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Grassroots Justice Network

Strengthening Environmental Justice through Legal Empowerment:

Lessons on Participation, Organizing, and the Role of Women

About the Grassroots Justice Network

The Grassroots Justice Network is a global community of more than 18,000 members across 190 countries, bringing together people working to advance justice so they can connect, learn, and act together. We use the legal empowerment approach to help communities know, use, and (trans)form the law, and to achieve lasting change in the face of injustice. In Latin America, the Latin American Legal Empowerment Community serves as the regional chapter of the Grassroots Justice Network.

The Grassroots Justice Network is convened by Namati, a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing social and environmental justice by building a movement of people who know, use, and (trans)form the law.

The Legal Empowerment Learning Agenda brings together members of the Network to assess their strategies, deepen their impact, and collectively address the knowledge gaps facing our global justice movement.

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Introduction

Legal empowerment is grounded in a simple but transformative premise: communities facing injustice should have the ability to know, use, and shape the law. Rather than treating law as something external and led exclusively by experts, legal empowerment integrates legal strategy into community organization, enabling communities to articulate their own visions and priorities. This approach takes seriously the idea that community participation in decision-making should not be limited to ad hoc consultation or procedural compliance, but should instead serve as a means of reconfiguring power relations between marginalized communities and the institutions that govern their territories.

In Latin America, where environmental conflicts often unfold in contexts of inequality, extractive development models, and institutional fragmentation, legal empowerment offers a pathway to environmental justice that goes beyond litigation or technical advocacy.

It draws on communities' lived knowledge, strengthens local governance, and opens participatory channels through which communities can meaningfully influence public decisions.

Since October 2022, three organizations have been working on participatory action research projects in their respective countries: Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ) in Argentina, Fiscalía del Medio Ambiente (NGO FIMA) in Chile, and Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales, A.C. (ProDESC) in Mexico.

In the cover: Mayan woman part of an ejido in Yucatán.

These organizations are part of the Grassroots Justice Network, a global network of 18,900 members representing more than 4,400 grassroots justice organizations in 190 countries, who learn from one another and take collective action to achieve transformative outcomes for communities.

Each of these organizations has worked alongside historically marginalized communities—urban, Indigenous, or agrarian—that face severe environmental impacts and exclusion from decision-making processes.

Their initiatives have sought to document strategies to strengthen participation of communities in both formal and community decision-making mechanisms, and highlight the central role of women's participation in land and territorial defence.

This document presents ten lessons drawn from these experiences.

Before exploring these lessons, we provide a brief context on the work of each organization. We also distinguish between two closely related but distinct concepts that respond to different objectives and actors: public participation in institutional decision-making and community organizing processes.

Legal empowerment efforts aimed at strengthening community participation in decision-making

ASOCIACIÓN CIVIL POR LA IGUALDAD Y LA JUSTICIA (ACIJ)

ACIJ collaborates with communities in the Matanza–Riachuelo Basin, a heavily polluted urban area that is home to millions of low-income residents, many of whom reside in informal settlements. In 2008, a Supreme Court ruling (the Mendoza Case) established that residents have the right to a healthy environment and ordered the cleanup and restoration of the basin. ACIJ accompanies residents of two informal settlements—Villa Inflamable and Villa 21-24—to ensure that the commitments set out in the ruling are fulfilled.

Photo: Participants from ACIJ, ProDESC, FIMA, and Namati gathered in Argentina, 2023.

Although the judgment created formal participatory bodies, these spaces often lack clarity, legitimacy, or real decision-making power and are dominated by inaccessible technical language. In response, ACIJ works to strengthen both these formal spaces and the autonomous community organizations that have emerged in the neighbourhoods. Through training, legal empowerment, research, and political advocacy, ACIJ supports residents in monitoring state commitments, understanding complex procedures, and asserting priorities grounded in everyday needs. Its work also addresses deep-seated mistrust of institutions and the gap between formal rights and their actual implementation.

