through a range of activities including peer-to-peer exchanges, skills support, and regional and global convenings, the initiative sought to improve methodologies for scaling up and deepening the impact of legal empowerment interventions.

As part of the LELA initiative, IDRC supports a cohort of action research projects focused on legal empowerment. A competitive call in 2021 for proposals resulted in a diverse set of projects covering 17 countries across West Africa, East and Southern Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. The cohort aims to strengthen the evidence base and research capacity on legal empowerment approaches that can contribute to democratic governance and address development challenges. These projects are designed to generate comparative research findings through participatory methodologies, centering the leadership of communities and linking learning directly to struggles for justice. The initiative includes regional knowledge hubs for each sub-region, with organizations like the Alternative Law Groups (ALG) in Southeast Asia serving as focal points for knowledge sharing and translation¹ By combining research and program experimentation, these projects seek to produce powerful insights on how legal empowerment strategies can build community power, increase participation of marginalized groups in decision-making, and advance changes to laws and institutions that deepen democratic and inclusive governance.

Namati plays a central role in the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub Initiative. As a leading organization in the field of legal empowerment, Namati convenes the Grassroots Justice Network (GJN), which is described as the largest community of grassroots justice defenders in the world. This network, comprising nearly 9,200 individuals from 170 countries and representing over 2,400 civil society organizations, serves as a platform for knowledge sharing, peer learning, and collaborative action. In the context of the IDRC-funded initiative, Namati is leveraging this network to facilitate the knowledge hub and shared learning agenda, which is 4 lines of collective inquiry that the cohort and larger legal empowerment community are exploring:

1. Building Community Power and Systems Change;
2. Impact;
3. Movement Infrastructure and 4) Closing Civic Space.²

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness, appropriateness, and outcomes of the IDRC-funded Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub initiative. The evaluation aims to examine four key areas: outcomes for cohort members, the effectiveness of the hub modality and peer exchange mechanisms, strategies for resilience in situations of democratic backsliding, and the relevance and quality of the research produced. By analyzing these aspects, the evaluation seeks to provide insights into the initiative's contributions to strengthening the evidence base and research capacity on legal empowerment approaches. Additionally, it aims to assess how well the project has facilitated knowledge sharing, collaboration, and learning among practitioners from various countries. The findings will inform future programming decisions, highlight best practices, identify areas for improvement, and contribute to the broader understanding of effective strategies for advancing legal empowerment and addressing global justice challenges.

¹The hub organizations were not selected through the competitive call but were rather selected on the basis of their existing role as regional anchors in the Grassroots Justice Network (GJN) -- with the intent to foster synergies between their GJN role and their research hub role.

²The Learning Agenda was the result of a broad consultative process spearheaded by Namati and rolled out to the cohort project teams (some of whom participated in the consultations). More about the Learning Agenda can be found [here](#).

II. Evaluation Methodology

As outlined in the inception report, this evaluation is based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected and analysed by the Lucid team. Sources of data included:

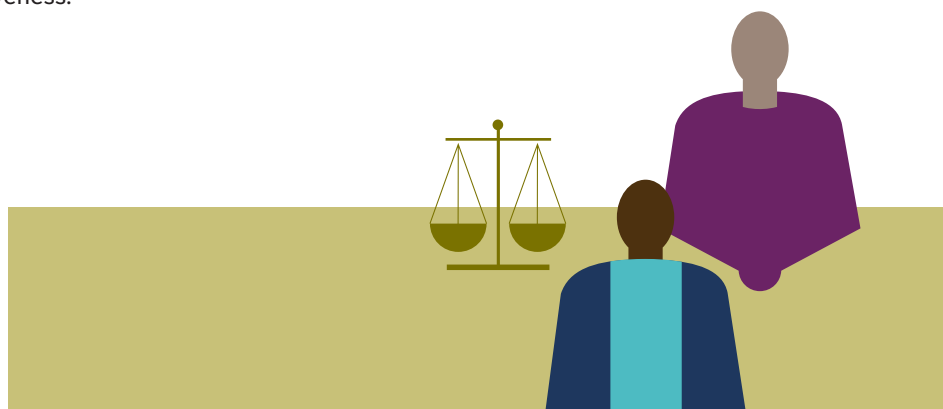
- **Document review:** This involved examining project technical reports, research outputs, and other relevant documentation to gather background information and assess progress;
- **Cohort survey:** An online survey was administered to cohort project team members to collect quantitative and qualitative data on their experiences with the LELA initiative and outcomes. The survey was primarily multiple choice, with a limited number of open-ended questions. The survey was administered in English, French, and Spanish to encourage responses. Response was respectable, with 58 responses in total.³
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** A total of 22 key informant interviews were undertaken with IDRC program officers, LELA Advisory Board members, and leaders of cohort project teams to gather more in-depth insights;
- **Observation:** Direct observation of global convening activities and peer exchanges to assess their implementation and effectiveness.

These methods allow for a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the initiative. The combination of document analysis, surveys, interviews, and observation enables triangulation of findings from multiple sources, enhancing the reliability and validity of the evaluation results.

Limitations

The evaluation is based primarily on the subjective perceptions of individuals, both in the survey and the interviews. There is a risk that responses may be affected by social desirability bias (over reporting of desirable behaviors) and/or overconfidence bias (difference between what individuals say they will do and what they actually do).

These risks are somewhat mitigated by encouraging evaluation participants to answer as truthfully as possible, ensuring that all responses will remain anonymous, and triangulating data with reference to documents and key informant interviews with individuals not directly involved in project implementation.



³The survey was sent to research project leaders within the cohort, and they were asked to distribute the survey to their larger research teams. It is unknown how many people in total received the survey, but it is reasonable to assume that 13 research teams with approximately 8-9 members that were involved in Learning Agenda activities would yield a population of about 105 possible survey respondents. It should be noted that not all respondents answered every question.

III. Findings

A. Outcomes for Cohort Members

Questions and subquestions under Evaluation Question Area #1 center on cohort-level outcomes emerging from their participation in the LELA initiative in terms of diffusion of legal empowerment strategies among cohort members to benefit their communities and to contribute to progressive policy reform. Success factors and challenges to achieving outcomes are also discussed in this section, as well as potential downstream outcomes.

Cohort members report substantive growth in their knowledge of legal empowerment strategies and tactics through their participation in the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub Initiative. The knowledge-sharing pillar of the initiative enhanced participants' understanding of legal empowerment strategies and their application in various contexts:

84% of respondents strongly agree or agree that interacting with legal empowerment peers—even if they work on issues different from their own—has strengthened their legal empowerment practice. **83%** report that one of the benefits of peer exchange has been gaining knowledge of new legal empowerment strategies or tactics; this ranked higher than other benefits listed. **92%** said that this new knowledge was either extremely valuable or valuable to their work; and **61%** report that they implemented new legal empowerment strategies or approaches in their work as a result of participating in LELA related activities.

“We adopted the approach of mobilizing and deploying grassroots paralegals to engage their communities directly.”

“Sometimes we just overlooked the simple ways of touching people and we were reminded of those when we saw our peers’ activities. That was crucial to enhance our outreach and community mobilization.”

“I have learned new approaches to legal empowerment work (e.g. ways to make paralegal-led workshops more interactive) that have been helpful for us in implementing such work in our context.”

Both the regional hubs and the global hub provided cohort members with virtual and in-person opportunities to exchange ideas on different ways to engage with communities. The lower percentage of respondents who reported that they had actually adopted new strategies or tactics (**61%**) compared to those who reported new knowledge of the same (**83%**) may reflect a number of factors. Most straightforwardly, some projects from West Africa and Latin America are earlier in the project cycle than their counterparts from East and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia.⁴ Many of these project leads or team members did not attend the global convening in Nairobi in March 2023,⁵ and thus their interaction with colleagues outside of their regions was new at the time of the survey.

Secondly, both quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that for several cohort members, substantive community engagement was a relatively new organizational strategy in and of itself. **Almost 50%** of survey respondents reported that being part of the LELA cohort had contributed significantly to their community outreach activities. **41%** reported their community outreach had improved a little, and less than **10%** reported ‘no change’. This suggests that an important outcome for the cohort was their (re)commitment to meaningful community engagement.

⁴Projects in Latin America and West Africa were added to the cohort in the second and third year of implementation of the LELA initiative.

⁵More information about the global convening can be found [here](#).

Qualitative evidence from interviews and observation of cohort members' contributions at the global convening supports these quantitative findings. Several project leads discussed how being part of the LELA cohort enhanced their recognition of the importance of centering community engagement in their legal empowerment work.

“Something I learned over the course of our action research project is that even though it takes time, putting communities at the center of the project is necessary.”

“We can move forward our strategy based on community power actions to institutional practice and then to law and policies. Community power is OUR source of power, and the source of leverage that we can bring to effect change.”

