NAMATI

Grassroots Justice Network

# POWER UP:
# LESSONS FROM TWELVE YEARS OF ORGANIZING WITH COMMUNITY PARALEGALS

Namati health advocate, Benigna José, at Morrumbene Health Center in Mozambique's Inhambane Province.

Graphic design: Juliana Camargo (camargoju.com)

*All photos in this report are sourced from Namati.*

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# About Us

## ABOUT NAMATI

Namati advances social and environmental justice by building a movement of people who know, use, and shape the law. In seven countries, we train and deploy community paralegals – organizers with a sharp understanding of law – who support people to protect their lands, pursue sustainable development, and exercise basic rights to citizenship and dignified healthcare. Drawing on our comparative experience across those focus countries, Namati convenes the Grassroots Justice Network, the world's largest community of justice defenders.

## ABOUT GJN

The Grassroots Justice Network is the world's largest community of justice organizations. Members of this global community connect, learn, and act together to build a more just world. The Grassroots Justice Network is convened by Namati. The Learning Agenda for Legal Empowerment brings network members together to test their strategies, deepen their impact and collectively address the knowledge gaps facing our global movement for justice.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Aisha Khagai** co-authored the case study "Speaking with One Voice: How Solidarity is Shaping Citizenship in Kenya." She is the Senior Manager for the Namati's Citizenship Rights Program in Kenya.

**Eduardo Malo** co-authored the case study "Collective Empowerment Requires Structure: Organizing for Health Justice in Mozambique." He is the Program Coordinator, Right to Health, Namati Moçambique.

**Morgan Hargrave** co-authored two case studies "Speaking with One Voice: How Solidarity is Shaping Citizenship in Kenya," and "Collective Empowerment Requires Structure: Organizing for Health Justice in Mozambique." He is the Manager of Global Programs at Namati.

**Michael Zanchelli** authored the section "Knowing and Using the Law: Insights for Justice Seekers' Journeys." He is the Senior Manager of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning at Namati.

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# Glossary

**Community paralegal:** An individual trained to assist community members to know, use, or shape the law to address an injustice. They often come from the affected community. Community paralegals accompany people affected by a rights violation to take action and seek remedies. They also act as frontline community organizers, mobilizing communities to pursue systemic change and building a cadre of other grassroots leaders. Sometimes they are called community legal workers, non-lawyer advocates, barefoot lawyers, community organizers, or community representatives.

**Justice seeker:** A community member who takes action to secure a remedy for a rights violation. They are often directly affected by the violation. Through their partnership with a paralegal, justice seekers begin an empowerment process—learning their rights, understanding relevant government institutions, building confidence to engage with officials, and helping others solve a similar problem. Some legal empowerment and legal aid organizations refer to these individuals as "clients."

**Case process:** The concrete steps taken to resolve a justice issue. The case process typically includes collecting evidence, writing complaints, meeting with officials, and/or mobilizing people for broader action. A community paralegal and one or more justice seekers undertake this process together. Through this collaboration, the justice seeker not only pursues a remedy but also gains knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate legal and institutional systems.

**Remedy:** A meaningful resolution to a justice issue. This can be anything that resolves or addresses a rights violation. For example, a remedy could be a company halting the pollution of a community's water source or compensating a community for harm caused.

# Executive Summary

Democracy depends on people being empowered to defend and exercise their rights. Community paralegals help those facing injustice do just that, even in contexts where the rule of law is tenuous. Understanding and using the law to address immediate injustices while working toward broader systemic change.

Community paralegals start by building rights awareness and legal knowledge among marginalized populations, but their work goes so much further. Increasingly, they have found ways to combine the law with organizing that builds the power of individuals and communities to make the law work for them.

Power Up: Lessons from Twelve Years of Organizing With Community Paralegals, by Namati and the Grassroots Justice Network, tracks the evolution of Namati's legal empowerment approach and shares the empowering lessons generated by community paralegals who have accompanied people and communities taking on dire justice challenges. Through case studies, analysis, and 95 interviews from around the world, this publication demonstrates how legal empowerment efforts build power within and across communities. Readers will learn:

- How community paralegals help people build the knowledge and confidence to demand justice from their political leaders.
- How collective action fosters resilience among communities, even in the face of direct harassment from government authorities.
- How community paralegals build solidarity across marginalized communities to create powerful movements for justice.
- How community groups and local committees can be engines for empowerment that stands the test of time.

The result is a publication that offers evidence and practical insights about the promise of legal empowerment. Practitioners in the fields of democratic governance, legal aid, and social movements will find insights that could help their work be even more empowering for the communities they work with.

# I. Introduction

## THE PROMISE OF BUILDING POWER THROUGH LAW AND ORGANIZING

**There is incredible diversity in how community paralegals around the world pursue grassroots justice, but across it all, there is one sentence you will never hear a community paralegal say: "I will solve this problem for you." Instead, community paralegals accompany people affected by unjust systems, putting them in the driver's seat while building their knowledge and confidence to engage powerful actors in seeking remedies for the violations they face.**

**"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."**

*- A group of Aboriginal activists, including Lila Watson, Australia, 1970s*

Why this approach? Why put such an emphasis on building power with community members when community paralegals and legal support organizations could use their expertise and connections to pursue remedies on their own?

There are two reasons, both of which are foundational beliefs that underlie how legal empowerment practitioners carry out their work.

The first is a way of seeing the world that prioritizes the dignity and wisdom of people. That worldview says that people affected by injustice are not only capable of advocating for themselves but are, in fact, the best advocates for the future they want.

The second is a belief about how change happens. Legal empowerment practitioners

are taking on the world's biggest challenges, most of which are entrenched after years of injustice and powerful interests who prefer to keep it that way. In such cases, positive change does not come easily. Legal empowerment can and must create multiple pathways to change—but each path begins with powerful communities. An organized and empowered base of people impacted by the issue provides the foundation on which advocacy, coalition-building, and other strategies to change systems are built.

**"What can we do now in order to be able to do tomorrow what we are unable to do today?"**

*- Paulo Freire*[1]

Combining legal power and people power offers incredible potential. Knowing the law helps us use it to our advantage. Comparing the rights guaranteed under the law with the reality of how they are implemented builds political consciousness and a shared analysis of where change is needed. Discussing what the law should be helps us form collective demands to rally around. And understanding what the law requires of institutions provides options for how to pursue solutions in the near term.

## WHY THIS PUBLICATION

This publication marks a 12-year journey that Namati continues to travel, distilling and sharing learnings from Namati staff, partners, organizers, and communities along the way. In the following pages, you will find a synthesis of insights drawn from over 90 interviews with people in Myanmar, Kenya, and India who were directly affected by an injustice and partnered with paralegals to address it. We call these people "justice seekers."

In addition to capturing lessons from individual justice seekers, the publication presents two case studies from Namati teams in Mozambique and Kenya. The case studies distill lessons from efforts to build community-driven movements capable of addressing the root causes of injustice. Together, they demonstrate what community power looks like in action. The chapters that follow first define how the legal empowerment cycle can build community power, then offer practical insights and hard-won lessons from Namati's 12-year journey.

