

What is a Community Paralegal?

“Community paralegals,” also known as “grassroots legal advocates” or “barefoot lawyers,” use knowledge of law and skills like mediation, organizing, education, and advocacy to seek concrete solutions to instances of injustice.



“Community paralegals,” also known as “grassroots legal advocates,” provide a bridge between the law and real life. These paralegals are trained in basic law and in skills like mediation, organizing, education, and advocacy. They form a dynamic, creative frontline that can engage formal and traditional institutions alike.

Instead of treating their clients as victims requiring an expert service—“I will solve this problem for you”—community paralegals can focus on legal *empowerment*. “We will solve this together, and when we’re done you will be in a stronger position to tackle problems like these in the future.”

Community paralegals are different from conventional paralegals—their primary role is not to assist lawyers, but rather to work directly with the communities they serve.

But just as primary health workers are connected to doctors and hospitals, community paralegals should be connected to lawyers and the possibility of litigation or high-level advocacy if frontline methods fail.

Community paralegal programs are diverse. Some take a holistic approach, addressing a range of justice needs; others focus on addressing a specific issue, like violence against women or protection of customary land rights. Some paralegals serve a very local jurisdiction—a village, a neighborhood—as volunteers; others are paid staff who cover a much larger area—a chiefdom, say, or a district.

How Community Paralegals Work

Community paralegals use several strategies to advance justice. These include:

- Public education to increase awareness of the law
- Advising clients on legal process, and options for pursuing remedies
- Assisting clients to navigate authorities and institutions
- Mediating disputes
- Organizing collective action
- Advocacy
- Fact Finding, investigations, and monitoring

In exceptionally difficult or serious cases, a paralegal can seek the assistance of a lawyer, who in turn may resort to litigation or higher level advocacy. Often, the credible threat of litigation can lead more powerful parties to participate in mediation or negotiation.

Advantages of This Approach

At their best, community paralegals can:

- Promote empowerment by fostering legal awareness and agency of clients.
- Provide tailored solutions to legal problems due to their creative strategies, range of skills and tools, and deep knowledge of local context.
- Be more cost-effective and accessible than most lawyers.
- Find solutions not only for individuals, but also entire communities.
- Engage a wide range of institutions, including administrative agencies and customary authorities.
- Prioritize a fair resolution rather than taking sides with only one party to a conflict.

Paralegals in Action: Three Case Studies

Negotiating Release from Wrongful Detention¹

After receiving a complaint at the station, police officers in Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone went to arrest the three boys involved. The boys were not at home, so the police instead arrested and detained the boys' mothers.

A paralegal working in the area heard about this incident and approached the local police Commanding Officer. The officer first told the paralegal that she would not release the mothers until their sons came into the station. The paralegal used knowledge of the formal law to negotiate for a different outcome, explaining that the police have no right to arrest a person for a crime allegedly committed by someone else. In addition, the paralegal went on to say that even if the police planned to file charges, the law allows only for a 72 hour detention period

¹ Case adapted from Daniel Sesay, "Paralegals in Helping Women Access Justice," forthcoming.

– and yet the women had been held for four nights already. The officer realized the paralegal was right and so she released the three women. The officer asked the women to report to the station again in two days in order for the police to continue collecting information related to the original complaint.

The three women returned to the police station two days later, but were promptly arrested by the police station's second-in-command. The paralegal called the Commanding Officer, who was away at the district headquarters, for an explanation of this second arrest. The Officer was more resistant than in their first exchange. She was upset that the paralegal was interfering with her work. The paralegal calmly persisted in referencing the law and making a case on behalf of the women. As a result, the Commanding Officer ordered the release of the women, this time unconditionally. Since then, the women did not have further issues with the police regarding the case. Another officer in the station also praised the paralegal for the way negotiation led to a proper outcome.

Navigating Authorities to Complete a Birth Registration²

Ali is a 35-year-old Nubian bus driver who lives in the Kibera area of Nairobi, Kenya. Nubians make up an ethnic and religious minority group that often experiences discrimination by the state and the general public. Ali attempted to obtain a birth certificate for himself through the late birth registration procedure, but had no success. Ali became fearful of the authorities. He decided not to re-apply, knowing how aggressive the questioning of the officials could be.

Community paralegals from the Kibera-based Nubian Rights Forum visited Ali during their door-to-door outreach. They encouraged Ali to try again for a birth certificate – this time, with a paralegal's help. The paralegal explained the legal requirements of the process in detail, adding information about what other Nubians had experienced and how they achieved success.

Since Ali had lost his secondary school certificate, the paralegal advised him to obtain a certificate from his previous religious education institution instead, as this document would bolster his late birth registration application. The paralegal advised Ali to obtain copies of his family members' national identification cards, also required in the late birth registration process.

Armed with new knowledge about the procedure and his supporting documents, Ali filled out the application form. The paralegal accompanied Ali to the District Commissioner's office. While their first visit did not result in a meeting, Ali and the paralegal returned to follow-up a further four times, eventually securing the necessary signature for Ali's birth registration application. While Ali still had to complete two rounds of additional verification, the paralegal advised and accompanied him through each step. By that point, Ali had gained the courage to pay the official 150 Kenyan Shillings application fee. Two weeks later, Ali was asked to collect his birth certificate at the registration office.

² Case study drawn from the experience of Nubian Rights Forum- Namati partnership in Nairobi, Kenya.

Advocacy and Arbitration in a Community-Level Case: Collectively Seeking Justice³

For many months, the 98 families living in a low-income housing block in Bogor, Indonesia, had not received electricity. The state electricity company, PLN, stopped providing electricity after finding out the wires had been illegally connected. The company demanded the residents pay a fine of several thousand dollars in order to reconnect the lines. The residents, however, claimed the developer of the housing block was the party at fault. The developer was also unwilling to pay the fine.

The residents approached a group of paralegals with their case. The paralegals assisted the community in staging rallies, writing letters to government agencies, and obtaining newspaper coverage of the issue. The paralegals also approached members of a local parliamentary commission and asked them to conduct two hearings on the case. The commission members accepted.

During the hearings, the commission asked all parties—the electricity company, the developer, and the residents—to share their side of the story. Many community members attended the meetings and had the chance to speak publicly about their challenges. Following the second meeting, the commission issued a non-binding statement in which they asked the developer to pay the fine. The electricity company initially still pressed the local residents for the money. After the paralegals threatened to take the case to court, the developer paid half of the fine and the company restored the electricity connection.

To learn more about community paralegals:

- Check out the [Kampala Declaration on Community Paralegals](#) (endorsed by 60 groups across Africa and cited in legislative debate regarding legal aid in several countries).
- Use a [practical guide](#) on starting and running a community paralegal program.
- Read [this analysis](#) of all evidence we could find on the impact of legal empowerment efforts.
- Ask questions and compare notes with other practitioners at the [Global Legal Empowerment Network](#).

³ This case study is adapted from Ward Berenschot and Taufik Rinaldi, "Paralegalism and Legal Aid in Indonesia: Enlarging the Shadow of the Law," Indonesia chapter in forthcoming six-country paralegal study.