The inclusion of participatory action research (PAR) principles into each project was a key factor in deepening community engagement for several cohort members. While the integration of PAR will be discussed in more detail below, it is relevant to mention here that **74%** of survey respondents reported that new skills in PAR was one of the benefits they derived from LELA activities, and **77%** found these new skills to be extremely valuable or valuable to their legal empowerment work. Relatedly, **over two thirds** of respondents reported that being part of the LELA cohort has helped them share findings with their community partners.⁶

As we can see, many research team members feel that PAR has strengthened both their research efforts and community outreach. Additionally, for at least two cohort organizations, integrating PAR principles into their legal empowerment work has led to substantial changes in how their organizations function more broadly with and within their communities. In the case of FIMA (*Fiscalia del Medio Ambiente*), adopting PAR principles has led to significant organizational change; as a result of being part of the action research cohort, FIMA is integrating community-centered legal empowerment principles into all aspects of their environmental advocacy work. The organization is currently faced with the challenge of how

to balance organizational growth with the need to continue meaningful community engagement.⁷

In the case of CHREAA (*Center for Human Rights Education, Advice and Assistance*), research team members described how undertaking action research had caused a “paradigm shift” in how they thought about their legal empowerment work. With their increased ability to engage with their communities, CHREAA realized the extent to which community members could be empowered to take care of minor issues themselves without relying on CHREAA for representation, a strategy which she noted was “more sustainable” in the long run.⁸

In terms of contributing to progressive policy reforms, systematic evidence is more challenging to find. This is due in part to the long-term nature and complexity of policy processes – outcomes may be realized in the medium and long-term, or at least beyond the scope of this evaluation. Additionally, for several cohort members who work in situations of democratic backsliding, policy advocacy is non-productive and at times poses risks to legal empowerment practitioners and human rights defenders. Cohort members spoke of being in ‘protective mode’, where they keep a low profile and work to keep the rights they have, as inadequate as they may be in many cases. As Namati notes in its synthesis report on legal empowerment in situations of repression:

Adaptation sometimes means re-evaluating what success looks like. Many legal empowerment organizations aim to drive progressive changes to law and policy that establish new rights, improve implementation, and change norms and power structures. However, in repressive contexts, organizations have reframed their goals and how they understand what ‘systems change’ means. Rather than driving progressive changes, the goal becomes to secure existing gains, prevent further backsliding and erosion of rights, and build the community power that can sustain democracy in the long run.⁹

As with adopting new strategies to work with vulnerable communities, quantitative and qualitative data reveal that a preliminary outcome for cohort members, and one which is necessary for policy reforms, is strengthening the capacity of organizations to engage with the state at various levels. For

⁶It is important to note that for some cohort members, it is not yet possible to share research findings with their communities because it is too risky for both them and their constituents: “Current context in the country does not allow us to share research findings as we could not safely organize community sessions at large.” (Qualitative survey response)

⁷Semi-structured interview, September 26, 2024.

⁸Semi-structured interview, September 25, 2024.

⁹*How Legal Empowerment Efforts are Fighting Repression and Deepening Democracy*. Grassroots Justice Network Report, pg. 14.

68% of survey respondents, participation in LELA activities has helped them moderately or significantly to share research findings in meaningful ways with relevant policy- and decision-makers. Indeed, a related outcome among cohort members is the recognition of the power of data in their policy advocacy: 64.5% report that being part of the LELA cohort has helped them significantly to integrate data and research findings into their legal empowerment activism.

“Data has a huge impact when lobbying for law reform/policy changes or influencing cultural changes in state functionaries. That is one key thing we got from being part of this cohort, how others are using data to influence change.”

“Yes, this [participating in the cohort] has shaped our policy engagement strategies, which include engaging with the Judicial Commission and Chief Justice.”

During a discussion of factors that contribute to convincing government officials to make desired changes or choices at the 2024 global convening,¹⁰ several contributors referenced the power of data and research to reinforce their advocacy. They spoke of strategies to inform government officials backed by data so they cannot deny the evidence; of warding off dismissal of their demands with evidence-based arguments, and of using hard data to back up arguments based on human rights to show how the government - and the community - could both benefit.

“Coming to them with well-justified strong data enables the government to become aware of the issue, and when they recognize the scope of the issue, it encourages them to respond.”

“Power of data is the only way to make them realize there are disparities between groups of people.”

“I plan to incorporate more structured data collection methods to support informed decision making and amplify community voices.”

Throughout the cohort, there are positive examples of member organizations working with their constituents to achieve legal and policy decisions that ostensibly will benefit communities. In the case of the project led by CED (Center for Environment and Development) in Cameroon and LEMU (Land & Equity Movement Uganda) researchers were successful in raising grievances of communities before public officials, resulting in illegally confiscated land being returned to communities in Uganda, and securing the right of communities to be consulted by private companies investing in land in Cameroon. In the case of Cameroon, this victory led to CED working closely with the UN to advance its business and human rights agenda in the country.¹¹ In West Africa, Synergia employed strategic litigation on behalf of local communities to successfully challenge discriminatory articles in a country’s controversial law that prohibited same sex marriage.¹² In Malawi, CHREAA and SALC (Southern Africa Litigation Center) supported community members in challenging the police practice of mass arbitrary arrests (sweeping) targeting street-connected children and sex workers; as a result, the High Court of Malawi declared this practice unlawful and in violation of constitutional rights and international human rights standards.¹³ In Senegal, Natural Justice (project # 109953 and 109710) has supported indigenous communities and women fish processors to document socio-economic and environmental harms caused by mining and other industrial activities, to negotiate administrative processes to hold corporate actors accountable, and to secure compensation for damaged crops and polluted water. These groups have also been successful in halting the construction of new factories.¹⁴

While these are positive examples of cohort members contributing to policy and legal changes, several project teams cautioned about focusing too heavily on policy change as an outcome. They cited the fact that in many of the countries in the cohort, good laws and policies exist, but only “on the books.” For many legal empowerment practitioners, the priority is to hold duty bearers accountable for the proper implementation of existing laws and policies. Even when

¹⁰The 2024 LELA global convening was held September 23 - 27, 2024 in the Philippines, hosted by Southeast Asia regional hub Alternative Law Groups (ALG).

¹¹109709 4th Technical Report, March 2024, pp. 4-6.

¹²110086 Interim Report, February 2024, p. 7.

¹³<https://www.southernafricalitigationcentre.org/news-release-malawi-high-court-declares-mass-arrests-sweeping-exercises-unconstitutional/>

¹⁴Engaging the State Stories, presented during the 2024 global convening.

organizations contribute to policy reform, often their communities are let down when the desired changes fail to materialize. For example, ACIJ (*Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia*) has won several important court cases; however, these did not lead to positive change in the everyday lives of their constituents, which ACIJ felt subsequently undermined their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of their communities. As one contributor at the global convening paraphrased, “Fancy ruling but we’re not living any better.” For legal empowerment practitioners, the definition of positive outcomes (or impact) must include the observable improvement in the lives of their community members, not just policy or court victories.

While progressive policy and legal reforms are challenging to achieve, the cohort was successful in several instances of building community power and resilience. In Indonesia, action research in one area led to the formation of a new farmer’s organization in 2024 that is less politicized, more democratic, and more representative of farmers in the region.¹⁵ In the Philippines, ALG member ELAC (Environmental Legal Assistance Center) was instrumental in galvanizing the One Palawan Movement that resulted in a plebiscite on a proposal to divide the island province into smaller territories. Turnout for the plebiscite was significant, and 58.5% of voters rejected the proposal, keeping the province united. In Malawi, CHREAA and SALC report that implementation of their action research project has led to the formation of organizations representing the interests of different communities in a more unified way. For example:

“The informal traders, who previously operated independently, have now formed an organization, Informal Traders Stream, comprising both men and women. This organizational development has been transformative, enabling them to address common challenges more effectively and advocate for their collective interests. One notable impact of this organizational formation is the enhanced capacity to respond to arrests within their community. By working collaboratively and leveraging the support of our paralegals, they can

navigate legal processes more efficiently and advocate for the release of detained members.”¹⁶

An ongoing challenge for grassroots legal empowerment activists, including LELA cohort members, is sustaining momentum among communities when several forces work against them, including long policy timelines, government attempts to divide civil society, competing interests among groups, and repressive tactics by companies and governments. Several cohort members in Southeast Asia report that community members and paralegals are worried about punitive litigation (SLAPP suits),¹⁷ leading to demobilization of grassroots engagement.¹⁸ At the 2024 global convening in the Philippines, one participant described how working with LGBTQI+ communities in East Africa can empower those communities, but at the risk of government retaliation such as mass arrests. Cohort members are very conscious of the potential risks to their communities as a result of legal empowerment activities, and underlined the necessity of finding ways to protect them from backlash:

“We are also paralegals so when we add to community empowerment and institutional evolution, we have issues of safety. The communities we work with are also afraid to fight against institutions. If we want legal empowerment to be effective and sustainable, we have to define how communities can safely fight institutions when needed.”

Positive elements that contribute to the outcomes described above among the LELA cohort include the following:

- Expanding networks
- The value of peer exchange
- Namati’s convening, synthesization and knowledge translation efforts
- The opportunity for cohort members to pause and reflect on their legal empowerment activism.

