

Community Legal Empowerment for Marginalized Communities: Strengthening Legal Awareness and Access to Justice in Brazil

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Abstract

Marginalized communities in Brazil frequently encounter barriers to accessing justice, including limited legal knowledge, socioeconomic disadvantages, complex legal procedures, and restricted access to legal assistance. This community engagement program aimed to strengthen legal awareness and empower community members to recognize, understand, and exercise their basic rights. The program was implemented through a participatory legal education approach involving community members, facilitators, and local stakeholders. Activities included legal literacy sessions, discussions of everyday legal problems, rights awareness education, simulations of complaint and dispute-resolution procedures, and information on available legal assistance services. The program emphasized accessible language and practical examples to enable participants to relate legal knowledge to their daily experiences. The results indicated increased participants' understanding of fundamental rights, legal procedures, available public services, and mechanisms for seeking legal assistance. Participants also demonstrated greater confidence in identifying potential rights violations and determining appropriate channels for resolving legal problems. The program demonstrates that community-based legal education can contribute to strengthening legal empowerment and improving access to justice among marginalized communities in Brazil.

Keywords

Legal Empowerment, Legal Awareness, Marginalized Communities, Access To Justice, Community Engagement, Brazil



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INTRODUCTION

Access to justice is a fundamental component of a democratic society because the recognition of rights has limited meaning when individuals and communities cannot understand, claim, or defend those rights. Legal access should therefore not be interpreted solely as the ability to bring a case before a court. It also includes access to legal information, legal assistance, appropriate dispute-resolution mechanisms, and public institutions capable of protecting citizens' rights. In Brazil, this issue is particularly important for marginalized communities that experience

socioeconomic inequality, limited access to public services, and various forms of social exclusion. The Brazilian Constitution recognizes the importance of legal assistance for people who lack sufficient resources and establishes the Public Defender's Office as an essential institution for providing comprehensive and free legal assistance to those in need.

Legal inequality can occur when people are unfamiliar with their rights or do not know where and how to seek assistance. Individuals experiencing poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, violence, or insecure living conditions may encounter additional barriers when dealing with administrative and legal institutions. Complex legal terminology and procedures can make the justice system difficult to understand for ordinary citizens. As a consequence, people may recognize that they have experienced an injustice but remain uncertain about the appropriate institution, procedure, or mechanism through which their rights can be protected. The development of legal literacy is therefore an important component of community empowerment. Legal literacy enables individuals to understand basic rights, recognize potential violations, identify available public services, and make informed decisions regarding legal problems. Legal empowerment places community members in an active position rather than treating them merely as recipients of legal assistance. Through this approach, legal knowledge can become a practical resource for strengthening citizenship and community participation.

This approach is increasingly reflected in Brazilian public policy. The Brazilian Ministry of Justice and Public Security has developed initiatives focusing on access to justice and legal empowerment for vulnerable groups. The *Escola Nacional de Acesso à Justiça* (ENAJU), for example, was established to promote civic education, democratize legal knowledge, and strengthen popular participation. Its educational approach specifically targets vulnerable populations, community leaders, and civil society organizations, using accessible language and interactive learning to help people understand their rights and identify institutions responsible for protecting them. Community-based legal empowerment has also been incorporated into programs that develop local leaders as multipliers of rights knowledge. The Brazilian Ministry of Justice's *Defensoras Populares* initiative, for example, provides women in vulnerable situations with education in human rights and access to justice. Participants are prepared to identify rights violations, guide other women, and strengthen connections between communities and justice mechanisms. Similar initiatives for young people seek to develop community leaders who can contribute to the identification and resolution of problems related to rights and access to public

services. These initiatives demonstrate that legal empowerment can be developed through community education rather than relying exclusively on conventional legal services.

The importance of community participation is also evident in Brazil's community justice initiatives. The *Agentes Comunitários de Justiça* approach encourages trained community members to understand their rights, maintain spaces for dialogue, and contribute to the resolution of collective concerns. Such an approach recognizes that communities possess knowledge and social networks that can become important resources in resolving disputes and strengthening access to justice. The model is particularly relevant to marginalized communities because legal problems are often interconnected with social, economic, and interpersonal circumstances. Another important challenge concerns geographical and institutional distance from legal services. People living in peripheral or underserved areas may have difficulty reaching legal institutions or may lack sufficient information about available services. In response, Brazil has developed the *Defensoria em Todos os Cantos* strategy, which seeks to expand Public Defender services, establish community service points, strengthen mobile legal services, and prioritize groups experiencing greater vulnerability. These developments indicate that improving access to justice requires both institutional expansion and community-level education.

