

Legal Empowerment:

A Pathway to Strengthening and
Amplifying Community Narratives



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.

About the authors

Carlos Asúnsolo is a Senior Manager at Namati and a human rights lawyer from Mexico with extensive experience in legal empowerment, environmental justice, and public policy. He has led regional research and training initiatives on climate justice.

Claudia Cote is a Senior Officer for Grassroots Justice Network at Namati. She has extensive experience in human rights defence and security, with a strong background in international cooperation and civil society work.

Poorvi Chitalkar is a Senior Manager at Namati, where she partners with practitioners to test strategies and co-create new knowledge to strengthen the global grassroots justice movement. Between 2020 and 2025, she led the Learning Agenda for Legal Empowerment -a field-wide learning effort that used participatory action research to explore how legal empowerment can drive systemic change. She is the author of [The Playbook of Justice: How Legal Empowerment Efforts are Fighting Repression and Deepening Democracy](#).

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Introduction

Latin America is undergoing a period of democratic backsliding, reflected in the weakening of institutions, the concentration of power, and the shrinking of spaces for citizen participation. Although this trend takes different forms across countries, it follows a shared pattern: the criminalization of protest, the stigmatization of social organizations, and growing state indifference to human rights. These dynamics directly affect communities' ability to organize, participate, and defend their territories.

Beyond the institutional sphere, this crisis is also reshaping how development, justice, and progress are understood. Dominant political narratives—modernization, energy transition, sustainable development—operate as instruments of power that determine which demands are considered legitimate and who is entitled to influence public debate.

In contexts of limited participation, contesting these narratives becomes a central terrain of struggle: communities can be silenced not only through legal mechanisms but also through discourses that delegitimize them or portray them as barriers to progress.

In this context, civil society organizations and grassroots organizations play a fundamental role. They act as counterweights to authoritarian tendencies, protect rights, and create spaces for the exercise of collective power. Legal empowerment strengthens this work by combining the strategic use of the law with community organizing, enabling people to understand, use, and transform the rules that shape their lives.

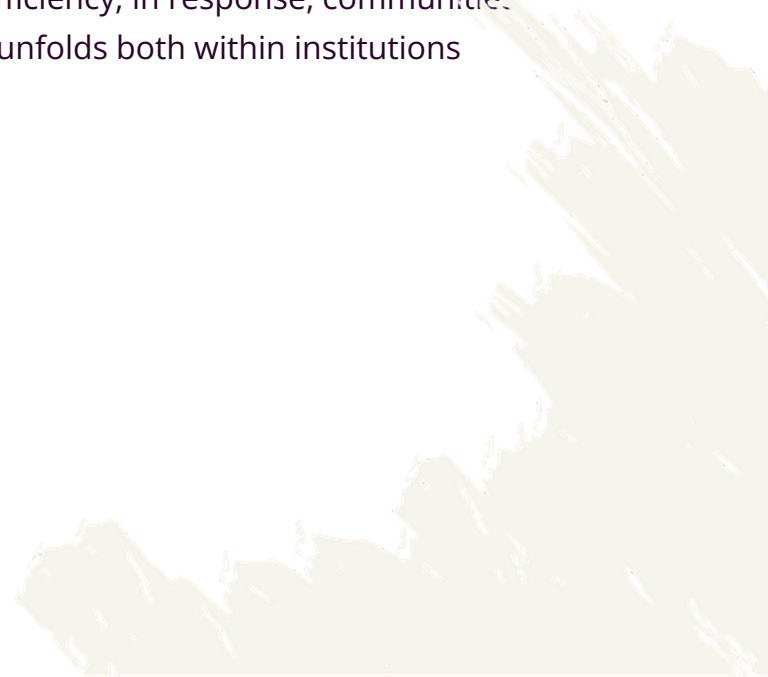
Legal empowerment not only facilitates access to justice; it also enhances communities' capacity to challenge power and build alternatives grounded in their own lived realities.

This analysis emerges from three organizations – ACIJ (Argentina), FIMA (Chile), and ProDESC (Mexico) – who participated in a multi-year global collective learning effort that used participatory action-research process to generate knowledge about how legal empowerment can drive systemic change.

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.

Throughout this journey, the role of narratives emerged as a central axis: discourses shape not only the obstacles communities face, but also the strategies they develop to resist.