¹⁵109715 5th Interim Report, March 2024, p. 5.

¹⁶109713 3rd Technical Report, April 2024, p. 10.

¹⁷Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation suits: https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/slapp_suit

¹⁸As one global convening participant commented, “When we talk about sustainability, we see we are losing people out of fear of being harassed by the government.”

Quantitative results from the survey show that participation in the LELA initiative increased cohort members' connections to legal empowerment peers either moderately (36%) or a great deal (58%)¹⁹ According to over half of survey respondents, expanding networks have contributed to increased collaborative opportunities for them (63%), and 77% feel that these opportunities are either valuable or extremely valuable to their legal empowerment practice.

“There have been connections across thematic areas and regions, which has been incredible!”

For many cohort members, integration into the Grassroots Justice Network is a clear benefit, but Namati has also facilitated integration of cohort members into other thematic and regional networks and organizations such as the African Center of Excellence on Access to Justice in Kenya, the *Escuela Latinoamericana de Abogacia Comunitaria y Activismo Juridico* in Latin America, and the Land, Environment, and Climate Justice Core Group. The activities of these networks/organizations provide opportunities for cohort members to share their experiences and research findings with others beyond the LELA initiative.

Relatedly, peer exchange is a significant benefit derived by cohort members through the LELA initiative. Ninety percent (90%) of survey respondents consider peer exchange to be either valuable or extremely valuable to their activism, leading to adoption of new tactics and strategies:

“Through peer exchanges, we were able to appreciate the special role that paralegals play in supporting communities to access justice. As a result, we have worked with legal aid organizations and community advocates to pursue redress for communities affected by evictions.”

(More analysis of the role of peer exchange will be presented below.)

As one of the objectives of the LELA initiative, collecting data and analysis on what works and what doesn't and why encourages critical reflection by cohort members on their assumptions and legal empowerment practices, enabling

participants to take a step back from their day-to-day activities and evaluate their theories of change and strategic orientation. For organizations that have been in the legal empowerment sphere for several decades, being part of the cohort provided them with the first opportunity to take stock of their past work and experiences, and to learn from this reflection. In the case of Kituo Cha Sheria, an evaluation of 50 years of their legal empowerment programs led to important insights on their contributions, the changing socioeconomic and political environments in Kenya and their implications, and the identification of organizational challenges and mitigation strategies.²⁰ Similarly, YLBHI (Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation) in Indonesia conducted a review of 54 years of structural legal aid via action research in 8 interventions. The results will be used to inform their ongoing legal aid strategies and organizational development.

“We seldom look back on what we do and rarely document it. This connects to the idea of having a minute to stop, take stock, and reflect, and move forward. After 54 years, we need to adjust on some levels.”

From survey results on the value of peer exchange and PAR on organizational practices for cohort members, and from interview data, we see that increased organizational development from the opportunity to pause and reflect on their work has been an important, if somewhat unintended, cohort-level outcome.

It is safe to say that little of the positive elements referenced above would have occurred without Namati's convening power, and data synthesization, reporting, and knowledge translation activities. The Global Knowledge Hub provides a platform for organized peer-to-peer exchanges, skills support, and larger convenings. These activities are designed to co-generate comparative research findings, allowing cohort members to learn from each other's experiences and insights, and the evaluation data support the achievement of those objectives.²¹

²⁰“[Evaluating the Impact of Legal Empowerment Programmes on access to Justice for the poor and marginalised in Kenya: Abridged Report.](#)”

²¹The caveat being that synthesization of cross-regional learning is still ongoing after the second global convening in 2024.

As referenced above, several cohort organizations are working in repressive contexts that constrain their ability to engage openly with their constituents, or to engage in legal or policy advocacy with decision-makers. Political pressure takes its toll on legal empowerment activists, and high personnel turnover in organizations is a reality. Additionally, several project leads discussed the very real possibility of their communities suffering backlash as a result of their legal empowerment activities.

Even in less repressive contexts, some cohort members have found it challenging to fully implement PAR principles into their action research projects. Several factors are at play here, including the long-term nature of community engagement that requires time and resources to build credibility and trust of community members. For those organizations for whom PAR and substantive community engagement were new ways of working, their capacity to undertake PAR will take additional time and additional support beyond a normal project cycle (even for IDRC).

Secondly, communities are not homogeneous, and cohort project teams faced challenges in overcoming divisions within their constituents based on competing interests and imbalances of power. Among refugee communities for example, different ethnic groups from different countries may have divergent goals or interests. Additionally, for some cohort organizations, overt government and corporate attempts to drive a wedge between legal empowerment activists and communities limited their ability to fully co-create research with vulnerable populations. In southeast Asia, governments have actively tried to sow division between CSO groups to weaken their solidarity.²²

With newer projects in West Africa and Latin America just embarking on their action research, there are still anticipated outcomes²³ likely to emerge with ongoing implementation of the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda. These include:

- **Continued cross-regional analysis and synthesization** efforts from Namati on the initiatives' learning arcs;
- **More substantive knowledge translation of research findings** targeting policy-makers at various levels, from the local to the regional;
- **Potential policy or legal reforms** with organizations' continued integration of data into their legal empowerment advocacy;
- **Expanding networks** for cohort members with their continued integration into the Grassroots Justice Network and other networks arising from new institutions such as the African Center of Excellence on Access to Justice and ELAC (*Escuela Latinoamericana de Abogacia Comunitaria y Activismo Juridico*);
- With continued opportunities for peer exchange, **horizontal diffusion of strategies and tactics** is likely to occur, strengthening the community of practice that is emerging;
- **Increased organizational resilience** if teams continue to integrate PAR principles into their work and engage in ongoing critical reflection;
- **Potential integration of voices of grassroots practitioners into global fora** via the UN Special Rapporteur on Independence of Judges and Lawyers and/or other bodies such as the OECD.

These outcomes demonstrate that the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub has successfully fostered a collaborative, global community of practice. This network has enhanced the capacity of cohort members to learn from each other, work together on shared challenges, and collectively advance the field of legal empowerment.



²²Contribution by cohort member during a session on “Challenges to Community Participation” on day 2 of the 2024 global convening in the Philippines.

²³Anticipated outcomes are derived from project objectives articulated in proposals to IDRC, and evidence of outcomes from projects that are farther along the project cycle within the cohort.

B. Hub Modality and Peer Exchange

This area of inquiry centers on the hub modality employed in the LELA initiative, and the resulting outcomes in terms of knowledge sharing and peer exchange.

Namati's Global Knowledge Hub has proven to be a highly effective platform for facilitating knowledge sharing and collaboration among cohort members. As the largest community of grassroots justice defenders worldwide, it provides an unparalleled resource for legal empowerment practitioners. With the implementation of the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda, Namati is building a vibrant global community of practice where members can engage in discussions, share best practices, and seek advice from colleagues facing similar challenges in different contexts.

Almost half of respondents (**47%**) described their relationship with the Global Knowledge Hub (Namati) as very or moderately deep, where they can discuss professional issues and challenges extensively.²⁴ Namati was instrumental in providing capacity strengthening sessions on PAR, fundamental legal empowerment strategies, and strategic storytelling²⁵ to cohort project teams. Certainly, gaining new skills in PAR was ranked highly by respondents as very valuable or valuable to them and their organizations (**77%**).

Namati has also been key to co-creating with cohort members several knowledge products that feature the work of LELA cohort members in accessible ways to foster knowledge sharing. One example is the "Common Pot" podcast²⁶ that shares the innovative grassroots strategies employed by cohort members and their communities to pursue justice. The storytelling format brings forth the voices of grassroots legal practitioners and highlights for listeners why some tactics work and others fail. Blog posts and practitioner interviews are other examples of knowledge sharing tactics accessible to cohort members and the wider Grassroots Justice Network.

Synthesization efforts such as the Impact Pathways report and the Legal Empowerment and Repression report, both of which were co-produced with cohort members, are important sources for comparative learning (a key objective of the Learning Agenda). These synthesization efforts target audiences beyond the cohort in order to advance understanding within the broader field of different legal empowerment strategies and the factors in their success and failure, as well as how and when legal empowerment practitioners can engage the state either dialogically or adversarially. Furthermore, they are important sources of grassroots voices and experiences for legal empowerment actors working at regional or international levels such as the United Nations, the OECD,²⁷ African Union, and so forth.

The Global Knowledge Hub has been instrumental in spearheading the Learning Agenda process and providing a platform for knowledge sharing and skills training, and the regional hubs have played a complementary role by providing more context-specific support and resources. Survey respondents report that they are in contact with regional peers almost **twice as often** as other colleagues farther afield, and the strength of their relationships with regional counterparts vs. others is significantly stronger (**36% vs 3%** at the tip of the scale of "very deep" to "very superficial").

