

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.

THE LEGAL EMPOWERMENT CYCLE

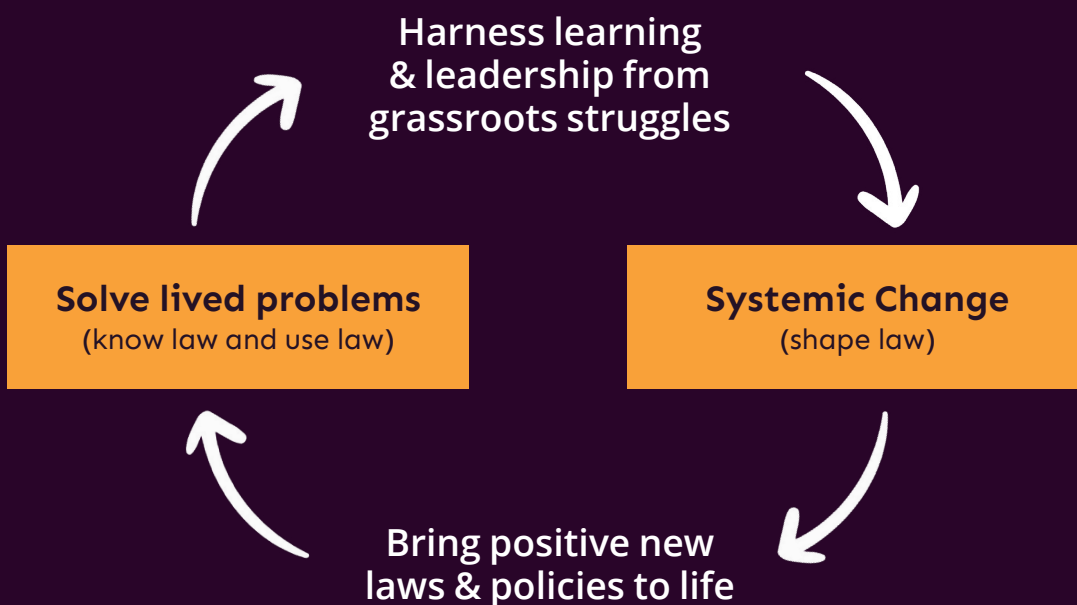


Figure 1: The legal empowerment cycle

This publication is a chapter in the longer report, “Power Up: Lessons from Twelve Years of Organizing with Community Paralegals,” which can be accessed in full here: <https://grassrootsjusticenetwork.org/resources/power-up-lessons-from-twelve-years-of-organizing-with-community-paralegals/>

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 LAW⁵



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.

Endnotes

- 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/>

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