This document synthesizes the main conclusions drawn from that experience. It examines how these organizations use legal empowerment to contest dominant narratives, sustain community struggles, and imagine more just futures. In all cases, official discourses have legitimized regressive policies in the name of development or efficiency; in response, communities demonstrate that the struggle for justice unfolds both within institutions and on the terrain of meaning



Accompanying the struggle for justice in difficult political contexts

ASOCIACIÓN CIVIL POR LA IGUALDAD Y LA JUSTICIA (ACIJ)

The Matanza–Riachuelo basin in Argentina is one of the most polluted in Latin America. As a result of claims brought by affected residents, the Supreme Court issued the Mendoza Case ruling in 2008, ordering the clean-up of the basin, the protection of public health, and the guarantee of community participation. Despite this, low-income neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires such as Villa 21-24 and Villa Inflamable have continued to face precarious public services, pollution, and serious health risks, while opportunities for participation have remained limited.



Photo: Community leaders protesting against the closure of the Mendoza case, Argentina, 2025

These conditions have fostered deep mistrust and a sense of abandonment by the State. In response, ACIJ works alongside neighbourhood groups to promote socio-urban integration through advocacy, legal action, capacity-building, and community research. It aims to build collective power, strengthen participation, and hold the State accountable.

The recent shift from a government that had assumed certain commitments to a far-right administration led by Javier Milei has introduced new challenges for communities. The new government has advanced an anti-rights rhetoric alongside austerity policies that further erode community leadership and citizen participation.

It is important to clarify, however, that the closure of the Mendoza Case in 2024 was not directly linked to this change in government. The sustained failure to comply with state obligations and the long-standing abandonment of neighbourhoods in the basin are structural problems that predate the current administration, including under previous Peronist governments. The case was closed as a result of this prolonged lack of implementation rather than as a decision of the new government. Even in this adverse context—marked by austerity measures and the cumulative exhaustion caused by years of state non-compliance—ACIJ continues to accompany local processes and defend the rights of those living in the basin.

FISCALÍA DEL MEDIO AMBIENTE (ONG FIMA)

FIMA works in Chilean Patagonia, in the Magallanes region, where Kawésqar communities face constant threats from extractive industries encroaching on their ancestral lands. The expansion of salmon farming in protected areas has damaged marine ecosystems and undermined ancestral ways of life.

At the same time, large-scale green hydrogen projects have been promoted in the Chilean steppe with little participation or transparency, deepening local exclusion from decision-making over the territory. In response, FIMA leads legal empowerment strategies that combine environmental litigation, administrative actions, and community support. Its work has documented the impacts of these industries and has even resulted in the revocation of salmon farming concessions. It has also strengthened communities' capacity to use legal tools for territorial defence, a strategy that now extends to hydrogen projects. FIMA faces a significant challenge: while the government continues to promote a 'green' discourse, it simultaneously maintains and deepens extractive practices. Environmental regulations have also been weakened to accelerate energy projects under the pretext of climate urgency. FIMA's experience highlights the contradictions between progressive rhetoric and regressive practices affecting communities in Magallanes.

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

ProDESC works in the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico, a territory historically disputed by economic, political, and even criminal interests over land and natural resources. In recent years, tourism, energy, and infrastructure megaprojects have accelerated the dispossession of communities. Maya communities around the Chichankanab lagoon face constant pressure from public and private actors seeking to impose tourism projects. In response, ProDESC strengthens communities' organizational and legal capacities to exercise their territorial rights. It supports ejido assemblies (collective landholding bodies) in land defence, promotes political coordination around the lagoon, and advances women's access to it. Through legal action, capacity-building, and advocacy, ProDESC seeks to halt dispossession and rebuild collective power to confront development models imposed from outside. ProDESC's work unfolds under a government that defines itself as left-wing, yet has deepened militarisation and promoted megaprojects. This is compounded by a judicial reform that threatens judicial independence and the growing co-optation of community authorities, further undermining democratic accountability.

Changing political contexts and shifting narratives

In moments of political transition, power shifts are not confined to institutions; they also reshape the symbolic terrain on which legitimacy is constructed. New state narratives often portray social movements and community struggles as obstacles to progress or as actors disconnected from the public good. This reframing undermines the meaning and legitimacy of their demands. Civil society organizations are sometimes even depicted as foreign agents or as anti-development actors, reducing public debate to simplistic binary positions of 'for' or 'against'. When such narratives take hold, movements are confronted with the challenge of defending not only their rights, but also the very legitimacy of their causes.