# II. Building Community Power Through the Legal Empowerment Cycle

**There are many traditions that focus on building community power, notably community organizing and social movements.**

**Namati's work is rooted in legal empowerment: helping communities facing injustice to know, use, and ultimately shape the law.**

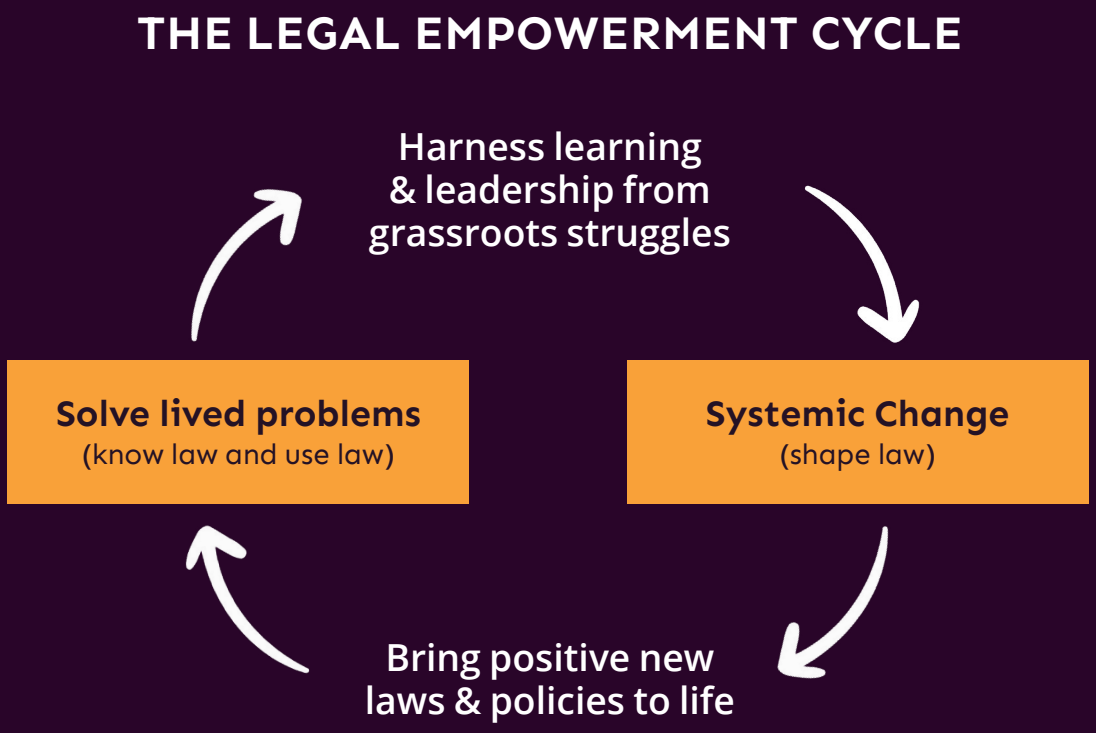



*Figure 1: The legal empowerment cycle*

## What new insights and methods for building community power can legal empowerment contribute?

The legal empowerment cycle creates opportunities for fostering two crucial assets: learning and leadership among those most affected by injustice. Communities facing injustice can draw on their experience to envision, organize around, and win changes to rules and systems.

On the left side of the cycle, communities use the law to solve everyday problems, building an understanding of how the rules work in practice as they do. Over time, communities amass a wealth of lived experience and data about where the system is working and where it is failing. That information helps to identify where reforms are most needed and offers a unique evidence base from which to argue for those reforms.

Legal empowerment efforts also cultivate the leadership needed to drive change. When people use existing rules to address problems in their own neighborhoods, they gain confidence and credibility.

This experience puts them in a stronger position to lead collective action among neighbors and larger-scale movements that improve laws and systems for everyone.[2]

As communities learn their rights, navigate institutions, and secure remedies to injustices over time and across different places, it fosters opportunities to build solidarity. This unity enables people to take action together to challenge and change unjust laws and policies.

The following sections describe the strategies Namati has developed over the last 12 years to build community power at each phase of the legal empowerment cycle: knowing the law, using the law, and shaping the law.

## BUILDING POWER THROUGH KNOWING AND USING THE LAW


Paralegals focus on community education as the foundation for **knowing the law.** They help demystify the law, making it a tool everyone can use. When this happens, people better understand their rights and are able to identify violations of the law when they occur. This education takes place in open community forums or during consultations with people directly affected by an injustice. Equipped with this knowledge, community members can help themselves and others solve problems: they know their rights, they know their options for taking action, and they know which institutions can help them.

Paralegals also partner with communities to **use the law** to remedy specific injustices. These grassroots "cases" involve gathering evidence to better understand the problem and identifying possible legal hooks—specific rules or provisions that can be used to demand redress. Paralegals and justice seekers approach the institution(s) responsible for upholding rights or addressing violations. They use formal complaints along with other forms of direct action to confront these institutions and compel a response.

The process of using the law creates a deeper understanding among justice seekers of how the law and systems operate in practice. When community members collect evidence, write letters, meet with officials, and navigate institutions, they are able to clearly see which parts of systems are failing and which are working. This work also illuminates patterns of violations: the same injustices happening again and again, impacting those on the margins of society. Community members can wield their firsthand experiences to make these patterns visible to others.

Paralegals work toward four key outcomes as they support communities in knowing and using the law, presented here as firsthand statements community members might make:

**1** **"I know what my rights are."**

**RIGHTS AWARENESS AND LEGAL KNOWLEDGE:** Building someone's working knowledge of the law is a foundation for legal empowerment. This requires demystifying complex legal provisions. Can people state their rights in plain, practical terms? Do they know which institutions are responsible for protecting those rights? Understanding what a law or policy means for someone's everyday life is more important than knowing its precise language.

**2** **"I can take action when my rights are violated."**

**SENSE OF AGENCY:** This is the feeling that an individual can make a difference through their actions. Marginalized and oppressed people can build a deeper sense of their agency by taking action to address an issue that directly affects them. In the context of law and organizing, justice seekers take concrete steps in their case and learn how to navigate institutions.

**3** **"I'll help someone who faced a similar problem."**

**PUBLIC SPIRITEDNESS:** Public spiritedness is a person's willingness to help others facing a similar problem. A justice seeker who goes on to accompany or take action with others experiencing a similar rights violation is a demonstration of public spiritedness.

**4** **"My rights were violated because there are unjust laws and institutions, which also affect others."**

**CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS:** When someone recognizes a rights violation, they may identify it as systemic—part of a broader pattern of injustices, often designed to benefit the powerful. This is critical consciousness. Paralegals share information with justice seekers about the widespread nature of these violations and foster connections among justice seekers experiencing the same kinds of violations. These activities foster a sense of critical consciousness within and across affected communities.

Together, these four outcomes form a foundation for collective action and community power. They are also precursors to building unity across affected groups. When more people know their rights, see they have power to create change, are willing to help others, and understand a violation is systemic, they are more likely to find common cause with others and take action together.

## BUILDING POWER TO SHAPE THE LAW[5]


Knowing and using the law creates the building blocks for shaping the law through grassroots leadership and collective action. Through using the law, communities are able to identify and build a cadre of grassroots leaders. These leaders organize and mobilize others to act collectively and wage campaigns to change unjust laws. Over time, communities unite and build movements to shape laws, policies, and practices to be more just and fair. But what does it look like to build power across an entire community to shape the law?

Power means communities can exert greater control over decisions that impact their lives. To build this kind of power, communities need to organize to make collective demands and hold leaders accountable.[3,4] There are two key building blocks for collective action: cultivating leadership within communities and growing a broader base of support.

## Developing Grassroots Leaders

The people paralegals work with every day—justice seekers and community members—are all potential leaders. To realize that potential, paralegals identify and support individuals by building their skills and providing opportunities to exercise their power. Combining law and organizing helps paralegals identify potential leaders among people directly affected by violations caused by unjust systems and laws. These leaders are close to the issue, have spoken out or acted for change already, or exhibit community spiritedness and are trusted by their community.

Over time, these grassroots leaders grow their skills and take on greater responsibility for organizing within their communities. Important qualities and skills for grassroots leaders include:

- Deep knowledge of the issue.
- The ability to plan and lead meetings that facilitate collective decision-making.
- Recruitment and outreach of new members, including making effective "asks" of others.
- Storytelling and messaging.
- Media engagement.

Leaders help foster shared decisions on goals, strategies, and tactics with input from a wider base of supporters.

## Growing a Base of Support

The "base of support" is the group of people who care about the issue at hand and can be mobilized to take action. Growing the base involves recruiting, community education about rights and the laws, and fostering trust and group identity to help develop collective goals and mobilize. Here are some signs of progress you might see as a community builds its base of supporters:

- More community members are showing up to events and actions.
- There are supporters from both the affected communities and other groups.
- The level of participation is sustained over time, with people remaining interested and engaged.
- There are open, active channels of communication and trust within the group as it grows.