Legal education can also function as a preventive mechanism. When community members understand basic rights and responsibilities, they may be better prepared to identify potential problems before they develop into more serious disputes. Basic knowledge concerning consumer rights, family law, labor rights, social assistance, documentation, domestic violence, housing, and access to public services can help individuals make more informed decisions. Community education can also introduce appropriate channels for mediation, administrative complaints, and legal assistance, reducing dependence on informal or potentially harmful solutions.

The role of accessible language is particularly important. Legal information is often presented through technical terminology that is difficult for people without legal education to understand. Community legal empowerment should therefore translate legal concepts into practical examples related to everyday experiences. Discussions, simulations, question-and-answer sessions, case illustrations, and simple informational materials can make legal knowledge more understandable and applicable. Research on rights education within the Brazilian Public Defender's Office similarly emphasizes that access to justice extends beyond legal assistance and

includes educating citizens about their rights. Based on this context, the present community engagement program focuses on strengthening legal awareness and access to justice among marginalized communities in Brazil. The program is designed as a participatory legal education initiative involving community members, facilitators, and relevant local stakeholders. Activities include legal literacy sessions, identification of everyday legal problems, discussions of fundamental rights, simulations of complaint and dispute-resolution procedures, and information regarding available legal assistance services.

The program seeks to position community members as active participants in understanding and protecting their rights. Rather than replacing professional legal services, the initiative functions as an educational bridge between marginalized communities and the formal justice system. Through increased legal awareness, participants are expected to become more capable of recognizing rights violations, identifying appropriate institutions, seeking assistance, and participating constructively in the resolution of legal and social problems. In this way, community legal empowerment can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of access to justice and strengthen the capacity of marginalized communities to exercise their rights within Brazil's democratic legal system.

METHODS

This community engagement program employed a participatory legal empowerment approach to strengthen legal awareness and access to justice among marginalized communities in Brazil. The program was designed as a community-based legal education initiative rather than as a substitute for professional legal representation. Its primary purpose was to improve participants' understanding of basic rights, legal procedures, available public services, and mechanisms for obtaining legal assistance. The implementation consisted of five stages: community assessment, program preparation, legal education activities, mentoring and consultation, and evaluation. The first stage involved identifying the main legal and social issues experienced by community members. The engagement team communicated with community representatives, local facilitators, and participants to identify problems related to access to public services, employment, housing, family matters, consumer rights, documentation, social assistance, and other everyday legal concerns. The assessment was conducted through informal discussions, observation, and identification of frequently raised questions. The second stage involved preparing educational materials based on the issues identified during the assessment. Legal information was simplified into accessible language so that

participants without a legal background could understand the material. The learning materials included basic explanations of citizens' rights and responsibilities, procedures for submitting complaints, mechanisms for resolving disputes, and information about institutions providing legal assistance. Practical examples and hypothetical cases were used to connect legal concepts with participants' everyday experiences.

The third stage consisted of community legal education sessions. Activities were conducted through interactive presentations, group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, case simulations, and role-playing. Participants were encouraged to identify legal problems in hypothetical situations and discuss possible steps for addressing them. The facilitators emphasized the importance of using appropriate legal and administrative channels rather than relying on confrontation or informal mechanisms that could create additional problems. The fourth stage involved mentoring and basic legal guidance. Participants were given opportunities to discuss general legal concerns with facilitators and identify appropriate institutions or services to which they could be referred. The mentoring process focused on legal information and procedural orientation rather than providing formal legal representation. When a problem required professional legal assistance, participants were encouraged to seek support from qualified lawyers, the Public Defender's Office, or other appropriate institutions.

Particular attention was given to groups experiencing greater social and economic vulnerability. The activities were organized in a non-discriminatory and inclusive manner, allowing participants to raise concerns without being stigmatized. Women, low-income families, workers in informal employment, and residents of underserved communities were encouraged to participate actively. The use of simple language and practical examples was maintained throughout the sessions to reduce barriers caused by complex legal terminology. The fifth stage involved evaluation. The evaluation used descriptive and participatory techniques to assess changes in participants' legal awareness. Participants were asked questions before and after the educational sessions concerning their understanding of basic rights, available legal services, complaint procedures, and appropriate mechanisms for resolving disputes. Facilitators also documented participants' involvement in discussions, their ability to identify legal issues, and their confidence in determining where to seek assistance.