FISCALÍA DEL MEDIO AMBIENTE (NGO FIMA)

FIMA works in the Magallanes region—Chile's southernmost and largest region—with Kawésqar communities confronting the expansion of the salmon farming industry in their territories. It also participates in the Magallanes Citizens' Panel on Hydrogen, which seeks to challenge the imposition of green hydrogen projects with limited transparency or public debate. FIMA utilizes Chile's Environmental Impact Assessment System as a key legal and participatory tool, particularly the citizen observation mechanism, which enables communities to formally contest projects that impact their land and waters. Its work combines legal strategies, community training, and coordination among diverse local actors. These processes create opportunities for collective learning, strengthen territorial leadership, and open up new democratic spaces in a context where participation is often highly procedural and technocratic.

PROYECTO DE DERECHOS ECONÓMICOS, SOCIALES Y CULTURALES, A.C. (PRODESC)

ProDESC accompanies Mayan communities in the Yucatán Peninsula, a territory historically contested by economic and political interests. Its work focuses on defending land and territory in the face of tourism and industrial megaprojects that lead to the dispossession of ejidos and communities. Ejidos are collective land tenure entities recognized under Mexican agrarian law, and their assemblies—particularly the Ejido Assembly and the Special Formalities Assembly—are the central forums for deciding on the use of land and resources. ProDESC's strategy centres on strengthening these governance structures through legal accompaniment, political education, and organizing processes that reinforce internal decision-making and cohesion. Although these assemblies have a legal basis, their power depends on community cohesion and the ability to uphold decisions in the face of powerful private and state actors. By strengthening capacities, supporting internal leadership, and promoting rights-based negotiations, ProDESC helps communities defend their territory through legally recognized processes guided by collective values and priorities.

Public participation and community organizing

Public participation refers to the formal mechanisms created by the state through which communities can influence institutional decisions, including public consultations, hearings, citizen observations, and technical roundtables. These processes seek to democratize environmental governance by recognising people as rights holders. However, despite their legal promise, public participation mechanisms often fall short. Highly technical procedures, limited access to information, and designs that are disconnected from community realities frequently render participation symbolic rather than transformative. In many cases, these mechanisms serve to legitimize decisions that have already been made, generating mistrust and reinforcing power imbalances.

Photo: Participants from ACIJ, ProDESC, FIMA, and Namati gathered in Chile, 2024.

Community organizing, by contrast, is rooted in local practices and territorial relationships. It encompasses how communities deliberate internally, identify shared concerns, make collective decisions, and defend their ways of life. Neighbourhood councils, assemblies, and autonomous governance structures help sustain cohesion, resolve tensions, and build a shared vision of the territory. These spaces also shape how—and under what conditions—communities decide to engage with the state.

Community organizing also faces limitations, including internal conflicts, concentrated leadership, external co-optation, and exclusion based on gender, age, or disability. Organizational attrition and the lack of state recognition can further weaken these processes.

Both forms of participation are essential to legal empowerment. Without strong community organizing, public participation is hollow; without public participation, community organizing lacks channels through which to influence state policy.

Legal empowerment operates by strengthening community organizing while simultaneously challenging the exclusionary design of formal mechanisms, allowing both spaces to reinforce one another in the pursuit of environmental justice.

At the intersection of community and institutional spaces, specific gendered tensions also emerge. Structural inequalities shape women's ability to participate meaningfully both within institutions and within their own communities. Effective participation requires transforming the conditions that constrain women's leadership, rather than simply increasing their presence.

Lessons on Participation, Organizing, and Gender

1. Public participation is most effective when it is supported by strong community organizing.

2. Legal frameworks create opportunities, but communities need tools and training in order to use them.

3. Participatory processes tend to be technocratic and exclusionary; therefore, building legal knowledge is essential.

4. Strategies must be adaptable and grounded in community priorities, as political contexts can shift rapidly and dismantle formal participation mechanisms.

5. Community organizing requires flexible, long-term strategies tailored to each community.

6 Strategies must account for burnout and internal conflicts within communities.

7 Inter-community coordination and alliances amplify impact and sustain advocacy despite political change.

8 Women face structural barriers that limit their ability to participate meaningfully in community organizing and public decision-making.

9 Women's participation requires transforming the conditions of participation, not simply "adding" women to existing spaces.