Photo: Members of ACIJ, FIMA and Citizen Panel H2, Chile, 2024.

In this context, legal empowerment becomes a tool for challenging both institutional and symbolic forms of power. The experiences of ACIJ, FIMA, and ProDESC illustrate how each organization confronts and redefines dominant narratives to sustain their struggles and remain credible actors in the public sphere.

FAR-RIGHT DISCOURSES

In Argentina, the election of Javier Milei to the presidency marked a radical shift in political discourse. Beyond institutional changes, his government advanced an aggressive narrative against human rights and social movements, framing rights as privileges and the state as an obstacle to development, while elevating the market as the primary source of solutions. Backed by broad popular support and unfolding amid an economic crisis, this discourse focused on inflation, fiscal deficits, and the cost of public services, dismissing rights-based narratives as obsolete or ideological.

For ACIJ, this context has required rethinking how to communicate about rights. The organization now grounds its advocacy in concrete realities. Rather than invoking the “right to water,” it highlights the fact that many neighbourhoods go weeks without water during the summer. This shift from abstract rights to tangible deprivation helps connect with people’s everyday concerns and challenge common public understandings about what is fair.

ACIJ reinforces this approach through participatory documentation and concrete evidence. In Villa 21-24, when water infrastructure works were halted, the organization conducted a neighbourhood survey, published the findings, and successfully pressured authorities to resume the project. By combining evidence, community participation, and accessible language, ACIJ reclaims legitimacy within a discourse dominated by economic urgency.

In sum, this approach shows that challenging narratives is not merely a matter of communication, but a deeply political act: an effort to redefine common sense, centre community perspectives, and reaffirm rights as a foundation of public life.

WHAT LIES BENEATH 'GREEN' RHETORIC

In Chile, the progressive government of Gabriel Boric came to power promising social justice and environmental leadership. Green hydrogen became a central pillar of this agenda, and Magallanes—with its favourable natural conditions—was positioned as an ideal site for its development. Urgency became a defining message: Chile had to act quickly or risk losing its competitive advantage. This narrative was used to justify the weakening of environmental safeguards, such as impact assessments and community consultations, reframing them as obstacles to progress.

In this way, the push for green hydrogen exposed the limits of a progressive government that, despite promises of transformation, ultimately reproduced extractive practices and top-down interventions.



Photo: Pali Aike National Park, Chile, 2024.

In 2023, the Citizen Panel on Hydrogen in Magallanes emerged as an autonomous space bringing together social organizations, academics, and community leaders. FIMA is part of the Panel and contributes its legal and advocacy expertise. The Panel seeks to democratize the debate over the region's development model, calling for transparency, access to information, and a critical assessment of green hydrogen projects.

Rather than rejecting projects outright, the Panel questions the conditions under which development is being pursued and demands evidence of the promised benefits. By reframing its position, it challenges official optimism without appearing obstructionist, posing key questions: What are the real environmental impacts? What tangible benefits will Magallanes receive? Why are cumulative impact assessments absent?

This strategy shifts the burden of proof onto project proponents while legitimizing scepticism as a form of responsible inquiry. Nonetheless, the Panel continues to face challenges, particularly in integrating social and economic concerns into a debate dominated by technical arguments. Moving forward requires shifting from a reactive to a proactive narrative—one that articulates not only critique, but also a vision for Magallanes' future: a balance between environmental protection, local participation, and equitable development.

THE STIGMA OF BEING POSITIONED AS 'AGAINST PROGRESS'

In Mexico, the governments of Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Claudia Sheinbaum have consolidated a popular left-wing project with unprecedented legitimacy. This broad support has reduced the political cost of marginalizing civil society, narrowing spaces for dialogue for organizations such as ProDESC. Criticism of government policies can now be easily dismissed as opposition or elitism.

Under the banner of bringing development to historically marginalized regions, the government has promoted megaprojects in impoverished areas of the country, such as the Maya Train and the Interoceanic Corridor, presenting them as engines of growth. Yet these initiatives often reproduce territorial dispossession under the guise of progress. Questioning them means calling into doubt long-promised visions of well-being, a politically sensitive task for organizations defending community rights.