Over time, different groups of community members can connect to build unity, solidarity, and a broader movement.

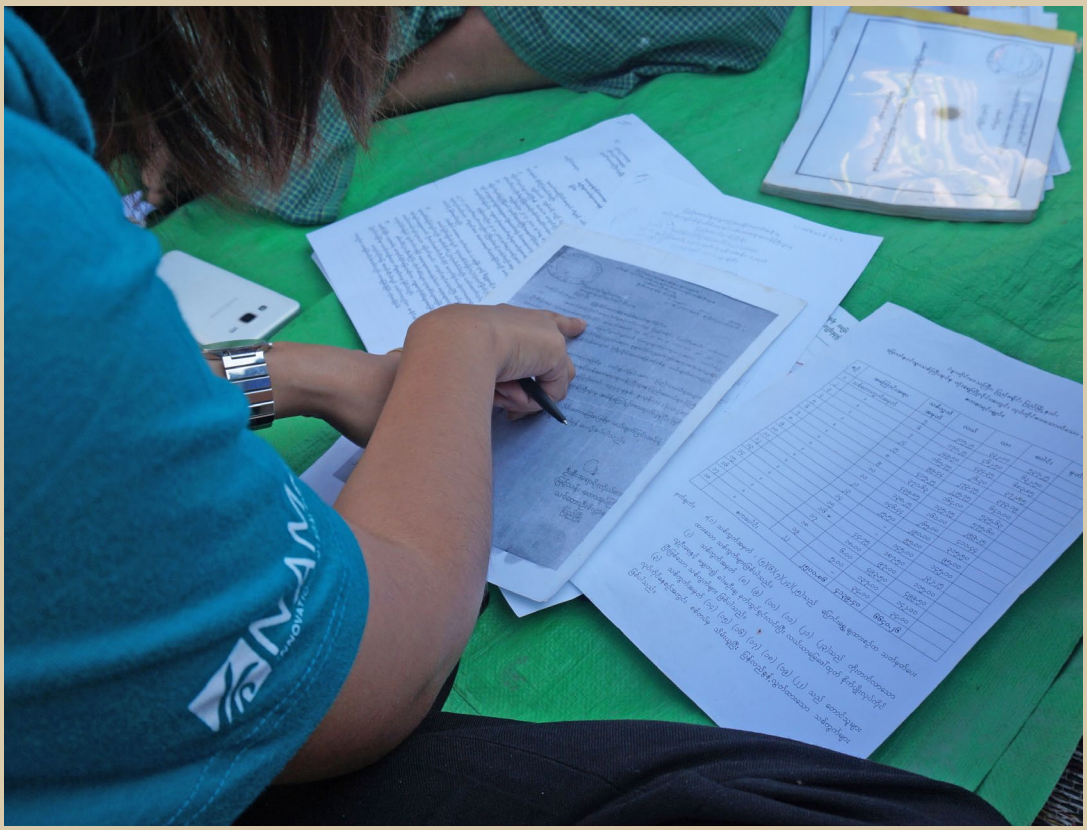
## Collective Action and Organizing

Collective action often begins with small actions at specific moments. For every large march or protest that makes the news, there are dozens of community forums, outreach drives, advocacy meetings, and other collective actions—each built on small, coordinated efforts by individuals. As these actions become more frequent, they lead to incremental "wins" that build power and momentum.

Wins don't have to be major milestones. They can include demands that are only partially met or defensive victories, such as slowing down the implementation of an unjust policy. Over time, these smaller wins build on one another, increasing the group's influence and opening new spaces for community action or participation in decision-making. This has a self-reinforcing effect: more space for participation leads to more opportunities to pressure those in power, have community demands heard, and seek structural change.

As community members organize to take action together, they build collective power. Here are some signs that an organizing effort is growing power:

- The group identifies the injustice and its root causes.
- The group identifies shared objectives and a strategy to achieve them.
- The group makes targeted demands of those in power that address the problems and hold leaders accountable.
- Power brokers and decision-makers outside of the group begin to name and identify the group and view them as influential.
- The group or members of the group are invited to participate in formal or informal decision-making spaces or processes.



**What's Next?**

The next chapter offers practical lessons for paralegals partnering with communities to know and use the law. These lessons are drawn from 95 interviews across three Namati programs with community members who partnered with paralegals.

The final chapter of this report, "Shaping the Law: Case Studies on Building Collective Power in Mozambique and Kenya," documents two case studies from Namati's work in Mozambique and Kenya. These examples demonstrate how grassroots leadership and collective action takes shape in communities. In Mozambique, the case study explores how a local structure, Village Health Committees, creates space for deepening and deploying community leadership. In Kenya, the case study details an essential ingredient for collective action; solidarity across communities affected by an unjust system.

# III. Knowing and Using the Law: Insights from Justice Seekers' Journeys

**Ziya, a Muslim woman of Nubian descent, and her family have lived in Kenya for generations. Yet when she applied for her national ID card, she was subjected to a *vetting process*—an onerous and discriminatory process not required of other ethnic groups in Kenya.[6] The process required her to submit rounds of extensive documentation and endure intrusive questioning by a committee of elders and government officials.**

After trying unsuccessfully for three years to meet the requirements, Ziya had all but given up hope of securing her ID.

Then she met Zena and Zahra, community paralegals with Nubian Rights Forum—one of Namati's partners based in Nairobi, Kenya. They helped Ziya understand her citizenship rights and navigate the vetting process. They informed Ziya of a mobile ID clinic coming to her neighborhood and accompanied her as she filled out detailed paperwork at the clinic. Ultimately, they found alternative forms of documentation to use that could support her case. Finally, after three more months, Ziya secured her ID document. With a formal government ID, she could now look for a better-paying job and send her son to a government school for free.

But happy as she was to have it, the ID was no longer enough for Ziya. Appalled by the discrimination she experienced, she signed on as a volunteer community ambassador to work alongside paralegals to end citizenship discrimination in Kenya.


In Zena and Zahra's story, we can see clearly how community education and casework serve as foundations for building community power. When Ziya's rights were violated, Zena and Zahra accompanied her as she took concrete steps to secure her ID, illustrating the process of casework. Paralegals did not take action on Ziya's behalf; they worked with her, coaching and sharing knowledge as they took action together.

The partnership between the Namati-trained community paralegals and justice seekers like Ziya breaks from the typical lawyer-client model. This partnership focuses not only on remedying the immediate injustice together but also on building the justice seeker's knowledge of the relevant laws and strengthening their ability to identify the systemic nature of a rights violation. When combining law and organizing, this relationship is a potent starting point for building community power—with and among those most affected by exclusionary systems.

***Image:*** *Zena Musa, program officer and paralegal with Nubian Rights Forum in Nairobi, Kenya*

## FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS WITH JUSTICE SEEKERS IN KENYA, MYANMAR, AND INDIA

In 2018, Namati teams began conducting follow-up interviews with justice seekers like Ziya to explore some of the most critical ingredients for building collective power through community education and casework.

The interviews explored the four core outcomes noted earlier:

1. Rights awareness and legal knowledge,
2. Ability to use the law to solve problems,
3. Willingness to help others facing a similar problem, and
4. Critical consciousness.

Since then, Namati has carried out 95 follow-up interviews with justice seekers who partnered with community paralegals in India, Kenya, and Myanmar.[7] These interviews represent the first time Namati has systematically explored the empowerment of individual justice seekers. The countries represent a wide range of contexts in terms of democratic norms and the strength of state institutions.

During these interviews, Namati teams heard powerful, firsthand accounts of justice seekers learning their rights and navigating institutions to seek redress. Their experiences offer valuable insights into how paralegals can partner with justice seekers to deepen their empowerment and lay the foundation for collective action. These interviews revealed what Namati was doing well, where there were gaps, and how paralegals can better support justice seekers on a journey toward collective action.