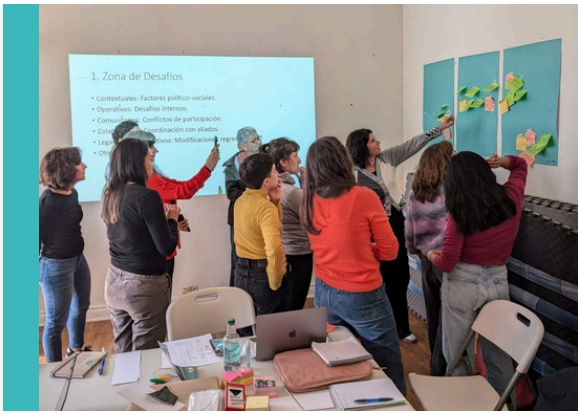
10 The goal of legal empowerment is not to achieve specific public policy outcomes, but to build long-term community power and autonomy.

Photo: Guanaco, a camelid native to South America.

Lessons on Participation, Organizing, and Gender

1

Public participation is most effective when it is supported by strong community organizing.



A clear lesson from these experiences is that public participation is most effective when it is underpinned by strong community organizing. Participation mechanisms—such as public hearings, environmental impact assessments, technical roundtables, or judicial monitoring bodies—offer formal opportunities to influence decisions, but they rarely function as intended when people engage with them as isolated individuals. Although the state may open spaces for "public participation," real influence depends on communities entering these spaces with shared positions, internal deliberation, and the collective capacity to articulate their priorities.

In Patagonia, for example, environmental participation processes exist in the form of citizen observations within Chile's environmental assessment system. The participation of Kawésqar communities affected by the salmon farming industry was strengthened when it was accompanied by collective spaces for learning and debate.

Photo: Participants from ACIJ, ProDESC, FIMA, and Namati in Chile, 2024.

These workshops became places where the community interpreted complex technical documents, discussed potential impacts on their ancestral territories, and articulated arguments grounded in their territorial knowledge.

A similar dynamic characterizes the experience in Buenos Aires. The judicial ruling known as the *Mendoza Case* created formal spaces for participation for residents of the polluted neighbourhoods of the Matanza–Riachuelo Basin. In practice, however, it was only when communities built internal structures—assemblies, representatives, and trusted leadership—that they gained the capacity to intervene meaningfully in institutional processes. The work of understanding relocation proposals, interpreting environmental reports, and negotiating with officials was only possible because of sustained organizing rooted in the everyday life of the neighbourhood.

In recent years, the expansion of tourism and infrastructure megaprojects has accelerated processes of dispossession, reshaping land use and weakening community autonomy in the Yucatán Peninsula. In this context, Mayan communities around the Chichankanab Lagoon, accompanied by ProDESC, face constant pressure from public and private actors seeking to impose tourism and conservation projects, often framed as environmentally responsible initiatives. Although these projects do not reach the scale of federal megaprojects, they reproduce more subtle forms of dispossession by intervening in the territory without adequate consultation, without clear information about their impacts, and through narratives that obscure the harm to communities' agrarian and cultural rights.

Ejido assemblies in Mexico hold significant legal authority, but their effectiveness depends on internal cohesion and active participation.

When ejidos engaged in collective deliberation—clarifying land records, strengthening internal groups, and ensuring that the community understood its rights—their formal authority translated into influential political power capable of responding to these external pressures. Without such organizing, the assembly structure risked becoming inactive or being manipulated by interests external to the community.

2

Legal frameworks create opportunities, but communities need tools and training in order to use them.

Legal frameworks—environmental laws, court rulings, and agrarian regulations—can enable participation, but only when communities have the tools, training, and strategic support needed to turn these frameworks into genuine avenues for advocacy. Recognising public participation in law or creating formal mechanisms is not sufficient; it is essential to actively promote their use and to strengthen community organizing so that collective voices can meaningfully influence decision-making.

In Chile, for example, environmental impact assessments provide a structured process through which communities can comment on projects that affect their territories. However, these assessments are technical, bureaucratic, and often inaccessible. As different communities in Magallanes strengthened their capacities to analyse these assessments, understand procedural steps, and identify potential points of legal

Photo: Participants from ELAW, ProDESC, Gaia Amazonas and Modatima in México, 2025.

vulnerability, this framework began to offer new opportunities—albeit with varying scope depending on the context—to challenge extractive decisions. At the same time, some regional authorities began to adapt their practices by increasing public information sessions and requiring companies to present project summaries in accessible language, thereby reducing barriers to effective participation.