The regional hubs are effective in focusing on issues and strategies particularly relevant to their specific regions, allowing for more targeted knowledge sharing, such as the regional paralegal exchanges in West and East Africa and Southeast Asia. They facilitate closer collaboration among organizations working in similar cultural, legal, and political

²⁴This survey was conducted prior to the 2024 global convening. This percentage would likely be higher if this question has been posed to respondents after the convening.

²⁵Namati hosted a "Storytelling Season" in 2023 that helped cohort members use their research findings and data to craft compelling stories of the change they are contributing to.

²⁶The podcast can be found on Spotify here

²⁷It is important to note that the OECD is co-custodian of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.3: *Promote the rule of law at the national and international level and ensure access to justice for all; and it leads on indicator 16.3.3: Proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism.*

contexts. Quantitative data suggests that the strength of relationships is strongest between cohort members within the same region: **75%** of respondents characterize relationships with peers within their region as either “moderately” (39%) or “very deep” (36%).

The combination of the global and regional hubs creates a multi-layered knowledge sharing ecosystem that supports cohort members. This structure allows participants to benefit from both broad, global perspectives and more targeted, context-specific resources and collaborations.

However, the effectiveness of these hubs varies among cohort members depending on factors such as their level of engagement and the relevance of shared resources to their specific work. Additionally, the hubs’ effectiveness may be influenced by the quality of facilitation and the ongoing commitment of members to active participation. The responsibilities of acting as a regional hub are substantial in terms of time and resources, and relies heavily on the convening abilities of organizations. A lack of clarity around expectations of regional hubs led to some concern expressed by DIG program officers regarding the frequency and nature of regional meetings and interactions.²⁸

Data suggest that the hub modality is most effective in the facilitation of **peer learning and exchange, both within regions and globally**. The opportunities for peer exchange cultivates a sense of community among cohort members that is hard to measure, but is clearly in evidence.

Eighty percent (**80%**) of survey respondents reported a sense of community as one of the particular benefits that they gained from peer exchange, and **92%** considered this to be either valuable or extremely valuable. This finding ties with the perceived value of knowledge of new legal empowerment strategies by cohort members.

There appears to be a mutually reinforcing relationship between the two outcomes of new knowledge and sense of community. The shared learning experiences in regional convenings and global convenings spark new understandings of how legal practitioners use different strategies to help community members to know, use, and shape the law, and, in

the process, recognition of the similar challenges they face in their work. Several cohort members described the impact that peer exchange has had on their work:

“I have learned things from other regions that I can apply in my own community work. When I brought community representatives together to present and learn, they felt valued and inspired.”

“To learn and hear from other countries validates the work we do as an organization and as individuals. For example the research we did focusing on key legal empowerment approaches shows that these strategies are universal and cross-cutting in the SEA region. The recent paralegal exchange has also shown that through these strategies we can collectively work to support each other and our paralegals.”

“Peer exchanges were fundamental for understanding different approaches to the same problem through different contexts.... The way other organizations work and experiences they shared made us rethink the need to promote alliances with other organizations within our country, to increase our territorial reach in the future, for example.”

“I learned a lot from how other organizations approached the same issue, and was able to broaden some of our organization’s strategies.”

When asked which of the LELA activities has been most valuable, **22 out of 30** qualitative responses referenced “in-person exchanges.” These types of in-person exchanges, while resource intensive, can have several important benefits, including deeper personal connections, informal networking, immersive learning through site visits, and shared experiences.

²⁸This concern was expressed by at least 3 DIG program officers, who had hoped for more sustained engagement from regional hub organizations within their region.

Indeed, **80%** of survey respondents ranked “a sense of community” as one of the particular benefits of peer exchange (second only to “knowledge of new legal empowerment strategies), and **92%** of respondents ranked this sense of community as “valuable” and “extremely valuable.”

By creating various opportunities for interaction, the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub modality has effectively facilitated a rich and ongoing peer exchange among cohort members, contributing to the development of a **global community of practice** in legal empowerment.

Overall, the Global Knowledge Hub and regional hubs appear to be valuable assets in supporting the work of cohort members, providing crucial platforms for learning, collaboration, and strengthening the global legal empowerment movement.

C. Resilience in Situations of Democratic Backsliding

This area of inquiry examines the value added for cohort organizations of their participation in the LELA initiative in terms of building or sustaining their resilience in contexts of democratic backsliding. It also looks at cohort-level outcomes so far in terms of the Democratic and Inclusive Governance Program’s outcome pathway.²⁹

Operating in contexts of democratic backsliding is a reality for most, if not all, LELA cohort members to a greater or lesser extent. As a follow-up to the global convening of 2023 in Nairobi where this issue rose as a priority for the cohort, Namati with ALG organized a series of virtual roundtable discussions to engage cohort and GJN members in a collective and comparative learning exercise around the increasing risks to legal practitioners in contexts of repression and the strategies that can and are employed to respond.³⁰ The resulting report by Namati synthesizes the discussions and distills the key points into discussions of common tactics used by repressive governments and their proxies, and the strategic adaptations and tactics implemented by some cohort and GJN members. These tactics include building solidarity among communities based on common cause, building coalitions for reform, and cultivating partnerships with wider social movements.³¹

The report’s content was the subject of numerous discussions at the global convening in 2024 where the issue continues to be of direct relevance to cohort members.

Although challenging to measure, evidence suggests that participation in LELA activities has benefited cohort members who face difficulties in their legal empowerment work from repressive governments and shrinking civic space. These benefits are chiefly in terms of perceived sense of community and solidarity, as well as new knowledge of strategies and tactics to engage antagonistic governments: **89%** of survey respondents either agreed (**24%**) or strongly agreed (**65.5%**) that learning from peers facing similar challenges as they gave them strength and inspiration in their legal empowerment work:

“I have gained motivation in my legal empowerment practice through understanding what is done elsewhere by other members in the civic space.”

Part of this inspiration and motivation likely comes from cohort members gaining new knowledge and insights from their peers on how they adapt to negative political dynamics in

²⁹DIG’s outcome pathway can be found in Annex 2.

³⁰[How Legal Empowerment Efforts are Fighting Repression and Deepening Democracy](#). Grassroots Justice Network Report, 2024, p. 4

³¹[How Legal Empowerment Efforts are Fighting Repression and Deepening Democracy](#). Grassroots Justice Network Report, 2024, pp.15-17.

different contexts: **82%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned something new from peers on how to work effectively in situations of shrinking civic space.

“We have been able to innovate in our legal empowerment work. For example, we have started to work with a wider range of tools, not only legal ones, such as security risk analysis.”

“[I] appreciated that in constantly shrinking social space, it is important to use a multiplicity of strategies and to build strong coalitions that can bring different skills and support each other in different ways.”

The sense of community and solidarity experienced by cohort members comes from not only learning from peers, but also from the opportunity to share their own experiences to benefit others. This mutually reinforcing aspect of peer exchange is an important element in building the community of practice that the LELA initiative is working towards. More than **50%** of respondents felt that they had been able to support peers who were facing difficult challenges.

“By sharing our knowledge and experience which can often be our personal life experiences can go a long way in helping each other to learn.”

“Sharing our experiences to help others to find answers to their challenges, especially in the areas of child trafficking.”

Given the relevance of the challenges of democratic backsliding to all cohort members to one degree or another, it is reasonable to assume that the evaluation’s findings presented in previous sections are also applicable to this evaluation question area, especially in terms of reported benefits of peer-exchange. These include new knowledge of legal empowerment strategies, emotional support (**77%** rank this as valuable or extremely valuable to them) and increased organizational resilience (**63%** rank this as valuable or extremely valuable).

DIG Outcome Pathway

Like all programs at IDRC, DIG has a program-specific outcome pathway that forms the basis of DIG’s monitoring and evaluation plan. The evaluation has highlighted above several examples of how the LELA initiative and cohort research partners have achieved outcomes relevant to DIG’s pathway. Please see Annex 2 for specific examples.

It is laudable that the LELA initiative and cohort have provided numerous examples of successful outcomes relevant to DIG’s outcome pathway, including substantive examples of intermediate outcomes related to contributing to resilient research ecosystems; horizontal diffusion of legal empowerment strategies and; contributing to strengthened empowerment and agency of vulnerable and marginalized communities. Outcomes related to policy uptake and gender transformative change are beginning to emerge, but will be more appropriate for assessment at a later stage.

D. Research Relevance and Quality

This area of inquiry focuses on to what extent the cohort research teams have contributed evidence-based research to address knowledge gaps in the legal empowerment field (as identified in the Learning Agenda). Additionally, issues of whether participation in the cohort has contributed to research quality among action research teams vis-à-vis IDRC’s Research Quality+ (RQ+) framework is addressed.⁴³

The challenge in assessing to what extent cohort projects have contributed to filling knowledge gaps is a question of timing. Several projects are coming to a close, but others are in the midst of implementing their action research with communities. While discussions at the 2024 global convening were rich in comparative detail among participants, synthesization of evidence across 13 projects will take additional time to get a truer picture of how LELA research teams have contributed to larger overarching questions facing the legal empowerment field.