In the following sections, you will read insights from these interviews. The analysis is grounded in rigorous qualitative coding and interpretation of findings with each program's paralegals. After each program distilled their own learning, the three teams held a collective reflection session to compare their learnings, identify common ground, and share how they have applied these insights to paralegal activities. Through these methods, Namati developed a comparative analysis that offers practical lessons on building power that practitioners can apply in their own work.


## Citizenship Rights in Kenya

*Number of Interviews: 19*

As illustrated in Ziya's story, people in Kenya without an ID cannot apply for a job, receive a bank loan, or access healthcare. To obtain basic identification documents, certain ethnic and religious minorities face a discriminatory "vetting" process. This process restricts what days of the week people can submit applications, burdens applicants with excessive documentation requirements, and/or subjects applications to additional scrutiny by security agents. These factors result in applications being denied or severely delayed, impacting an estimated five million Kenyans.

The Namati's Citizenship Rights Program helps these Kenyans access ID documents and, using those experiences, pushes to end discriminatory vetting. The program works alongside three grassroots partner organizations: Haki na Sharia, Haki Center, and Nubian Rights Forum, whose paralegals partner with members of the Nubian and Somali communities in Kenya, among others.

Between 2018 and 2019, partners carried out 19 interviews with justice seekers who were either trying to secure documentation or had recently completed their case. Thirteen interviewees were women, and sixteen had cases resolved at the time of the interview. In all cases, the justice seekers faced a series of burdensome and discriminatory steps to secure their documentation. Many had low levels of literacy, which made it even more challenging to navigate the convoluted system.

**"Paralegals help bring change in people and their perspective, we get to know what our right is. And this understanding helps us to fight with confidence."**

*- Justice seeker*

## Land and Environmental Justice in Myanmar

*Number of Interviews: 59*

In Myanmar, during the time the interviews were conducted, Namati and partners deployed community paralegals who support farmers to understand and use the law to protect their land rights. This work included efforts to recover seized land and better protect the land and forests they used. In 2019, Namati expanded its efforts to assist communities harmed by public and private projects that do not comply with environmental regulations.

Of the 59 justice seekers interviewed, the majority were male farmers with unresolved cases. In most cases, they sought redress for their farmland being taken, attempted to register land as community forest, or applied for the right to use vacant, fallow, or virgin lands. These cases were often complex, remaining unresolved for many years. Many justice seekers dealt with areas of the law that were still evolving and lacked clear precedent from past cases.

In recent years, navigating land issues has become more challenging due to the 2021 military coup and ongoing civil war. Paralegals and communities have adapted to focus on strengthening communities' customary land rights and protections. Despite the challenges, many of the justice seekers remain committed to seeing their cases through, as their livelihoods depend heavily on the land.

## Environmental Justice in India

*Number of Interviews: 17*

In India at the time of the interviews (2018), the Environmental Justice program at the Centre for Policy Research in India worked to close the enforcement gap in industrial environmental regulation. Industrial projects often violate regulations—for example, companies dumping poisonous chemicals into the waters of fishing communities or emitting hazardous levels of air pollution. Paralegals worked in four states to support affected communities to understand and use the law to address these harmful environmental violations.

Justice seekers in India came from diverse backgrounds. Some were civic leaders in their community, like the environmental activist who tried to stop an illegal landfill dump near local farmland. Other justice seekers partnered with paralegals because a violation directly and deeply impacted their lives, like the small-scale farmer who fought against toxic waste being released on his farmland and into the community's water from nearby mines.

The following sections present the main comparative insights from follow-up interviews with justice seekers across all three programs, organized by the different empowerment outcomes the interviews explored.

# RIGHTS AWARENESS AND LEGAL KNOWLEDGE

## Most Justice Seekers Deepen Their Knowledge of the Law Through the Case Process

Paralegals work to make complex provisions in the law more accessible and relevant for affected communities. They frame the law in terms of rights that communities and individuals possess, the mandates and obligations of specific institutions, and the institutional avenues for registering a complaint. This approach makes the law relevant and actionable to justice seekers, motivating them to pursue a remedy for the violation they experienced.

**Of the justice seekers interviewed**

**84%** *built a deeper working knowledge of the law through their partnership with paralegals.*

They were able to name the rights that had been violated in their case and describe them in practical, everyday terms. Less frequently, justice seekers identified and named specific technical provisions and codes. This was anticipated by paralegals, who focus on educating communities about their rights in plain language, not technical legalese.

Paralegals used a creative mix of strategies to raise awareness of rights and laws, including community education sessions, peer-to-peer mentoring, and translating the law into local languages. For example:

- In India, paralegals translated laws into regional and tribal languages so community members could read the law themselves and better understand the provisions. They also paired more experienced justice seekers with those newer to the case process, fostering peer-to-peer mentoring and coaching.
- In Myanmar, paralegals held open community education sessions where they used writing, signing, and visuals to make legal knowledge more practical and accessible. These sessions often served as a starting point for identifying new violations and opening cases.
- In Kenya, paralegals developed a guidebook[8] for Kenyans with illustrations to explain the law and steps to secure an ID in simple language and relatable visual depictions (see figure 2).


*Figure 2*: *Illustration in "Citizenship Rights in Kenya" guidebook depicting someone securing their ID—a creative method for disseminating accessible information about rights and the case process.*

**Working alongside paralegals—writing complaint letters and meeting with officials—helped almost all justice seekers learn the steps needed to secure a remedy.**

Paralegals and justice seekers work together throughout the case process. They organize community meetings, collect evidence, write complaint letters, and meet with government officials. This hands-on collaboration deepens justice seekers' understanding of the law and institutions.

**Of the justice seekers interviewed**

**100%**

*could cite at least some of the key steps in their case process.*

**97%**

*had at least some understanding of the government institutions responsible for addressing the issue they faced.*

Paralegals and Namati staff attributed this outcome to paralegals and justice seekers collaborating closely at every step to compel institutions to act. In India, more than three-quarters of interviewees noted that before partnering with paralegals, they were unaware of which institutions they needed to engage to remedy their justice issues.

**"People generally go to collectorate or nagarpalika for every problem and hence their issues remain unaddressed since they are approaching the wrong authority. This case helped me identify the actual agency responsible for such violations and cases."**

*- Justice seeker, India*

In Ziya's story, paralegals Zena and Zahra accompanied Ziya throughout the discriminatory vetting process. They shared with Ziya her rights under the law and joined her at multiple meetings with officials and institutions to help her navigate the confusing, discriminatory process. Through that accompaniment and action, Ziya was able to better understand the steps needed and the important institutions.

Namati teams have used these insights to reinforce and build on an accompaniment model that emphasizes coaching and joint action.

**Paralegals found it more difficult to build legal knowledge in cases that dealt with multiple laws, unresolved areas of the law, or complex administrative steps.**

The three programs had important differences in the complexity of legal provisions and case processes. In Kenya, cases to secure identification documents involved a small number of legal provisions and relatively few government institutions. By contrast, the land and environmental issues in Myanmar and India were more complex, requiring justice seekers to learn numerous legal instruments and navigate confusing webs of institutional bureaucracy. In Myanmar, paralegals often encountered areas of the law that were still evolving, with little or no precedent from prior cases. Even lawyers and government officials were frequently uncertain about how to interpret and apply these laws. This made it especially difficult for paralegals to build justice seekers' knowledge.

Staff from all three programs reflected that more complex and vague provisions and procedures made building justice seekers' knowledge more challenging. In many cases, paralegals were learning in real time alongside justice seekers what the law required and which institutions mattered.

Each program experimented with different strategies to help paralegals stay informed of new developments with relevant laws and policies. In Kenya, paralegals with Namati's partner Nubian Rights Forum began a practice of "Biryani Fridays." At the end of each week, they share a midday meal together and pick one justice issue or legal provision to explore, dissect, and discuss. This helps paralegals keep abreast of evolutions in the law and devise creative ways they can help the Nubian community understand their rights.

