

A Learning Agenda for Legal Empowerment

Over the past 15 years, legal empowerment has matured significantly as a field and there is growing recognition of its potential to advance justice on a wide range of issues. As legal empowerment efforts grow, we have an opportunity to collectively tackle the most pressing questions for the field.

The Legal Empowerment Network is launching a learning agenda to foster deeper collaboration and address key knowledge gaps, by focusing the efforts of hundreds of organizations on a set of common questions. It will provide the foundation for comparative learning among practitioners and researchers working across different issue areas and geographies. Most importantly, the Learning Agenda will build community, creating space for practitioners to come together to reflect on lessons learned and generate ideas for innovation.

Why do we need a learning agenda?

Legal empowerment is diverse, encompassing a range of methods: legal literacy, accompaniment and legal representation, strategic litigation, organizing and collective advocacy. Legal empowerment is also applied in different sectors, including housing, health, gender-based violence, labour rights, land and environmental justice to name just a few. What unites this diverse field is a focus on helping communities to know, use, and shape the law. The methods are varied but the goals are the same: to democratize the law and give people more power over the decisions that directly affect them.

There are a number of studies documenting the impact of specific legal empowerment efforts, but we need a broader evidence base that connects insights emerging from experimentation across the field. A learning agenda offers an opportunity to develop a common framework for comparing experience across issues and places. It also creates space to foster action research, and use participatory learning to advance the fight for social change. By reflecting on the core questions that emerge in practice and through exchange with others, we can build stronger programs that more effectively address injustice. And by generating evidence about the impact, we can make the case for why growing legal empowerment efforts should be a public priority around the world.

What do we mean by learning?

Learning is often narrowly equated with research but that is not the only path. The Learning Agenda takes a big-tent approach to learning, which includes different approaches including practitioner reflection, using program data, and formal research studies using various qualitative and quantitative methods. Three principles can help ensure that learning is practically useful and reflects the ethos of legal empowerment. First, learning should be linked to practice. By grounding learning in key questions for program strategy, we can identify what works, under what conditions, and use that knowledge to achieve transformative impact. Second, it is only through collective and comparative learning that we can address knowledge gaps that face the field as a whole. Third, learning is most powerful when done in partnership with communities. Methods of learning must be respectful of their knowledge and should aim to build their power to address the issues that most affect them.

What are some of the top priorities for learning?

In 2018, the Legal Empowerment Network launched a collaborative effort to create a learning agenda for the field. We [convened](#) 30 leading practitioners and academics working on legal empowerment to outline priority areas for learning to expand the frontiers of knowledge. Building from the co-design workshop, we convened working groups on four themes: impact, program methods, relationship to the state, and scale and sustainability. Over the following year, each working group reviewed the existing evidence, identified the gaps and key debates, and suggested key questions for learning. We are currently synthesizing the literature reviews produced by each group in order to share a draft learning agenda this spring.

An overarching priority for the Learning Agenda is to generate learning about the pathways from casework to systems change. The starting point for legal empowerment is the lived experiences of ordinary people: a mother struggling to obtain an ID, or members of a fishing community seeking to stop a factory from dumping poisonous chemicals in their waters. In the aggregate, grassroots cases show how the law works in practice, revealing where public systems that are meant to protect rights break down. This is a different way of approaching reform: drawing lessons from the experience of ordinary people, and translating cases that affect thousands of people into reforms that affect millions. How can legal empowerment efforts to redress specific rights violations contribute to broader changes to laws, policies and institutional practice? How can legal empowerment build power amongst people facing injustice? Within these broad questions, there are many important questions about how change happens. This includes understanding effective strategies for advancing systemic change in different settings; how engagement with the state varies across political contexts; and how legal strategies can be combined with organizing and social movements.

In addition, the Learning Agenda will also include broader questions about the impact of legal empowerment efforts, how programs can be scaled to close the global justice gap, and the forms of financing needed to sustain and grow the legal empowerment movement.

Next Steps

- Feedback on the draft learning agenda: a draft learning agenda will be shared widely with practitioners and researchers for input in the spring of 2021. This is an opportunity to build engagement and ensure the Learning Agenda targets the most important priorities for the coming years.
- Catalyzing action research on legal empowerment: The Legal Empowerment Network and IDRC will support cohorts of [action research projects](#) in Africa and Southeast Asia. Over the next 3 years, these projects will generate new knowledge on how legal empowerment can achieve transformative systems change. They will also support wider regional engagement on learning and collective action.
- Learning in the Legal Empowerment Network: Network members can engage with the Learning Agenda through a range of [learning opportunities](#) including an annual leadership course, in-person learning exchanges, and e-learning courses. In addition to providing resources for legal empowerment organizations to advance learning in their own work, we hope to foster multi-year learning collaborations within regional and thematic core groups.