In Argentina, the *Mendoza Case* established a significant set of obligations requiring government agencies to advance the cleanup of the basin and strengthen participatory spaces for affected communities. However, legal and community participation opportunities are not limited to this ruling alone: both before and after the case, there have been community-led processes and advocacy strategies driven by organized residents who deliberate around the everyday needs of their neighbourhoods. In the context of the Mendoza Case, the ability to engage in advocacy depended on residents understanding the implications of the ruling, the functioning of basin institutions, and the technical details of proposed interventions. Community surveys, visual guides, and practical workshops transformed this distant judicial mandate into an accessible tool. Equipped with these instruments, residents were able to challenge authorities, request information, and propose alternatives. In turn, several institutions began to modify their practices by holding technical roundtables and consultation meetings directly in neighbourhoods rather than in central offices, making participation possible for people who had previously been unable to attend.

In Mexico, the Agrarian Law establishes that ejidos have collective decision-making authority over land use, including the power to authorize or reject projects. However, in order to exercise this authority, ejidos required support to meet requirements such as maintaining a quorum, drafting legally valid resolutions, and properly recording decisions. Without such accompaniment, their formal rights remained inaccessible; with it, they became powerful tools for territorial defence.

3

Participatory processes tend to be technocratic and exclusionary; therefore, building legal knowledge is essential.

Even when legal frameworks formally allow for participation, participatory processes often reproduce technocratic forms of exclusion. Procedures tend to privilege expert knowledge, legal language, and technical formats that marginalize the perspectives of the communities most directly affected. The complexity of legal language becomes a barrier: regulations, notices, and procedural steps are drafted in dense, technical terms that are nearly impossible to understand without specialized training, limiting who is able to participate. Moreover, institutions rarely produce accessible materials or adapt their communications, further reinforcing power asymmetries.

For this reason, the role of organizations that act as “translators” is critical. By interpreting legal norms, procedures, and concepts for communities, these intermediaries transform inaccessible processes into usable tools,

Photo: Participants from ACIJ and Namati in Argentina, 2025.

enabling communities not only to understand their rights but also to use them strategically to influence decision-making.

A major challenge lies in the restrictive design of Chile's environmental participation system. Although citizen observations are legally recognized, they are constrained by short timelines, incomplete project information, and highly technical language. The process lacks procedural flexibility and cultural relevance, making genuine dialogue between communities and the state difficult. Despite these limitations, FIMA has used citizen observations to expose impacts that companies attempt to conceal—such as the artificial fragmentation of salmon farming projects operated by the same company. In the Nova Austral case, observations submitted by Kawésqar communities demonstrated that several "separate projects" were in fact components of a single operational plan. In situations where authorities denied communities the right to submit observations, communities drew on their legal knowledge to challenge project approvals, resulting in the annulment of at least three salmon fattening centres for failing to initiate the legally required participation processes.

In Buenos Aires, technocratic exclusion was evident in water planning processes and relocation proposals. Meetings with government engineers and environmental agencies relied on language that prioritized institutional metrics over neighbourhood-level experience. Data generated by the communities themselves—through surveys, mapping exercises, and participatory assessments—enabled them to engage in these discussions on more equal footing.

4

Strategies must be adaptable and grounded in community priorities, as political contexts can shift rapidly and dismantle formal participation mechanisms.

Legal empowerment unfolds in dynamic contexts: political priorities change, institutional roles evolve, and community concerns shift over time. Strategies must therefore be flexible, adaptive, and responsive to new realities.

In Buenos Aires, community organising processes were initially shaped by disputes related to relocation and environmental remediation, though these processes followed different trajectories in each neighbourhood. While they generated important learning, they also left gaps as institutional oversight began to weaken. In this new context, other concerns—such as irregular water provision or failures in everyday infrastructure—became more pressing for residents. In response, ACIJ accompanied a targeted participatory assessment of water access, which enabled the community to document problems, strengthen its organization, and generate evidence to demand institutional responses. This work helped reactivate participation by linking advocacy efforts to the priorities that the community itself identified as most urgent.