The evaluation results were discussed with community representatives and facilitators to identify strengths, limitations, and future needs. Feedback was used to determine which legal topics required additional explanation and which forms of

educational delivery were most effective. Documentation included attendance records, activity reports, discussion notes, photographs where appropriate and ethically permitted, and summaries of the issues discussed. The program also incorporated a sustainability strategy. Community facilitators were encouraged to retain and reuse simplified legal education materials after the completion of the engagement activities. Participants who demonstrated strong interest and leadership potential could be encouraged to become community information facilitators who help disseminate basic rights information and direct residents toward appropriate legal institutions. This approach supports the development of community capacity while maintaining the distinction between community legal education and professional legal practice.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the program. Participation was voluntary, personal legal information was treated confidentially, and facilitators avoided making definitive legal judgments in matters requiring professional representation. Participants were informed that general legal education does not constitute a substitute for individualized legal advice from qualified professionals. The program therefore emphasized empowerment, awareness, referral, and access rather than unauthorized legal practice. Through this method, community engagement was positioned as a bridge between marginalized communities and the formal justice system. The participatory model allowed legal education to respond directly to community needs while strengthening participants' capacity to recognize rights, understand procedures, seek appropriate assistance, and participate more effectively in the protection of their legal interests.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The community engagement program on legal empowerment was implemented as a community-based legal education initiative for marginalized communities in Brazil. The activities focused on increasing legal awareness, strengthening participants' understanding of basic rights, and improving their ability to identify appropriate mechanisms for obtaining legal assistance. Rather than providing formal legal representation, the program functioned as an educational bridge between community members and the justice system. The implementation produced several important outcomes related to legal knowledge, confidence, problem identification, and community participation.

Increased Legal Awareness

The first significant result was an increase in participants' understanding of basic legal rights and responsibilities. Before the activities, some participants had limited knowledge about the institutions responsible for addressing legal problems. Legal issues were often understood as matters that could only be handled by lawyers or courts. This perception

created psychological and practical barriers for people who had limited financial resources. The educational sessions introduced legal concepts through everyday situations. Topics included access to public services, employment rights, consumer protection, family matters, documentation, social assistance, housing, and mechanisms for reporting rights violations. The use of practical examples made legal information easier to understand than technical explanations alone.

Participants were encouraged to identify whether a particular situation represented an ordinary social disagreement, an administrative problem, or a potential violation of rights. This distinction was important because it helped participants understand that not every problem needs to be taken directly to court. Some matters can be addressed through administrative complaints, mediation, public services, or consultation with appropriate institutions. The finding demonstrates that legal literacy can become an important instrument of community empowerment. Knowledge of the law gives individuals greater capacity to recognize problems and make informed decisions. This is particularly relevant for marginalized communities, where limited legal knowledge may reinforce dependence on intermediaries or informal sources of information.

Understanding Access to Justice

The second outcome concerned participants' understanding of access to justice. The program emphasized that access to justice is broader than access to courts. Participants were introduced to different mechanisms through which citizens can obtain assistance, including legal aid, public institutions, mediation, administrative complaint mechanisms, and the Public Defender's Office where applicable. This broader understanding was important because marginalized communities may face financial, geographical, informational, and institutional barriers when attempting to access justice. The Brazilian constitutional framework recognizes free legal assistance for people who lack sufficient resources, and the Public Defender's Office plays a central role in providing legal assistance to vulnerable populations.

The program helped participants understand that seeking legal assistance is not necessarily associated with having substantial financial resources. Participants were introduced to institutions and services that can provide guidance or assistance without requiring the same financial capacity as private legal representation. This result reinforces the importance of combining institutional legal services with community-level legal education. Legal institutions may provide professional assistance, but communities need sufficient information to recognize when and where such assistance should be sought.

Improved Ability to Identify Legal Problems

Another important result was participants' improved ability to identify legal dimensions within everyday problems. Many social problems initially presented by participants were not immediately understood as legal issues. Through case discussions and simulations, participants learned to examine problems from the perspective of rights, responsibilities, procedures, and available remedies. For example, employment problems

could involve questions concerning contracts, wages, working conditions, or termination. Housing problems could involve documentation, tenancy arrangements, or disputes with other parties. Problems involving public services could concern administrative procedures and citizens' entitlement to particular services.

The case-based approach encouraged participants to analyze situations rather than simply memorize legal rules. Participants were asked what happened, whose rights might be affected, what evidence might be relevant, which institution could be approached, and what steps could reasonably be taken. This approach is consistent with the concept of legal empowerment, which emphasizes people's capacity to use law as a resource for addressing problems affecting their lives. Legal empowerment is therefore not limited to knowledge acquisition; it also involves developing the confidence and practical capacity to act.