In India, paralegals adopted a teaching-based learning approach. Each paralegal took a turn learning a relevant law, then would prepare and share a presentation on it during paralegal training sessions.

## CONFIDENCE ENGAGING OFFICIALS AND A SENSE OF AGENCY

**The firsthand experience of taking action and getting a response from powerful institutions helped build confidence in the vast majority of justice seekers.**

**Of the justice seekers interviewed**

**90%**

*reported a greater sense of confidence engaging government officials, which they gained by taking action in their cases.*

Working with paralegals during the case process—such as drafting complaint letters or attending meetings with local officials—helped them feel equipped to interact with government authorities. Before this experience, the prospect of meeting with a government official was intimidating. However, seeing the results of their actions at each step reinforced their motivation to keep going. It showed them that they could affect change.

**"We learned about the law, how to write complaint letters, how to deal with the government departments. Our slogan is also "Let's try. We can get something. If not, we would stay the same."**

*- Justice seeker, Myanmar*

**"My interactions with government officers have totally changed because having known my rights, I will be seeking services as an informed person and won't allow anyone to take advantage of me."**

*- Justice seeker, Kenya*

**"I can now access government offices without fear. I used to fear going to government offices because of the stories that I hear from people but now I have courage."**

*- Justice seeker, Kenya*


**Those who experienced direct harassment from government officials often felt dispirited and hesitant to engage officials again. But collective action offered hope.**

In Kenya, justice seekers who experienced discrimination or harassment from government officials during the case process expressed reluctance to engage with officials again. Namati staff who led interviews noted that these experiences could cause significant distress and trauma.

**"The questions the government officials asked me were very provocative and irrelevant. That is why I cannot engage any government officials again."**

*- Justice seeker, Kenya*

This served as an important reminder: justice seekers and paralegals are individuals taking on powerful institutions and systems.

Without avenues for acting collectively and building solidarity, systemic barriers can be overwhelming and disempowering. However, when those avenues exist, they offer justice seekers hope, support, and a way forward. Namati's Citizenship Rights Program team and partners in Kenya have invested heavily in cross-community exchanges, where community members affected by the same discriminatory system can connect, share experiences, and formulate plans for joint action. These moments of mutual sharing and planning transform what feels like an isolated struggle into a united fight for justice. Together, they can take action, make demands, and bring about change.

## PUBLIC SPIRITEDNESS

**Community members were more likely to help others facing similar problems after taking action with paralegals.**

**Of the justice seekers interviewed**

**92%**

*were willing to help others or had already helped others facing a similar problem.*

This sense of public spiritedness took different forms. A farmer in Myanmar shared legal knowledge about land rights with a neighbor. In Kenya, a Nubian woman helped a friend find the right government building to visit to deliver documentation required to secure their ID. Another justice seeker in Kenya helped six neighbors fill out vetting documentation after working with a paralegal to secure a birth certificate for his child. In the process, he shared crucial information needed to navigate the discriminatory, burdensome process.

**"Since working with the paralegal, I have helped several people in referring them to paralegals or also informing them of their rights to access these important documents."**

*- Justice seeker, Kenya*

**"[Since my case] I have helped my mother with correcting her birth certificate and applying for a new one."**

*- Justice seeker, Kenya*

Public spiritedness is a crucial ingredient to building leadership within communities. It reflects a willingness among community members to invest their time and energy to address injustices others face.

## CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

**Two-thirds of justice seekers were able to identify systemic breakdowns in India and Kenya.**

Paralegals in Kenya noted that many justice seekers initially believed they were at fault for their inability to secure an ID. They thought they had made a mistake or "fallen through the cracks" of the system. As paralegals worked with them, they helped justice seekers understand that the problem was not their fault; the vetting process was designed to discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities.[9]

Approximately 7 in 10 justice seekers interviewed in Kenya ultimately identified the vetting process as targeted and discriminatory. While this majority reflects progress, paralegals were surprised that the percentage wasn't higher, given the emphasis on communicating this message during the case process.

To address this, paralegals have increased efforts to highlight systemic discrimination in community forums and initiated cross-community exchanges. These exchanges allow justice seekers to hear firsthand stories from others who endured the same vetting process, clarifying and reinforcing the systemic nature of the problem. The exchanges have become a staple for the Namati's Citizenship Rights Program in Kenya, as it looks to build a national movement.[10]

In India, the justice seekers who identified deeper, systemic issues were typically those who were highly engaged and had worked on complex issues over a longer period of time. Namati staff reflected that extended engagement gave justice seekers deeper insights into how systems worked in practice, enabling them to take a critical lens to the law and identify areas most in need of reform.

**Building critical consciousness is a bridge to supporting the collective action of communities.**

Critical consciousness is a fundamental ingredient for communities working together to address systemic issues. After interviewing justice seekers, Namati teams gathered in a cross-team reflection session to compare findings and insights. The teams talked about critical consciousness as the bridge between solving individual problems and becoming part of a broader movement. When affected community members recognize that their problem is not an isolated incident but representative of a broader systemic breakdown, they are more likely to join the fight to change the system through collective action.

In Kenya, the people who travel this bridge are called "community ambassadors." They step beyond their individual case and take action to address the systemic issue by sharing their story with public officials and courts, organizing community forums, and bringing others into the movement.

## THE NEXT STEPS IN A LEARNING JOURNEY

Namati teams are putting these insights into practice in the ways described above. As they continue experimenting, new sets of critical questions present themselves: How can momentum that starts during a case process build toward collective action that addresses the root causes of systemic breakdowns? What conditions, support, and structures are needed during and after the case process for this to happen? How can paralegals use experiences to address rights violations with individual justice seekers to establish a pipeline of potential leaders in communities?

These questions sparked further experimentation, reflection, and learning. The next chapter captures this learning through two case studies of Namati programs, documenting what it looks like in practice to build leadership and support communities to act collectively.

# IV. Shaping the Law: Case Studies on Building Collective Power in Mozambique and Kenya

**There are many pathways and strategies to bring about systemic change or, as Namati refers to it, "shape the law." This chapter highlights two case studies that show how collective power—built through grassroots leadership, organizing communities, and taking collective action—can shape the law.**


The case study from Mozambique explores how local governing structures, like Village Health Committees, can be places where leaders can grow and communities can act collectively. The case study from Kenya examines what it takes for diverse communities to take action together, emphasizing critical consciousness as a foundation for solidarity and unity across affected communities.

# SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE: HOW SOLIDARITY IS SHAPING CITIZENSHIP IN KENYA

The ingredients for collective action that can win positive systemic change are many: strategy, clarity, patience, and power, among others. But at the heart of any successful collective action will be an engaged and cohesive group of people. When taking on an injustice entrenched by history and power, that group will have to take the form of a diverse coalition that can maintain unity over time and through challenges. We call this solidarity. This is a case study of how one team built solidarity on a divisive issue and used it to win meaningful change.

## The Fault Lines of Belonging

Millions of people around the world are without citizenship or without the legal identity documents required to exercise their citizenship rights. Namati's citizenship justice work is centered in Kenya, a country of over 50 million people coming from more than 40 recognized tribes. Many people from both recognized and unrecognized tribes are excluded from full citizenship due to discrimination based on ethnicity and religion.

For most Kenyans, applying for identification is a simple formality, with forms processed in just a couple of weeks. But for certain minority populations, the process is slow and arduous. Applicants are repeatedly called in for "vetting," where they are asked intrusive questions and required to produce more documents, including some that may be hard to obtain or may not even exist, like their grandmothers' birth certificates. The process can drag on for months or years. Many simply give up.

Even as citizenship exclusion affects multiple populations, unity across them has proven hard to come by. Some people assume their exclusion is the result of a lack of state capacity or due to their own poverty rather than systemic discrimination.

Others have trouble identifying with other ethnic groups, seeing the exclusion of those groups as unique or even justified.

And yet, unity has begun to emerge. Communities are finding common cause, and new actors are joining the fray. What changed, and what is driving the progress? We reflected on years of work and uncovered some key insights.

**Solidarity Doesn't Emerge by Chance**

"It just happened."