In Mexico, shifts in the internal politics of ejidos required ProDESC to continually adapt its organizing strategies. As new leadership emerged in several communities, existing alliances shifted and support for territorial defence weakened.

Photo: Community leaders and members of ACIJ in Argentina, 2023.

The case of the Dziuché ejido illustrates this dynamic: a change in the ejido commissariat led new authorities to align with external actors—local governments and companies promoting “ecotourism” projects. This shift fractured organizational processes, weakened collective efforts to protect the lagoon, and blocked territorial defence actions. In this context, ProDESC has had to navigate not only external pressures but also shifting power relations within the ejido itself. Rather than attempting to preserve previous coordination structures at all costs, ProDESC focused on strengthening smaller but committed internal groups, while simultaneously maintaining long-term regional relationships.

The sustainability of organizing work does not depend solely on preserving past decisions, but on communities’ capacity to adapt their strategies as political, institutional, and territorial conditions change. When contexts shift —sometimes abruptly, dismantling formal participation mechanisms or altering internal dynamics—organizations require flexible tools that allow them to redefine priorities, reorganize, and sustain their legitimacy in the face of new scenarios.

5

Community organizing requires flexible, long-term strategies tailored to each community.

Community organizing is shaped by the specific histories, social structures, and internal dynamics of each territory. This means that support for participation cannot rely on one-size-fits-all models: what works in one context may be ineffective—or even counterproductive—in another. It is essential to avoid importing concepts or practices that do not align with local realities, which requires a deep and sustained understanding of the community, its needs, and its particular characteristics.

In Magallanes, FIMA worked simultaneously with Kawésqar communities—whose organizing processes are rooted in cultural identity and historical ties to the sea—and with a hybrid and diverse coalition brought together through the Citizens' Panel. Strategies necessarily differed in each case. With Kawésqar communities, the focus was on building trust and recognising ancestral knowledge. In the Citizens' Panel, by contrast, facilitation was required to bridge differences in expertise, sectoral identity, and technical language.

In Buenos Aires, participation strategies were adapted to the organizing conditions of each neighbourhood. In Villa 21-24, where a stronger community base existed, ACIJ supported the creation of the Delegates' Body (*Cuerpo de Delegados*), a representative space that enabled the channelling of demands, participation in decisions related to relocation, and engagement with the technical roundtables of the *Mendoza Case*.

Photo: Members of ACIJ in a workshop with community leaders in Argentina, 2024.

Although this space was not able to influence all structural decisions, it provided the community with a genuine margin of influence and legitimacy within a process that was largely imposed from above. In contrast, in Villa Inflamable—where organizing was weaker and distrust of the state was deep—ACIJ pursued a different strategy: strengthening a collective position against total relocation and making visible the demand to remain in the territory under improved conditions. Through participatory surveys, training, and work with local leaders, an alternative narrative grounded in in situ improvement was established. Over time, this form of participation contributed to the state abandoning the idea of displacing all families and accepting a territorially anchored solution.

6

Strategies must account for burnout and internal conflicts within communities.

The struggles for justice that communities face are long, exhausting, and marked by uncertain outcomes. Many communities, already engaged in meeting the basic demands of daily life, must also shoulder the emotional and logistical burden of participation: attending meetings, reviewing technical documents, negotiating with authorities, and mobilising neighbours. This sustained effort often leads to burnout, particularly among community leaders and marginalized groups, such as women.

Photo: Community members in Argentina participating in a photography workshop, 2025.

Prolonged pressure also makes internal conflict almost inevitable, as communities are forced to navigate stress, differing priorities, and scarce resources. A key lesson is that these dynamics must be anticipated from the outset: encouraging leadership renewal, designing processes that reduce the burdens of participation, allowing for natural cycles of greater or lesser involvement, and developing creative strategies to restore collective motivation.