Although the case of the Chichankanab lagoon in Dziuché is not a large-scale infrastructure megaproject, it reflects a more subtle form of dispossession driven by the state government in alliance with private actors. When the state declared the area a Protected Natural Area without the consent of the ejido, it restricted traditional subsistence practices in the name of conservation while facilitating ecotourism projects backed by institutional and private interests. This process—supported by the NGO Amigos de Sian Ka'an—used environmental narratives to legitimize decisions that undermined the territorial and cultural rights of the Maya people.

In this sense, state and municipal governments governed by Morena have relied on the party's popularity to legitimize actions that face limited public scrutiny, even when they reproduce exclusionary dynamics. Chichankanab illustrates how discourses of development and conservation can be instrumentalized at different levels of government to advance agendas that do not reflect community decision-making.

Through this approach, ProDESC seeks to disrupt dominant narratives by showing that so-called 'green' progress often entails hidden social, environmental, and cultural costs, and by asserting the defence of territory as an act of care rather than opposition.

In Mexico, the government promotes tourism and energy megaprojects in the southeast of the country under the banner of development and social justice. By framing these initiatives as a way of “repaying the historical debt” to marginalized regions, criticism is neutralized, and the idea is reinforced that opposing them is equivalent to rejecting progress. At the local level, these narratives are further reinforced through discourses of ecotourism and conservation, which mask dispossession and legitimize the appropriation of land.



Photo: ProDESC and Mayan people discussing about Agrarian Law, Mexico, 2024.

Cross-cutting reflections on narratives

1

Narratives are a terrain of contestation.

2

Effective narratives must be grounded in communities' lived experience.

3

Narratives are tools for advocacy and for imagining possible futures.

4

Narratives have limits, and it is crucial to recognize that they are not a substitute for collective action or political organizing.

5

Narrative transformation requires creativity and adaptability.

Cross-cutting reflections on narratives

1

Narratives are a terrain of contestation.



Legal empowerment goes beyond courts and institutions; it involves questioning the meanings upon which power is built. Shaping public narratives is essential to sustaining the legitimacy of rights-based struggles. Narratives determine which actors are seen as legitimate, which problems become visible, and which solutions are considered possible.

2

Effective narratives must be grounded in communities' lived experience.



Rights-based language gains strength when it is rooted in everyday realities and expressed through the voices of affected communities. In Buenos Aires, a community's story of its neighbourhood without water can mobilize more effectively than a technical report. In Magallanes, a well-framed question can open up debate that closed-off discourse seeks to silence.

In Yucatán, collective testimony can dismantle the green façade of dispossession. By linking legal claims to tangible experiences—such as water scarcity or threats to land—organizations make rights more understandable and rebuild legitimacy from the ground up. The power of narratives lies in their ability to connect with people’s real lives.

3**Narratives are tools for advocacy
and for imagining possible futures.**

In contexts of democratic closure, narratives serve a dual function: they are a means of resisting hegemonic discourses and of imagining alternative futures. They function both as advocacy tools and as sources of hope. By documenting lived realities—water scarcity, environmental degradation, or covert dispossession—organizations such as ACIJ, FIMA, and ProDESC use narrative to regain visibility and challenge dominant meanings. At the same time, these stories help to imagine alternative futures: rights grounded in everyday needs, participation in shaping development, and justice rooted in community life.

4

Narratives have limits, and it is crucial to recognise that they are not a substitute for collective action or political organizing.



Without robust community processes, narratives risk becoming empty rhetoric, unable to transform material conditions. Their power lies in their connection to the legal, pedagogical, and organizational work that sustains them. Within legal empowerment strategies, no single tool operates in isolation. While narratives are an important element in the fight for justice, they do not work on their own.

5

Narrative transformation requires creativity and adaptability.



Legal empowerment actors must continually adjust their narratives to shifting political contexts. This involves translating complex legal ideas into accessible messages and drawing on data, art, and local knowledge to reimagine what justice means in times of change. In Argentina, for example, ACIJ uses community photography to expose exclusion and restore visibility. In Mexico, ProDESC employs participatory mapping around the Chichankanab lagoon to document dispossession and defend collective land. These creative tools transform evidence into narrative power.



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