That's what Aisha, Senior Manager of Namati's Citizenship Program, said when we first sat down to reflect on how the walls between communities had started to break down. The shift appeared to be totally organic. It seemed that gradually a common conversation about ID and citizenship was emerging across the country. The justice seekers we accompany started talking about systemic causes of the injustice. Some of our partners did, too. And slowly, so did many others, including influential people with whom we had never had contact.

One place we have seen the conversation become both deeper and broader is within Kenya's Muslim community. Not all of the groups excluded from full citizenship are Muslim, but it is a major factor in the discrimination against Nubians, Somali-Kenyans, and others. It is now common to hear Muslim leaders name ID as an issue that affects their whole community. Similarly, policymakers and community leaders who once addressed citizenship as an issue for a single constituency—such as "the Somali community"—now speak about it pertaining to "the Muslim community," minority communities as a whole, or even just anyone subject to vetting.

What we realized by reflecting on our work and how this unity has begun to surface was that it didn't happen spontaneously. Aisha started by saying, "it just happened," but she went on to describe years-long efforts to develop a deeper understanding of systemic causes with communities, connect the citizenship issue to other challenges faced by marginalized people, develop ties between affected communities, and introduce stories of shared struggle and liberation. It turns out that unity didn't just happen.

### Citizenship as "the mother of all rights"

Access to identity documents is the mother of all rights. Having these vital documents means an individual has the "gate pass" to access all other basic rights and government entitlements. For a child to access education, they need a birth certificate. A young woman or man seeking an opportunity to further their studies or take on official employment would need an identity document. As Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa faced one of the harshest droughts ever experienced, identity documents were required to access the aid being provided by humanitarian organizations. This is a clear indication that organizations working on other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or human rights issues should consider the critical role citizenship plays in realizing one's fullest potential.

## Critical Consciousness Is the Foundation for Solidarity

When Namati began its citizenship work in Kenya, most justice seekers saw their struggles as isolated incidents. They believed they had "fallen through the cracks," unaware that the delays and denials they faced were not the norm for people from the country's majority ethnic and religious groups. To address this, Namati worked closely with partners in affected communities to help people understand their rights by holding community forums, canvassing potential justice seekers, and showing up in spaces where people without IDs are likely to be.

Through those interactions with justice seekers, it became clear that more needed to be done to build knowledge of citizenship rights and the policies that shape them. Community education cannot just focus on the letter of the law and how the system works in practice. It needs to include how the laws came to be, counter prevalent narratives in Kenyan culture, and illuminate the extent of the discrimination and exclusion faced by minority communities in the country. It also needs to open the door to action. In short, the team and its community ambassadors needed to build critical consciousness.

Namati program staff, partner paralegals, and community ambassadors came together to develop new ways of talking about citizenship issues and new stories to share from each affected community. They practiced delivering concise, impactful messages—"elevator speeches"—to articulate these ideas clearly and consistently.

That approach set things in motion. The systemic understanding that harsh vetting and exclusion are based in discrimination started to show up more and more out in the community, on social media, and in political debates. As a result, it became easier for justice seekers to identify with others, which laid the groundwork for solidarity between disparate communities. It also made it possible to use that solidarity as the basis for coordinated campaigning that could make a difference.

For example, as the Kenyan government prepared to roll out a new digital ID regime, communities and advocates from across the country united to challenge it. Together, they argued in public and in court that transitioning to a digital system risked entrenching the exclusion of entire communities. The system was halted, partially reformed, and then restarted with new protections for populations that had been subject to discriminatory vetting in the past. Although they tried, the government and other supporters of vetting were unsuccessful in undermining the new narrative of systemic discrimination and in dividing the coalition fighting for citizenship justice.

A lot of work went into maintaining the coalition as it grew more diverse and increasingly ran into pushback from the government and in the media. Focusing on critical consciousness proved to be one of the coalition's most impactful strategies. The coalition and their constituencies had conversations over and over that kept coming back to the same shared understandings: "This is systemic discrimination" and "the solution is to end vetting." Repetition was key in seeding and solidifying consciousness.

The coalition also consistently centered the voices of people from across Kenya who were directly impacted by the discrimination. That meant

building their consciousness and creating opportunities for them to articulate their views on the injustice and how it should be solved. The result for the coalition was a stronger message that carried the credibility of coming from those most impacted.

## Ambition and Collective Action Expand as Solidarity Grows

Bolstered by the understanding that grew from deep conversations facilitated by paralegals, communities began defining policy goals, crafting petitions, and strategizing collectively. Seeing other communities take similar steps inspired them to think bigger. They started to think about how to move together. In short, they developed a power analysis to accompany their goals.

By connecting their demands to those of other excluded groups, communities became more ambitious. Once hesitant to confront the vetting process, some now view ending vetting altogether as an achievable goal.

That increased ambition also showed up in casework. For example, paralegals from Namati's

partner organization Haki na Sheria have accompanied many people to get birth certificates for themselves and/or their children, but they were hesitant to devote more time and resources to helping people get IDs. The vetting challenge seemed insurmountable. Slowly, however, they began to take on more ID cases. What changed? First, the Haki na Sheria team saw they weren't alone in pushing for full recognition of everyone's citizenship rights, which meant they were more powerful than they realized. Second, they started to see responsiveness from the government on the issue, so their confidence in the possibility of real change grew over time.

The results are clear. In 2022, Haki na Sheria won a government commitment to provide 14,000 ID cards for Kenyans living in and around refugee camps in the north, where many people are wrongly classified as refugees and therefore not eligible for Kenyan citizenship. Almost all of those promised ID cards have been delivered, and Haki na Sheria continues to fight for recognition for tens of thousands more victims of this "double registration."

## Integrated Strategies Reinforce Collective Action

The Namati team and its partners worked to ensure that every activity—casework, outreach, and organizing—reinforced the broader strategy of building a unified movement. They consistently ask themselves: How does this activity contribute to our larger goals? For example, do the topics on their regular radio show reinforce the messaging delivered in community forums and during casework and advocacy?

This integrated approach required both careful planning and adaptability. It's not just the team, either; partners, community ambassadors, allies, and community leaders are all contributing to and looping into the design and delivery of this integrated strategy.

The team has also found ways to connect the fight for equal citizenship with other fights in order to raise the profile and gain allies. Digital security and privacy groups with global reach took up the cause, as did social welfare organizations that saw that a lack of ID would be a barrier to accessing benefits.

These integrated strategies led to an extraordinary breakthrough. In May 2024, President Ruto pledged to end vetting. It was the first time a Kenyan president publicly acknowledged the unconstitutional nature of this decades-old system. In February 2025, the president followed through by abolishing vetting committees. This was a change few thought was possible when paralegals first started helping discriminated communities to secure IDs in 2012. Today, the coalition—paralegals, grassroots leaders, community members, and allies—are working to ensure the president's historic declaration translates into a truly inclusive ID system in practice.

## Conclusion

Solidarity across affected communities has proven essential to advancing citizenship justice in Kenya. By connecting communities, the movement has highlighted systemic gaps and amplified the call for systemic change. Solidarity has also provided protection for vocal ethnic tribes by aligning them with other communities in the push for an inclusive identity system. Once systemic remedies are achieved, they will encompass all those who face barriers in accessing identity documents, ensuring a more just and equitable system for everyone.

# COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT REQUIRES STRUCTURE: ORGANIZING FOR HEALTH JUSTICE IN MOZAMBIQUE

**"We used to think that healthcare is a gift from God, but now we know that it is our right."**

*- Amelia, after working with a health advocate and Village Health Committee in Mozambique*

Mozambicans have strong healthcare rights enshrined in the constitution, Ministry of Health policies, and regional and international covenants. But a lack of information, poor enforcement, and power dynamics prevent many people from exercising those rights. Violations are persistent, with people being denied service, facilities lacking basics like water or privacy, and health workers demanding illicit payments for treatment.