What is clear, however, is that most if not all projects have made efforts to align themselves with the priorities of the Learning Agenda, despite the diverse nature of the issues they are working on, and the variety of regional contexts in which they are carrying out their action research.

Many cohort members have centered their research on issues affecting marginalized populations, such as women, LGBTQI+ communities, indigenous peoples, and urban poor communities. This aligns with the Learning Agenda’s emphasis on addressing the justice needs of vulnerable groups and ensuring that legal empowerment strategies are inclusive and equitable. Many projects have integrated participatory methodologies that center community members in the research process. This approach also ensures that the research is grounded in local realities and needs, reflecting the Learning Agenda’s commitment to people-centered justice strategies.

Cohort members are actively generating evidence through action research that examines effective legal empowerment

strategies. This aligns with the Learning Agenda’s objective to build a robust evidence base for comparison of legal empowerment interventions, helping to inform best practices and policy recommendations across different contexts. Research conducted by cohort members also often incorporates intersectional analyses that consider how different social identities affect individuals’ experiences with justice systems. This aligns with the Learning Agenda’s focus on understanding diverse justice journeys and addressing systemic inequalities.

However, there have been some significant challenges for cohort members in fully aligning their research with LELA priorities and fully implementing PAR. The research conducted by members of the LELA cohort has generally embraced the principles of methodological rigor, particularly through the use of participatory action research (PAR). However, the extent of this rigor can vary based on several factors, including context, resources, and existing relationships with communities.

At the most fundamental level, some cohort members face resource and capacity limitations that hinder their ability to conduct comprehensive research aligned with the Learning Agenda’s priorities. The level of expertise among cohort members in conducting rigorous PAR varies significantly.⁴⁴ Some have extensive training and experience, while others are less familiar with this methodology, potentially affecting the quality and rigor of their research processes. **Over two thirds** of survey respondents identified new skills in PAR as a valuable benefit to them. For some cohort members and their community researchers, basic training on PAR principles either by Namati or regional experts, is simply insufficient to equip

⁴³The RQ+ Framework can be found [here](#).

⁴⁴It should be noted that while having strong community trust and ties is necessary for PAR, it is an insufficient condition for PAR to be implemented faithfully.

researchers to meaningfully engage communities in the research process.⁴⁵ The risk arises that a superficial application of PAR principles occurs, undermining the intention to fully integrate local perspectives, and leading to more traditional researcher-subject dynamics in the field.

As described in previous sections above, political pressure and restrictive legal environments have limited some cohort teams' ability to freely engage with communities or disseminate findings that critique existing power structures. This can impede alignment with the Learning Agenda's goal of fostering open dialogue and advocacy for systemic change, since the socio-legal environment is impermissible to enacting PAR principles in practice.

In summary, while many cohort members have successfully aligned their research with the priorities of the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda by focusing on marginalized communities, generating evidence, and employing participatory methodologies, they also face challenges related to resources (human and financial), political pressures, and varying regional priorities that can complicate this alignment. However, as discussed above, the modality of peer exchange is helping cohort members to learn about potential solutions and coping strategies from their fellow legal practitioners.

RQ+ Assessment⁴⁶

While it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to fully assess each project according to the RQ+ framework, some general cohort-level observations can be made in this regard. In particular, strengths of cohort research include research legitimacy, research importance, and positioning for use.

Strengths of the cohort research include:

- The deeply contextual action research that draws on the lived experiences of grassroots organizations and vulnerable populations in the 13 countries in the cohort, which will bring the voice and the perspectives of individuals - who are often left out of research - into regional and global fora;
- The comparative research element that draws out relevant best practices and innovations of legal empowerment for grassroots activists within and across different regions;
- The positioning of cohort research findings into regional

and global networks such as Namati who have excellent convening power among key stakeholders, and;

- The strong relevance of the research to priority issues of access to justice and human rights for some of the world's most vulnerable populations.

Some areas of potential improvement include issues related to scientific rigor and methodological integrity:

- **Gaps in methodology:** Technical reporting by cohort projects varied in the quality of documentation of PAR methodology, making it difficult to assess rigor and integrity.
- **Uneven treatment of gender considerations among projects.** While gender was a priority for some cohort members such as Natural Justice, other projects needed to be prompted by IDRC program officers to include gender dimensions into their research and analysis.
- **Balancing community participation with methodological rigor:** Striking a balance between ensuring meaningful participation from community members and maintaining methodological rigor can be challenging. The thoroughness with which cohort members document their research processes varies. In some cases, researchers have prioritized participant engagement at the expense of systematic data collection protocols. Several cohort members discussed in interviews or in technical reporting about the challenges of getting community researchers to document their interactions and observations, likely leading to some rich and nuanced tacit knowledge not being captured.

While many cohort members have demonstrated a commitment to methodological integrity through participatory action research (PAR) by engaging communities meaningfully and producing contextually relevant findings, challenges related to resources, political contexts, and varying levels of experience and data analysis capabilities can impact the overall rigor of their research efforts. Consideration of these challenges by IDRC will be crucial for enhancing the quality and impact of grantees' contribution to legal empowerment and access to justice.

⁴⁵Semi-structured interview, August 2024.

⁴⁶<https://idrc-crdd.ca/en/rqplus>

E. Considerations for IDRC

‘Relationships first, research second’

As a research orientation rather than a delineated methodology, PAR in theory is committed to democratizing the research process, in which the research questions, methodologies, and dissemination of co-created knowledge are agreed upon by all research participants. In this way, PAR should give ownership of the research to vulnerable and marginalized groups and decolonize the research process by dislodging traditional research canons of “who gets paid, speaks for the work, and has veto power over what goes public.”⁴⁷

In actuality, however, PAR is subject to a number of potential pitfalls that can impact research quality and pose ethical dilemmas. The most problematic, as Cahill (2007) notes, “are those research approaches which in the name of participation mask realities of tokenism, reinforce social hierarchies, emphasize consensus, and reproduce the dominant hegemonic agenda.”⁴⁸ (p. 269). The traditional IDRC-supported research process of proposal, research, reporting, and knowledge translation on a 3 year cycle may inadvertently reinforce the traditional power imbalances between paid researchers and communities. For several cohort members for whom research has not been a primary focus, implementing PAR and satisfying IDRC reporting requirements was at times challenging.⁴⁹

To mitigate some of these pitfalls, DIG should continue to partner with organizations who have deep ties to their communities and who are committed to democratizing the research process. For its part, DIG could internally discuss the implications of requiring grantees to implement PAR in terms of project timelines, resources, and expectations for research ‘outputs’. Indeed, some cohort members do not use the term

“participatory action research” at all because of the power imbalances implied in the term “participatory.” They instead use terms such as ‘community-led research’ or ‘community action research’ to more fully center disenfranchised communities in the research process.⁵⁰ DIG has an opportunity to support grantees to decolonize the research process, but internal reflection on what that looks like in reality is required. Devolving granting responsibilities and streamlining grantee reporting to regional partners is a potential measure in this regard.

What is Impact?

To Namati’s credit, the co-production of knowledge with cohort members allowed for a substantive engagement with the challenges faced by grassroots legal empowerment practitioners and their communities in situations of democratic backsliding. Acknowledgement of non-permissive environments for many legal empowerment practitioners and the real possibility of backlash against communities may require a re-evaluation of what impact is in these situations. Anticipated outcomes of progressive policy reforms and systems change may need to be scaled back or redefined more modestly to reflect the realities of grassroots practitioners and communities. Involving grantees and their community partners in the definition of ‘outcomes’ or ‘impact’ at all stages of the research process (including evaluation) is a possible step to ensure that expectations are realistic and appropriate to their lived experiences.

Community of Practice vs Field

What are the opportunities for IDRC in supporting research to strengthen and sustain a community of practice that is not traditionally research-based in the way that a ‘field’ is?

⁴⁷Sandwick, T., Fine, M., Greene, A. C., Stoudt, B. G., Torre, M. E., & Patel, L. (2018). Promise and provocation: Humble reflections on critical participatory action research for social policy. *Urban Education*, 53(4), p. 477.

⁴⁸Cahill, C. (2007). The personal is political: Developing new subjectivities through participatory action research. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 14(3), p. 269.

⁴⁹Key informant interview, August 15, 2024; semi-structured interview, September 26, 2024.

⁵⁰Group discussion, 2024 global convening, day 4.