In FIMA's work with Kawésqar communities, one of the main organizing challenges has been the accumulated burnout of certain leaders, particularly those who have taken on responsibilities for years in lengthy and highly bureaucratic processes. Responsibility tends to be concentrated in a small number of individuals, leading to overload, internal conflict, and tensions with other sectors of the community—especially where some people benefit from or support the salmon farming industry. In addition, the lack of clear results in terms of transforming structural conditions has generated mistrust and a sense of powerlessness, making it difficult to renew collective commitment.

In ProDESC's work, efforts to strengthen community organizing begin with recognising a fragmented landscape within ejidos, where actors with differing views on megaprojects coexist. For this reason, organizing does not work with the ejido as a homogeneous whole, but rather accompanies internal groups that have actively sustained territorial defence efforts.

In the Villa Inflamable neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, following a long struggle to halt forced relocation and affirm the right to remain, the community experienced a period of exhaustion, withdrawal, and demobilisation. In response, ACIJ sought to create new conditions for collective action through memory-based work. A photography workshop was organized in collaboration with the Haluro Collective, involving young people from the neighbourhood in conducting interviews, collecting images, and reconstructing local history.

The project also coordinated with community leaders and local organizations focused on recovering experiences from the neighbourhood during the military dictatorship. Although still under construction, the photographic archive already functions as a collective space for rebuilding community, strengthening a sense of belonging, and highlighting the ways in which the neighbourhood has historically defended its right to remain.

7

Inter-community coordination and alliances amplify impact and sustain advocacy despite political change.

While community-specific organizing is vital, coordination across communities can significantly increase political influence and provide resilience when a particular community experiences setbacks. Alliances broaden the base of support, create shared narratives, and enable the diffusion of innovations.

In Chile, the Citizens' Panel emerged as a powerful regional platform for debating the implications of green hydrogen development. By bringing together scientists, cultural actors, and civil society organizations, the panel expanded public understanding and provided counterweights to the state's development agenda.

Photo: Participants from ACIJ, ProDESC, FIMA, Namati and Panel Ciudadano H2 in Chile, 2024.

In Argentina, a similar dynamic emerged through the Espacio Intercuencas (Inter-Basin Space) promoted by ACIJ. This space brings together leaders from multiple neighbourhoods across the Matanza–Riachuelo Basin to share experiences, articulate common demands, and build a unified agenda in engagement with the state. It was formed following the formal closure of the Mendoza Case, at a time when institutional channels for participation were weakening. The Espacio Intercuencas helped build relationships between neighbourhoods with distinct organizing histories, sustained dialogue among leaders, and maintained collective pressure on institutions even in the absence of judicial oversight. It operates as a flexible coordination hub that recognizes territorial differences while reinforcing the value of joint action.

In this case, coordination also extended beyond the community itself. Alliances intentionally incorporated public institutions—such as the Ombudsman's Office, prosecutors' offices, and public defence offices—which strengthened the legitimacy of the space and expanded its strategic reach. Mapping power dynamics and key actors was essential to identifying these alliances: a systematic analysis of institutional roles, influence, and potential points of convergence enabled communities and ACIJ to build meaningful alliances in pursuit of an environmental justice agenda.

8

Women face structural barriers that limit their ability to participate meaningfully in community organizing and public decision-making.

Across all three contexts analysed, women face structural barriers that shape their participation in both internal organizing processes and institutional spaces. Caregiving responsibilities, insecurity, masculinized environments, exclusionary norms, and unequal access to land and resources all determine whether women are able to attend meetings, speak up, and sustain leadership roles over time.

In the Kawésqar communities accompanied by FIMA, territorial defence against the salmon farming industry and hydrogen projects is perceived as an urgent collective struggle. Women participate actively in these efforts, but continue to face obstacles in accessing formal spaces of representation. They risk being criticized when they assume leadership roles and are constrained by caregiving burdens, economic precarity, and the unsafe, masculinized environments created by extractive industries in Magallanes. These conditions hinder—and at times jeopardize—visible leadership.

In the neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires where ACIJ works, women carry much of the day-to-day organizing work, yet they are often sidelined in institutional spaces dominated by technical language and hierarchical dynamics.

Photo: Casa de la Mujer Indígena y Afromexicana in a workshop on ejido land tenure, Mexico, 2024.

Care responsibilities, insecurity, and precarious employment limit the time they can devote to advocacy, while the fatigue generated by unfulfilled state commitments further discourages their participation.