Namati's approach to realizing health justice has been to seize a solution that existed on paper but not in practice: Comitês da Saúde, or Village Health Committees (VHCs). These bodies are made up of volunteer community members who work together to educate their neighbors about their rights, help patients resolve violations, and hold health facilities accountable for providing dignified care.

VHCs appear in Ministry of Health policies, but when Namati began pursuing health justice in Mozambique in early 2013, there was not a single functioning VHC in any of its program catchment areas. Strong and active voluntary associations do not appear overnight, so Namati recruited defensores de saúde—community paralegals focused on public health—to build and support VHCs. The defensores de saúde (or "health advocates" in English) got VHCs up and running and have strengthened them through training and other capacity-building initiatives ever since.

Today, Namati has health advocates in 75 health facilities across Maputo City and the provinces of Inhambane, Zambézia, and Maputo.

Each one of these facilities now has a VHC made up of 20 to 25 members. These committees are winning remedies, taking on 29,000 violations to date, with an 81 percent resolution rate, while building relationships and awareness of rights and best practices among health workers and community members.

One of the most lasting impacts may be that VHCs have proven to be powerful vehicles for individual and collective empowerment. Namati's health advocates ensure that VHCs have committed memberships that include people from vulnerable or marginalized populations, and they build the members' capacities to address not just individual cases but also systemic barriers. As a result, VHCs are working to change policy and practice so that health services are available and delivered with quality and dignity. They are an example of what innovative community organizing can look like.

Sustained collective action does not pop up overnight, nor does it happen without leadership and structure. The flourishing of VHCs in Mozambique has come with a host of lessons for what that leadership and structure can look like.

**Structures That Generate Collective Empowerment**

People join the VHC in their community for a variety of reasons. They want to learn about public health and local institutions, build their skills and confidence in engaging with others, or improve their community's essential services. Many members express a deep sense of responsibility and purpose. As a VHC member, they get to see—and, indeed, create—positive impact each day as they lead community education sessions and accompany justice seekers in resolving violations.

Laurinda, a young woman who recently joined the committee in Morrumbene, described how quickly being a member of the VHC made an impact on her. Within her first couple of days, she helped community members pursue a remedy for their case, and after a few months of service, she could see how much she had learned. That's important because she had joined the committee primarily because she saw it as a chance to gain new knowledge and skills. And now she sees an opportunity to help the committee grow its connections with other young people.

**"I am here because something motivated me to be here. It's a very beautiful experience. What motivated me is that I want to give more experience to another young person and invite more young people to be in this group so that they can study more and learn more about this project. This is very important. I learned a lot from this committee. I learned a lot from our health advocate."**

*- Laurinda Castro, member of the Village Health Committee in Morrumbene*

Laurinda's experience illuminates how VHCs empower individuals, but what may be the most exciting aspect of VHCs is how they generate collective empowerment.

VHCs build rights awareness, critical consciousness, and agency within communities while creating a space and structure for collective learning and action. They are a space to plug into for community-spirited people who want to do more. Community organizing isn't marching in the streets in spontaneous and cathartic expression; it is about structure that creates community and collaboration—structure that lasts for the long fights that come with pushing for justice. And that's what VHCs can be.

One place we see that is in how VHCs play a role in systemic change and advocacy. Beyond seeking remedies in individual cases, they also seek to affect policy and practice at health facilities.

With support from Namati's health advocates, VHCs lead quarterly participatory health facility assessments, analyze the data they collect alongside staff and patients to determine the root causes of common problems, agree on a strategy to address the systemic issues, and commit to concrete actions and timelines.

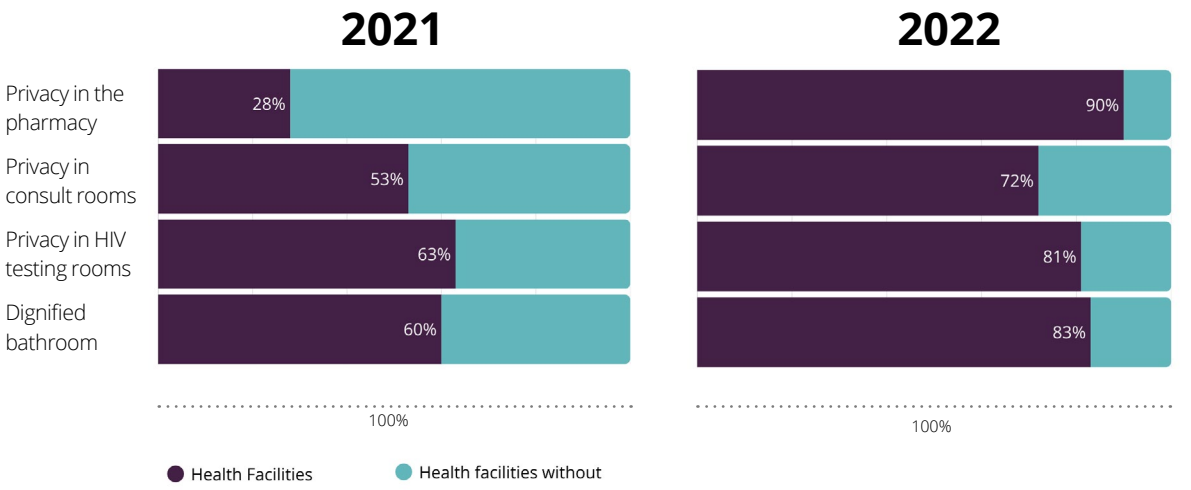
But their efforts and impacts can expand beyond an individual facility. For example, when multiple patients across different communities and provinces complained about a lack of privacy when receiving diagnoses and test results, VHCs took on the issue. Using testimonies from community members and years of data generated from their casework, they secured a directive from provincial health officials commanding all health facilities to improve privacy measures. VHCs collaborated with health facility staff to identify solutions, such as scheduling adjustments and installing privacy screens, and ensured the solutions were implemented and sustained.

A similar story emerged with an effort to ensure every facility offered privacy for patients. Figure 3 shows how quickly a coordinated advocacy effort built on grassroots casework can lead to results. In just a year and a half, patient privacy at health facilities across an entire province greatly increased.

Success in one province could then be taken to others, and the momentum they build can transfer to other issues, which leads to even more systemic change in both policy and practice. VHCs have since taken on other systemic issues, including bribery in health facilities.

Since VHCs are now seen as respected partners in the places where Namati works, they are increasingly involved in decision-making at local and district levels. Standout members of VHCs have begun forming advocacy groups to solidify this role and address patterns of violations at the district and provincial levels. These groups collect data on rights violations and invite justice seekers from multiple communities and facilities to share their stories directly, with the goal of improving how care is provided across multiple health facilities.

HEALTH FACILITY PRIVACY BEFORE AND AFTER INITIATIVE




The ultimate aim is for VHCs and advocacy groups to evolve into a national movement. This kind of ambition is possible when communities are supported by a sustainable structure that enables grassroots leadership development, collective deliberation, and ongoing dialogue with—or pressuring of — public institutions.


## What It Takes for Committees to Flourish

In the Mozambique experience, having a trained and dedicated health advocate has been key to success. You can hear it in how VHC members talk about the health advocates who support the committees' work and development.

Laurinda, the VHC member in Morrumbene, put it like this:

**"I am here to learn. And I have learned a lot to teach the community thanks to our health advocate, Eugenia".**

But what does the support they provide look like in practice?