A community of practice like the LELA cohort and larger GJN have certain characteristics that distinguish it from more traditional notions of an academic or disciplinary field.⁵¹ These characteristics include:

- **Purpose:** Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common concern, set of problems, or interest in a topic (such as legal empowerment) and come together to fulfill both individual and group goals. They focus on sharing best practices and creating new knowledge to advance a domain of professional practice through ongoing interaction. In contrast, a field is a broader concept that encompasses the entire area of study or professional domain. It doesn't necessarily involve direct interaction or collaboration among its members.
- **Boundaries:** Communities of practice have flexible boundaries - members are those who participate in and contribute to the practice. Members define themselves by 'doing' and developing their practice. Fields, however, have more rigid boundaries defined by academic or professional standards, credentials, or professional affiliations. They are typically defined by bodies of knowledge and established methodologies.
- **Learning and Knowledge Creation:** Communities of practice emphasize collective learning and the development of shared resources. This learning is often tacit and arises from the interactions and experiences of the members. Fields, on the other hand, tend to focus on the accumulation and advancement of knowledge through more formal channels such as research, publications, and academic discourse.
- **Identity Formation:** Communities of practice can play a significant role in shaping the identities of their members. They provide a context for developing expertise and professional identity through peer exchange and interactions. While fields also contribute to professional identity, they do so in a more abstract way, often through the adoption of shared paradigms, methodologies, and bodies of knowledge rather than through direct personal interactions.

In essence, while a field provides the broader context and body of knowledge, a community of practice represents a living, dynamic group of practitioners actively engaged in learning and advancing their shared domain within that field.

Research can serve as a foundation for generating new knowledge within a community of practice. The process of collective inquiry helps refine the domain of practice and builds a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, and tools.⁵² By studying effective strategies and outcomes, practitioners can improve their approaches, adopt new strategies, and engage in critical reflection on their practice. As has been described above, LELA cohort members highly value peer-exchange and the sense of community that it creates, as well as the knowledge of different legal empowerment strategies implemented in different regions. At the global convening in 2024, a number of organizations shared their research and advocacy pathways with organizations who are earlier in the project cycle, and facilitated the construction of their theories of change and research strategies to guide their work.

Namati plays an important role here as a 'clearinghouse' or 'repository' of cohort members' research reports, stories, and experiences. Additionally, the learning arcs of the Initiative are useful frameworks for collective inquiry among cohort members, and are the subject of both regional and global convening sessions, as well as virtual gatherings.⁵³

An important role of research within a community of practice is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Research in communities of practice often involves a combination of academic and practitioner knowledge.⁵⁴ This integration helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that research is relevant and applicable to contextual realities. It can also promote co-production of knowledge between researchers and community members, as long as the relationship is democratic and non-exploitative.

Research conducted within communities of practice can contribute to the broader field of knowledge in which they are embedded. Knowledge sharing through various channels, including academic journals, conferences, and community forums, extends the learning of the community of practice beyond its immediate members. The integration of cohort member organizations into regional think tanks is a case in point.

⁵¹<https://thesystemsthinker.com/communities-of-practice-learning-as-a-social-system/>
<https://www.communityofpractice.ca/background/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>

⁵²<https://researchimpact.ca/resources/community-of-practice-everything-you-need-to-know/>

⁵³The four learning arcs are: 1. Building Community Power and Partnering with Social Movements; 2. Repression and Closing Civic Space; 3. Community Participation in Decision-making and 4. Engaging the State.

⁵⁴An excellent example is the Journal of Legal Empowerment started under project 109713 with Kituo Cha Sheria which contains articles by both practitioners and academics. The journal is in its very early days, and it remains to be seen how effective it will be in bridging the two spheres of expertise.

Given the importance of research to communities of practice, IDRC has an opportunity to continue to contribute to the growth and sustainability of the legal empowerment community of practice. IDRC supported research can drive knowledge creation, inform practice, build capacity, bridge theory and practice, and extend the impact of the community's work. This evaluation describes a number of examples of where the LELA cohort with DIG support have produced important pieces—and processes—of research that have positively empowered communities, that are positioned to influence global discourses on access to justice, and that have contributed to organizational development of grassroots legal empowerment organizations. Given the rising tide of

authoritarian governments around the world, shrinking civic space, and outright repression of human rights defenders including legal empowerment actors, the positive outcomes of the LELA initiative in terms of fostering solidarity and community among the cohort and larger Grassroots Justice Network are significant. Increasing repression of vulnerable and marginalized communities will only increase the need for a vibrant community of grassroots legal empowerment activists who can draw support from the community and contribute lived experiences to the collective inquiry process on legal empowerment theory and practice moving forward.



F. Conclusions

The Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub Initiative has had clear benefits for cohort members including, but not limited to:

Peer-to-peer learning: The initiative facilitated peer exchanges at regional and global convenings, and through virtual exchanges, that led to positive outcomes of building a sense of community and solidarity among the cohort, new knowledge of legal empowerment approaches, and diffusion of strategies especially on how to adapt to situations of democratic backsliding.

Networking and collaboration: The initiative brought together practitioners, researchers, and officials from different regions, cultivating a growing global community of practice committed to advancing legal empowerment practice and positive social change for vulnerable and marginalized communities.

Access to resources and support: Cohort members received skills support from Namati through online courses, tailored training on participatory action research and storytelling, and access to learning resources. This contributed to improved research and knowledge sharing capacities of cohort members.

Opportunity for comparative learning: The hub modality enabled cohort members to gain insights from comparative case studies and experiences across countries within their region, and cross-regionally. The stewardship role of Namati as the global hub is integral to the synthesization of evidence generated by the cohort to fill knowledge gaps.

Given the complexity of the initiative and the cohort's contextual realities, there were (unsurprisingly) some challenges encountered during the period under review.

These challenges include, but are not limited to:

Democratic backsliding: Cohort members and their communities in several instances incurred risks while engaging in their legal empowerment activism. The increasing reality of anti-democratic narratives and practices by governments in each region of the cohort necessitated the adaptation of strategies to maintain legal empowerment work (and safety) in the face of closing civic spaces and increasing authoritarianism.

Implementation of PAR: For some cohort members, substantive community engagement was a new way of working, and more time was needed to build relationships with their constituents. Preliminary training on PAR was insufficient to equip cohort researchers. Additionally, not all communities are homogeneous, and some cohort organizations encountered community conflicts that impacted data collection, as well as transient or distrustful populations.

Documentation Gaps: Some cohort members faced challenges in ensuring that their community research partners documented their research processes, leading to some gaps in technical reporting. Additional support to build documentation practices will help to capture important tacit knowledge of researchers that can provide a more nuanced and holistic view of the issues being researched and the perspectives of disenfranchised communities.

Despite these challenges, the outcomes described above demonstrate that the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub has successfully fostered a collaborative, global community of practice. This network has enhanced the capacity of cohort members to learn from each other, work together on shared challenges, and collectively advance the field of legal empowerment.

G. Recommendations

Based on the evaluation findings of the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub Initiative (LELA), and the considerations described above in section E., recommendations for IDRC include:

Enhance Knowledge Translation and Implementation Support:

While **83%** of participants gained knowledge of new legal empowerment strategies, only **61%** implemented them. IDRC should consider developing targeted mechanisms to bridge this gap, such as:

- Providing targeted knowledge translation and implementation support and resources that ensure that there is a two-way flow of information and knowledge between grantees and their community members;
- Facilitating mentorship programs between experienced and newer practitioners;
- Creating follow-up workshops focused on strategy implementation challenges.

Strengthen Community-Centered Approaches:

Given the positive impact of community engagement, IDRC should consider ways to support legal empowerment grantees to continue centering their communities, such as:

- Expanding capacity-strengthening on community action research principles and methodologies;
- Allocating sufficient resources (time, personnel, funding) for grantees to engage in community outreach activities;
- Facilitate sharing of best practices in community-centered legal empowerment, including facilitating discussions of the challenges of engaging communities and mitigating the associated risks of backlash against (and from) communities, and exploitative research practices.

Strengthen Peer Learning Networks:

IDRC should continue to facilitate knowledge sharing among cohort members, as **84%** reported that peer interactions strengthened their legal empowerment practices. These networks can provide ongoing support and learning opportunities beyond the project timeline. This might most usefully be done at the regional level via the hub modality, where regional anchors can:

- **Facilitate Context-Specific Learning:** Regional hubs can foster exchanges tailored to local challenges, allowing practitioners to share strategies for resilience in similar political environments;
- **Promote Adaptive Engagement Strategies:** Regional hubs can develop and disseminate context-appropriate tactics for engaging with different levels of government, helping projects navigate restrictive environments more effectively;
- **Enhance Data-Driven Advocacy:** Hubs can provide specialized training on data collection and analysis relevant to regional policy landscapes, strengthening evidence-based arguments for maintaining existing rights;
- **Provide Protective Networks:** By connecting organizations within regions, hubs can create protective networks for practitioners facing democratic backsliding, enabling knowledge sharing and mutual support in similar challenging contexts.

Weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks of supporting a community of practice:




IDRC (DIG) should purposefully discuss the implications of meaningfully supporting a community of practice, which will require (re)consideration of what constitutes policy impact, systems change, and research quality within a community of practice modality.