In the ejidos accompanied by ProDESC, structural barriers are deeply embedded in agrarian law and internal practices. Land ownership is predominantly male, and women without agrarian rights often lack voting rights or access to decision-making bodies. Internal registries and community norms frequently exclude women from representative positions, making their participation contingent on the political will of ejido authorities.

9

Women's participation requires transforming the conditions of participation, not simply "adding" women to existing spaces.

Strengthening women's participation entails transforming the conditions under which participation takes place, rather than merely increasing the number of women in spaces that already reproduce patriarchal dynamics. Building participation through a gender lens requires broadening the roles considered valuable, reducing the pressures and risks women face, and creating environments in which they can contribute through their knowledge, experiences, and collective practices.

Photo: Community leaders and members of ACIJ in Argentina, 2023.

Effective strategies recognize that formal leadership structures often replicate patriarchal norms, and that meaningful participation emerges when women have access to information, targeted support, and spaces that respect their lived experiences.

FIMA focuses on creating conditions that organically strengthen women's participation. This includes expanding channels for participation beyond formal positions and offering accessible, low-pressure spaces for collective learning. A key example is the support provided to the coastal zoning process in Magallanes. FIMA organised preparatory workshops in which Kawésqar women were able to analyse legal and technical documents, articulate cultural and ecological perspectives, and prepare input for the regional plan. Similarly, during the environmental assessment of the Cabo Negro port expansion, FIMA facilitated a women-centred citizen observations workshop, enabling participants to identify socio-environmental risks and formally express concerns in a space usually dominated by technical and male voices.

ACIJ has created training spaces grounded in a gender perspective and directly accompanies women as they enter institutional arenas. For example, neighbourhood workshops carried out with La Poderosa and Fundación Temas link women's lived experiences with tools for collective action. The University Training Programme at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) School of Law deepens these skills through legal and organisational training delivered by leaders from similar communities. ACIJ also provides targeted accompaniment—such as preparing women leaders from the 14 de Noviembre neighbourhood for meetings with courts and public bodies —to ensure they can advance claims with confidence.

ProDESC strengthens women's participation by activating existing legal mechanisms and building long-term organizing processes. A central strategy is the reactivation of the UAIMs (Women's Industrial Agricultural Units), which enable women without agrarian rights to collectively access land.

In La Presumida, ProDESC facilitated training, the drafting of internal regulations, and formal registration, enabling women to establish a recognized space for participating in territorial decision-making. ProDESC also weaves networks among women from different ejidos through the Casa de la Mujer Indígena y Afromexicana (House of Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Women, CAMIA), where women receive political training, share experiences, and build networks to sustain their leadership.

10

The goal of legal empowerment is not only to achieve specific public policy outcomes, but also to build long-term community power and autonomy.

Although legal empowerment generates concrete outcomes—such as halting harmful projects, influencing public policy, or improving services—its deepest and most enduring impact lies in strengthening community power and autonomy. This long-term transformation is grounded in building communities' capacity to understand how institutions function, produce their own knowledge, mobilize collectively, form strategic alliances, and lead internal decision-making processes. These shifts enable communities not only to respond to specific threats, but also to shape the conditions of their participation and the affirmation of their rights over time.

Photo: Participants of the Community Evidence Workshop, Mexico, 2025.

The legal empowerment approach seeks to transform communities' relationship with their rights and with the institutions responsible for guaranteeing them. This shift—towards greater clarity, confidence, and collective agency—extends beyond any individual case and lays the foundation for sustained civic participation and long-term social change.

In Patagonia, communities developed lasting skills to interpret environmental studies and participate in regional debates. In Buenos Aires, networks of neighbourhood leaders strengthened their capacities to monitor government actions, foster coordination across neighbourhoods, and defend their rights beyond the scope of the Mendoza Case. In Yucatán, ejido members who acquired organizing and legal skills were better equipped to make autonomous decisions regarding land and territory, even in the face of persistent institutional or political challenges.

The experiences of ACIJ, FIMA, and ProDESC demonstrate that it is possible to design strategies that not only respond to conflict or burnout, but also contribute to sustaining organizing processes with enduring political significance.

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