When asked about the most important aspects of their work, the health advocates emphasized several key responsibilities:

*"The health advocate must be humble and empathetic and know how to put herself in the other's shoes because most of the members come from very poor communities; sometimes they don't even know how to read or write. This includes carrying out simulations of activities so that members develop communication skills and mastery of the contents and methodology of the educational sessions in the community and in the health unit."*

*"[They must also] create a welcoming and inclusive environment, and provide development opportunities for each member, forming working groups composed of strong and weak members and giving all members the opportunity to lead all activities and decision-making."*

*— Farida Jafar Taju, health advocate, Inhambane Province*

*"The health advocate must offer initial training on their role and create opportunities for the committee members themselves to lead the activities, invest in the recognition of the role of the committee by the health units, and publicize the results or impact of the health committees' actions in the community and in the health unit."*

*— Geraldo Cremildo Guilundo, health advocate, Inhambane Province*

*"The health advocate must cultivate a sense of responsibility among the members and encourage a culture of accountability. That is, when a member is assigned responsibilities, he has to give feedback to others on the activities carried out... share experiences and changes achieved by the committees from other areas of health, give feedback on the positive aspects and those that need improvement in a constructive way without humiliating or denigrating the members... praising the members for the successes achieved by the group as well as the individual ones."*

*— Carlota Carlos, health advocate, Maputo Province*

*"The health advocate must cultivate a spirit of leadership rather than deferring to authority, establish a relationship of trust and a healthy work environment, ensure the representation of the various groups in the creation of the committee, observe the terms of reference for the functioning of the health committees, [and] periodically carry out continuous training on topics related to health."*

*— Alice Chambule, health advocate, Maputo City*

*"The health advocate must involve health authorities in the creation or revitalization of the committee, developing initiatives that encourage competitiveness among members as well as motivate members, [and] getting involved in the design of strategies and advocacy for the resolution of challenges that limit access to health services."*

*— Eny Quembo, health advocate, Maputo City*

Their answers emphasize two sides of the health advocate's role. One is all about maximizing empowerment. Health advocates say that they must support VHC members to take ownership of the committee and ultimately over the outcomes of the health facility in their community. The second relates to securing buy-in from public health authorities, ensuring that VHCs are seen as valued partners in the health system. This dual responsibility requires a delicate balance of leadership.

## Building on Progress

A decade of supporting Village Health Committees has led to significant progress. Communities have seen health outcomes improve and influenced public health policy and practice, and Namati is on its way to imagining a national movement of VHCs and community health advocates to advance systemic change at district, provincial, and national levels. At this juncture, there are new frontiers and questions about how to build on this progress and advance health justice across Mozambique.

## How can the VHC movement continue to expand across Mozambique?

Boane, a district outside Maputo with a population of about 100,000 people, is home to an exemplary Village Health Committee. Maria Luís, a member of the committee, told us that her dream was that every community in the whole country has a committee like theirs. It is an ambitious dream, but there has also been remarkable growth over the last decade.

Increased resources from the Ministry of Health are crucial for sustaining and scaling the movement. Currently, VHC members volunteer their time and often cover costs like transportation themselves.

***Image:*** *Maria Luís, a member of the Village Health Committee in Boane, Mozambique*

Additionally, VHCs could benefit from more training, oversight, engagement, and strategic alignment with the Ministry of Health. Namati, the committees, community leaders, and some local health officials continue to advocate for the Ministry of Health to invest in VHCs at a level that matches their significant impact.

***Image:*** *Hortência Alangem, a Namati Health Advocate in Inhambane Province, Mozambique*

## How can VHCs influence policymaking at higher levels?

The advocacy groups made up of selected VHC members are the primary strategy for building VHCs' policymaking influence. The advocacy groups were established in 2021 and are made up of strong Village Health Committee members and patients from six districts where Namati works.[11] The next year, the initiative expanded to four additional districts.[12] Namati convenes the groups, trains them further in human rights and advocacy, and helps them get in front of decision-makers. The advocacy groups' objectives include:

- Giving voice to patients, communities, and VHC members at the district, provincial, and national levels.
- Recognizing patterns of common challenges across communities and leading advocacy for their resolution.
- Pushing for recognition of the key role of VHCs in promoting humanized health services and for greater investment in and support for committees.

These groups show tremendous promise in bringing patient voices to the forefront and reducing the prevalence of common violations—even at health facilities where Namati does not have health advocates posted.

## Conclusion: Collective Empowerment Requires Structure

Any group of people can come together to build their collective power, but it won't happen without intention. Village Health Committees in Mozambique have shown the importance of having a space with leadership and structure that people can turn to when they need assistance or when they want to take collective action.

Namati and partners are pioneering new ways to support local committees as engines of democracy in other countries as well. In Sierra Leone, Namati supports Village Area Land Committees that bring together residents to protect land from underhanded investors and environmental degradation. In Kenya, Community Land Management Committees lead the way in implementing communal ownership and management of land and natural resources. Along the way they are learning what it takes to create spaces for deliberative decision-making that actually work, without being either "captured" or ignored by those in power.

Community governance is beautiful in theory and powerful when it works. The journey to making it undeniable may be part of the evolution of democracy in the 21st century.

# Conclusion

This report documents two case studies and a set of insights from interviews with over ninety community members about how communities can build their own power over time through the legal empowerment cycle.

The pursuit of systemic change is daunting. Systems are complex and intimidating. People in power want to keep things the way they are. For communities starting on this journey, the barriers can feel insurmountable and the path forward unclear.

The stories and insights here remind us that the path to justice begins with small, intentional steps: a conversation, a complaint, a connection. Over time, these efforts grow into movements that challenge entrenched power and achieve systemic change. Change is possible when people act collectively and have the right tools and knowledge in hand.

Using the law, community paralegals work alongside people affected by unjust systems to secure meaningful remedies. This knowledge and this process creates learning about where the system is failing people and leadership among those most affected by its failures. In Kenya, we see how communities have used the law over time and built solidarity—first within and then across affected communities. In Mozambique, Village Health Committees provide a blueprint for how local structures offer fertile ground for deepening leadership and waging collective action.

We hope that Namati's experience offers others a new idea to test or a new insight to apply in their own work. Most importantly, we hope these stories offer a sense of hope and solidarity to everyone fighting to protect the rights of their communities.

# Endnotes

1 *Paulo Freire. Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Continuum, 1994).*

2 *The language here is drawn from two pieces authored by Namati's founder, Vivek Maru, describing how the legal empowerment cycle builds community power: Vivek Maru, "Give the People the Law," Democracy, September 4, 2020, https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/give-the-people-the-law/ and Vivek Maru, "A Pathway to Climate and Environmental Justice," American Journal of Law and Equality 3 (2023): 103–149, doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/ajle_a_00060*

3 *Derick W. Brinkerhoff and Omar Azfar, Decentralization and Community Empowerment: Does Community Empowerment Deepen Democracy and Improve Service Delivery? (n.p., 2006), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237295682_Decentralization_and_Community_Empowerment_Does_community_empowerment_deepen_democracy_and_improve_service_delivery*

4 *Joe Painter et al., Connecting Localism and Community Empowerment (n.p., accessed March 11, 2025), https://ccednet-rcdec.ca/sites/ccednet-rcdec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2011-connectinglocalismandcommunityempowerment-discussionpaperpainter.pdf*

5 *The concepts defining "Building Power to Shape the Law" section were heavily shaped by Center for Evaluation Innovation's report, "Evaluating Community Organizing," which can be accessed here: https://evaluationinnovation.org/publication/evaluating-community-organizing/*

6 *You can read a fuller account of Ziya's story here: https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-digital-ids-make-systemic-bias-worse/*

7 *Of the 95 interviews, 19 were conducted in Nairobi, Kenya with paralegals who focus on citizenship-related right violations, while 76 were conducted with paralegals based in Myanmar and India (59 and 17, respectively) who work on land and environmental justice violations.*

8 *Namati et al., Citizenship Rights in Kenya (Nairobi: Namati, 2018), https://namati.org/publications/citizenship-rights-in-kenya/*

9 *Ziya's Story is a powerful firsthand account of this.https://namati.org/news-stories/ziyas-story-fighting-for-id-fighting-the-system/*

10 *You can read an in-depth accounting of these efforts in the case study "Speaking With One Voice: How Solidarity Is Shaping Citizenship in Kenya" (pp. 35-41).*

11 *Chamanculo and Matola Districts in Maputo and Zavala, Vilankulo, Maxixe, and Jangamo Districts in Inhambane.*

12 *KaMavota and Marracuene Districts in Maputo; Inhambane City and Inharrime in Inhambane.*

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