Annex 1–List of Action Research Projects

Project Number	Project Title	Partner / Grantees	Countries
109709	Preventive legal empowerment: Early alert and action to strengthen rights in the context of land-based investments	Center for Environment and Development (CED), Land & Equity Movement Uganda (LEMU), IIED, UK	Uganda, Cameroon
109710	Grassroots Legal Empowerment & Social Movements Partnership to Close the Justice Gap for the Urban Poor in West Africa	Justice & Empowerment Initiatives (JEI)* [*regional hub for W Africa]	West Africa, Benin, Senegal
109207	Promoting legal empowerment of the urban poor in West Africa through an inter-city community paralegal network	JEI, West African Slum / Informal Settlement Federation, Physically Challenged Empowerment Initiative, Fédération d’Habitants De Bidonvilles / Zones de Taudis (Bénin) / Incorporated Trustees of Community Legal Support Initiative	West Africa, Benin, Senegal
110086	Opening pathways to justice for marginalized + individuals in West Africa	Synergia - Initiatives for Human Rights	West Africa
109953	Legal empowerment of rural women to better manage climate change impacts in Senegal	Natural Justice	Senegal
109711	Uprooting Injustices and Establishing Formal Linkages for Inclusive, Integrated African Cities	Muongano Wa Wanavijiji Akiba Mashinani Trust, People’s Process on Housing and Poverty in Zambia	Kenya, Zambia
109712	Closing the Justice Gap: Critiquing Legal Empowerment Approaches to Address Police Abuse in Malawi	Southern Africa Litigation Centre, Centre for Human Rights Education, Advice and Assistance	Malawi
109713	Grounded Evidence-Based Research and Learning: Enhancing the Impact of Legal Empowerment Programmes in Africa	Kituo Cha Sheria* [*regional hub for E Africa]	Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia

Project Number	Project Title	Partner / Grantees	Countries
109715	Advancing structural legal aid to respond to new legal empowerment challenges in Indonesia	Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia	Indonesia
109716	Strengthening grassroots communities' participation and collective action to bridge the gap on access to justice	Alternative Law Groups [*regional hub for SE Asia	Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand
109714	Advancing refugee protection and rights in Southeast Asia through legal empowerment	Asylum Access	Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand
110034	Legal empowerment for environmental justice in Latin America [*regional hub for Latam]	Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales (ProDESC), Fiscalía del Medio Ambiente (FIMA), Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ)	Mexico, Chile, Argentina
109237	Legal empowerment to promote citizen participation and social justice in Rio's favelas	Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Economicas - IBASE	Brazil
109438	The Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub	Namati, Inc. [Global hub]	Global

Annex 2–DIG Outcome Pathway

Monitor	Monitor & / or Evaluate	Assess trends		
<p>Development Challenge</p> <p>Countries at a critical democratic juncture - emerging from conflict, transitioning from authoritarian rule, experiencing democratic decline - experience particular governance challenges</p> <p>Worsening governance is accompanied by deepening inequalities, increasing insecurity, lack of public accountability.</p> <p>Use and misuse of digital technology, a lack of regulatory mechanisms, puts democracy at risk, amplifies marginalization and inequality, and contributes to social harms.</p> <p>Protracted forced migration puts strain on social service delivery and social cohesion, compounding existing limitations in governance capacities, especially in urban settings.</p> <p>Unresolved grievances linked to exclusion of marginalized groups widen inequalities, undermine trust in and legitimacy of governance institutions, and perpetuate unrest and underdevelopment.</p> <p>Donor-driven agendas and analyses are not delivering the localized evidence needed; weak or eroded local knowledge systems are undermining use of locally-generated knowledge to respond to governance challenges.</p>	<p>Investments & Activities</p> <p>We will explore potential new donor partnerships to strengthen inclusive democracy and address forced migration, promote digital rights and data governance, and close the justice gap.</p> <p>We will form strategic partnerships, mobilizing Canada-South & South-South networks including in D4D, OGP and democratic governance.</p> <p>We will convene multi-disciplinary teams of research actors and facilitate multi-sectoral thinking to strengthen capacities of governments, universities, and civil society to generate and use locally-grounded policy research and data to address democratic challenges.</p> <p>We will promote research agendas driven by southern researcher communities – particularly in contexts of democratic transition, fragility, and forced migration – to ensure research priorities to counter democratic decline are locally-grounded.</p> <p>We will support research on policies and practical solutions to promote inclusive democratic governance, harness the potential of digital technology and open data, and address structural barriers faced by marginalized communities, including women and girls.</p>	<p>Immediate Outcomes</p> <p>1) Knowledge production: Communities of Southern researchers produce high-quality, trans-disciplinary and innovative research on DIG priorities.</p> <p>2) Strengthening localized voices: Researchers, civil society members and affected communities based in the Global South produce and access knowledge, tools, evidence and strategies, to confront governance challenges.</p> <p>3) Collaborations and networks: South-South and South-North collaborations and networks are formed or strengthened for generating and promoting trans-disciplinary lesson-sharing and locally-informed evidence and solutions.</p> <p>4) Knowledge translation: Researchers and civil society members based in the Global South share and strategically position new strategies, innovations, solutions, best practices and lessons to enable evidence-based actions, solutions and shape policy and academic debates.</p> <p>5) Resources and partnerships: DIG, in partnership with like-minded funders, collectively raise financial support and resources to amplify impact of programming.</p> <p>6) Gender, equity, diversity, and inclusion: Researchers develop methodologies and evidence to contribute to improved gender equality, from an intersectional lens, in contexts of weakened democracy.</p>	<p>Intermediate Outcomes</p> <p>1) Resilient research ecosystems: Research ecosystems are resilient and sustainable to independently support rights and evidence-based decision making in contexts of protracted displacement and weakened democracy.</p> <p>2) Governance institutions leverage research: National and subnational governance institutions leverage DIG research and partners to design and implement new policies or practices to improve accountability, transparency, and respect for rights.</p> <p>3) Strengthened empowerment and agency: Affected communities and advocates are protected, empowered, and equipped to claim and defend rights and confront structural power imbalances.</p> <p>4) Global South research shapes governance debates: Voices from the Global South and their locally driven knowledge and priorities are sought after to shape governance debates, agendas, and commitments.</p> <p>5) Scaled solutions and innovations: Locally generated solutions and innovations are scaled and adapted to different contexts to optimize impact.</p> <p>6) Gender transformative change: DIG's work contributes to transformative change around gender, including in terms of intersectional gender power relations.</p>	<p>Development Outcome</p> <p>Vulnerable people and communities benefit from more inclusive, accountable, and transparent governance. They are better able to shape the policies and practices that affect their lives by exercising their democratic rights and freedoms, including in contexts of democratic transition and displacement.</p>   
Context	Control	Influence (medium-term, ~5 years)	Interest (long-term, 10+ years)	
<p>Democratic and Inclusive Governance: Outcome Pathway</p>				

Examples of Outcomes

DIG Outcomes

LELA Initiative's Achievement

Immediate Outcomes

1. Knowledge Production

*Namati and the action research project teams have produced numerous research outputs in various formats—briefs, reports, blogs, podcasts, films, and art installations based on their action research with communities.

Immediate Outcomes

2. Strengthening localized voices

*Namati's synthesization reports are based on grassroots practitioner experiences;

*Meg Satterthwaite's involvement in the LELA initiative elevates grassroots perspectives in her role as UN Special Rapporteur on Independence of Lawyers and Judges;

*Integration of PAR principles into research projects has stimulated research teams to center community voices in their legal empowerment work. See examples of CHREAA and FIMA above;

*In the case of the project led by CED (Center for Environment and Development) in Cameroon and LEMU (Land & Equity Movement Uganda) researchers were successful in raising grievances of communities before public officials, resulting in illegally confiscated land being returned to communities in Uganda, and securing the right of communities to be consulted by private companies investing in land in Cameroon;

*In Malawi, CHREAA and SALC (Southern Africa Litigation Center) supported community members in challenging the police practice of mass arbitrary arrests (sweeping) targeting street-connected children and sex workers; as a result, the High Court of Malawi declared this practice unlawful and in violation of constitutional rights and international human rights standards;

*Collaborations between cohort members and think tanks such as the African Center of Excellence on Access to Justice (ACE-AJ) and the Escuela Latinoamericana (ELAC) provide cohort members with opportunities to integrate the voices and perspectives of their communities in larger fora.

Immediate Outcomes

3. Collaborations and Networks

*By creating various opportunities for collaboration and interaction, the Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda and Knowledge Hub modality has effectively facilitated a rich and ongoing peer exchange among cohort members, contributing to the development of a global community of practice in legal empowerment.

4. Knowledge Translation

*Over two thirds of survey respondents reported that being part of the LELA cohort had helped them to share their research findings more meaningfully with both their constituents and with policymakers. Several cohort members described how learning from both Namati and peers about different methods to share findings—through maps, graphics, storytelling, social media, interactive facilitation, for example—had particularly helped them to share knowledge with communities;

*West Africa regional hub organization JEI (Justice and Empowerment Initiative) has been particularly innovative in knowledge sharing tactics, including interactive art installations featuring audio recordings of informal settlement dwellers, and movies highlighting the plight of informal settlements in West Africa that counter the dominant narrative of slum dwellers as criminals;

*Namati's synthesization efforts effectively draw out comparative learning on legal empowerment opportunities and challenges that contribute to the growing discourse on legal empowerment and its contribution to inclusive governance. See their Impact Pathways report and their Repression and Deepening Democracy report. Additional synthesization products are expected from Namati after this evaluation has been concluded.

Immediate Outcomes

5. Resources and partnerships

6. Gender, equity, diversity, and inclusion

*Many cohort members have centered their research on issues affecting marginalized populations, such as women, indigenous peoples, and urban poor communities. This aligns with the Learning Agenda's emphasis on addressing the justice needs of vulnerable groups and ensuring that legal empowerment strategies are inclusive and equitable;

*An example: In West Africa, Synergia employed strategic litigation on behalf of local communities to successfully challenge discriminatory articles in a country's controversial law that prohibited same sex marriage.

Intermediate Outcomes

1. Resilient research ecosystems

*Two important outcomes here: 1) productive collaborations with universities and faculty members and 2) integration of cohort research team members into regional think tanks;

*For several cohort members, involvement of university faculty and departments not only strengthens their research capacities, but also serves to strengthen their advocacy with governments:

“[We] work a lot with universities and they help us frame an issue in a way to convince the government that there is a need...University support shows legitimacy and avoids the argument that we are ‘tampering with the numbers’ on the side of the poor.”

*Despite the challenges of bringing together academic and practitioner writers and reviewers, the publication of the inaugural volume of the Legal Empowerment Journal is a laudable step towards bridging theory and practice to advance learning in the legal empowerment field;³²

*In strategic litigation, strong evidence gathered through collaborations between lawyers, scientists (academics) and communities was identified by global convening participants as critical to success;³³

*Collaborations between cohort members and think tanks such as the African Center of Excellence on Access to Justice (ACE-AJ) and the Escuela Latinoamericana (ELAC) provide cohort members with opportunities to integrate the voices and perspectives of their communities in larger fora. Cohort members have participated in panels, workshops, and policy briefings with aligned organizations for broader dissemination of research findings and advocacy with public officials.

³²The journal is spearheaded by regional hub organization Kituo Cha Sheria under project 109713.

³³Session on “Engaging the State”, Day 2 of global convening.

Intermediate Outcomes

2. Governance institutions leverage research

*The project with Akiba Mashanini Trust (AMT - project 109711) is a good example of a municipal government leveraging IDRC supported research to address the unjust “poverty penalty” paid by informal settlement dwellers for services. The informal settlement was subsequently declared a Special Planning Area by city planning officials:

“The issue of the poverty penalty when it was brought to us [in the city government]—of course we knew that people in the settlements pay; they do not have formal supply. But when the issue of the poverty penalty was brought out, it actually made us think of how selfish it actually was for people in the formal settlement areas to pay much less than what the people in the informal settlements were paying because it was basically penalizing people for being poor. I think this also prompted us to really see how we can start thinking about equity; because this was actually a big issue of inequality, in terms of infrastructure and supply of other services.”³⁴

*Another example is project 109709 with CED and LEMU. In the case of the project led by CED (Center for Environment and Development) in Cameroon and LEMU (Land & Equity Movement Uganda) researchers were successful in raising grievances of communities before public officials, resulting in illegally confiscated land being returned to communities in Uganda, and securing the right of communities to be consulted by private companies investing in land in Cameroon. In the case of Cameroon, this victory led to CED working closely with the UN to advance its business and human rights agenda in the country.

³⁴Marion Rono Deputy Director of Housing and Urban Renewal, Nairobi Metropolitan Services, quoted in: *Measuring the Poverty Penalty*, Global Center On Adaptation, 2022, p.5. Marion Rono Deputy Director of Housing and Urban Renewal, Nairobi Metropolitan Services, quoted in: *Measuring the Poverty Penalty*, Global Center On Adaptation, 2022, p.5.

Intermediate Outcomes

3. Strengthened empowerment and agency

*The cohort was successful in several instances of building community power and resilience. In Indonesia, action research by the Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation in one area led to the formation of a new farmer's organization in 2024 that is less politicized, more democratic, and more representative of farmers in the region;³⁵

*In the Philippines, ALG member ELAC (Environmental Legal Assistance Center) was instrumental in galvanizing the One Palawan Movement that resulted in a plebiscite on a proposal to divide the island province into smaller territories. Turnout for the plebiscite was significant, and 58.5% of voters rejected the proposal, keeping the province united.

*In Malawi, CHREAA and SALC report that implementation of their action research project has led to the formation of organizations representing the interests of different communities in a more unified way. For example:

“The informal traders, who previously operated independently, have now formed an organization, Informal Traders Stream, comprising both men and women. This organizational development has been transformative, enabling them to address common challenges more effectively and advocate for their collective interests. One notable impact of this organizational formation is the enhanced capacity to respond to arrests within their community. By working collaboratively and leveraging the support of our paralegals, they can navigate legal processes more efficiently and advocate for the release of detained members.”³⁶

*Cohort member ProDesc (110034) worked with 5 communities in the Yucatan Peninsula to effectively protect their land rights from encroachment from the Mexican government and foreign investors.³⁷

³⁵109715 5th Interim Report, March 2024, p. 5.

³⁶109713 3rd Technical Report, April 2024, p. 10.

³⁷[The Protection of the Chichankanab Lagoon in the Yucatan Peninsula](#). Grassroots Justice Network, December 2024.

Intermediate Outcomes

3. Strengthened empowerment and agency (cont.)

*Cohort member FIMA (110034) worked in concert with other environmental rights organizations to build the confidence and capacity of indigenous organizations and CSOs to understand the law and its language, enabling them to be more effective and equal interlocutors with representatives of the government and the salmon-farming industry. The result has been an increasing formal acceptance of the participation of indigenous groups in the assessment of projects associated with the expanding salmon-farming industry and their potential impact on recognized ancestral territory and customs.³⁸

4. Global South research shapes governance debates

*Cohort members from Namati and action research projects participated in events in the 2024 OECD Global Roundtable on Access to Justice in Ottawa (October 7-10, 2024)

5. Scaled solutions and innovation

Review of project documentation, interviews, and observation show the horizontal diffusion of legal empowerment strategies such as:

***Cultivating allies within different levels of government or legal enforcement:**

- According to one cohort team member working on child trafficking, learning how CHREAA worked with the police to combat abuse against sex workers and LGBTQI+ individuals inspired them to find ways to engage officials in their legal empowerment activism.³⁹

³⁸<https://grassrootsjusticenetwork.org/resources/empoderamiento-juridico-y-defensa-del-territorio-magallanes-ong-fima-sp/>

³⁹Kil, September 25, 2024.

Intermediate Outcomes

5. Scaled solutions and innovation
(cont.)

- Kituo's engagement with the Kenyan judiciary to improve access to justice and the subsequent diffusion of strategies to Rwanda is another impactful example that impressed other teams.⁴⁰
- The strategy of cultivating allies is even more necessary for cohort members who are experiencing new levels of shrinking civic space. When Namati mapped the strategies of cohort members in engaging the state, they found that "Across the cohort, we noted a pattern that as political contexts become more repressive and the risks of confrontational approaches increases, organizations shift toward less adversarial approaches."⁴¹

***Challenging/changing authoritarian narratives** that cast legal empowerment practitioners and communities as dangerous agents or anti-development:

- Several cohort members who participated in the repression and resilience roundtables in 2023 organized by Namati discussed the need to more effectively tell their story of how legal empowerment activism supports communities and holds institutions accountable;
- Another narrative strategy that resonated with cohort members at the 2024 global convening was framing their demands as a win-win situation for communities and governments, as a Southeast Asian organization did by aligning interests of fishing communities with the government's desire to conserve mangrove swamps.
- When asked at the end of the 2024 global convening what would be one method or tactic that participants would take back with them to try at home, several people mentioned "storytelling" as a way to take back the narrative from detractors;

⁴⁰2024 Global Convening, session on Harvesting Impact (Day 1).

⁴¹*How Legal Empowerment Efforts are Fighting Repression and Deepening Democracy*. Grassroots Justice Network Report, 2024, p. 14

Intermediate Outcomes

5. Scaled solutions and innovation
(cont.)

*Forming strategic alliances with social movement actors to leverage expertise and skills, and to mitigate risk of targeting:

- At the 2024 global convening, ACIJ (110034) described how they adapted to community demobilization in the wake of Javier Milei's election in Argentina⁴² by building alliances with grassroots organizations in their communities that they hadn't worked with before, and making connections between community leaders to leverage the power of numbers;
- Another cohort member concurred: "We faced a similar situation once, where we had to do something we did not have the strength to do, so we reached out to allies who were in a better position to do this, and we accompanied them."
- One of the strategies identified by the 2023 Roundtable participants on repression and deepening democracy was cultivating partnerships with social movements to scale their legal empowerment efforts.

6. Gender transformative change

Although some projects within the cohort are making important advances toward this objective, transformative change in this sphere remains to be realized.

⁴²Milei took a strong position against social justice movements and initiatives after he came to power, and his economic policies have exacerbated high inflation and high levels of poverty in the country.