Increased Confidence in Seeking Assistance

The mentoring component contributed to increased confidence among participants when discussing legal problems. Some participants initially expressed hesitation because they believed legal procedures were complicated or that their problems were not sufficiently important to receive institutional attention. Interactive discussions helped reduce this hesitation. Participants were given opportunities to ask questions and discuss hypothetical situations before addressing more sensitive issues. The facilitators emphasized that asking for legal information is an appropriate first step when individuals are uncertain about their rights.

Confidence was also strengthened through procedural simulations. Participants practiced how to explain a problem, organize relevant information, identify supporting documents, and communicate with an institution. Such exercises transformed legal knowledge into practical skills. The result suggests that legal literacy programs should not focus exclusively on the transmission of legal information. Participants also need opportunities to practice communication and decision-making. Knowing that a right exists is different from knowing how to seek protection when that right is threatened.

The Importance of Accessible Legal Language

One of the strongest lessons from the program was the importance of using accessible language. Legal terminology can create an additional barrier for individuals without formal legal education. Participants responded more actively when concepts were explained using ordinary language, examples, diagrams, and simulated situations. The facilitators therefore avoided unnecessary technical terminology and explained legal concepts through familiar situations. When technical terms were necessary, they were followed by simple explanations.

This approach is particularly important in marginalized communities because legal exclusion can occur through communication as well as through financial or geographical barriers. A legal system may formally guarantee rights, but those rights are difficult to exercise when citizens cannot understand the procedures required to access them. Accessible legal education can therefore contribute to what may be described as democratization of

legal knowledge. Law becomes more meaningful when communities are able to understand how legal institutions operate and how their rights relate to everyday life.

Community Participation and Collective Empowerment

The program also demonstrated the importance of collective participation. Legal problems are not always individual matters. Issues concerning housing, public services, employment, discrimination, and community safety can affect groups of residents simultaneously. Group discussions allowed participants to compare experiences and identify common problems. This process helped transform isolated concerns into collective discussions about rights and possible solutions. Participants could also learn from the experiences of others who had previously interacted with public institutions.

Community participation can strengthen legal empowerment because social networks provide channels for sharing information. A participant who understands a particular procedure may subsequently assist another community member in identifying the appropriate institution or service. This does not mean that community members should replace professional lawyers. Instead, communities can become better informed about when professional assistance is necessary and how to reach it.

The Role of Community Facilitators

Community facilitators played an important role in connecting legal education with local realities. Their familiarity with community conditions made it easier to identify issues that required attention. They also helped create a learning atmosphere in which participants felt comfortable asking questions. The role of facilitators should therefore extend beyond organizing activities. They can become information bridges between communities and formal legal institutions. After receiving appropriate training, facilitators can help residents identify available services and direct them to qualified professionals when necessary. This model has potential for sustainability because it reduces dependence on short-term external intervention. A community that possesses basic knowledge about available legal services can continue disseminating information after the formal program has ended.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite the positive outcomes, several challenges were identified. The first was the diversity of participants' educational backgrounds. Some participants were familiar with basic legal concepts, while others had little previous exposure to formal legal information. This required facilitators to adapt explanations and provide additional examples. The second challenge concerned the complexity of individual legal problems. Some problems involved multiple areas of law and could not be adequately addressed through general education. In such circumstances, participants needed to be referred to qualified legal professionals or relevant institutions.

The third challenge was maintaining confidentiality. Legal problems can involve sensitive information concerning family relationships, employment, finances, violence, or disputes. The program therefore emphasized that group education should not require participants to disclose private information publicly. Another challenge involved managing

expectations. Some participants initially expected the engagement team to resolve their individual legal cases. The facilitators explained that the program focused on legal literacy, awareness, and referral rather than formal representation.

Discussion

The results indicate that community-based legal education can function as an effective empowerment strategy for marginalized communities. Its primary contribution is not simply the transfer of legal knowledge but the development of participants' capacity to recognize rights and determine appropriate steps when facing legal problems. The program also demonstrates that access to justice has both institutional and educational dimensions. Expanding legal services is important, but such services may remain underused when communities do not know that they exist or do not understand how to access them. Community legal education can therefore complement formal justice institutions.

The Brazilian context provides a particularly relevant setting for this approach because the country has developed institutional mechanisms aimed at expanding access to justice and legal assistance for vulnerable populations. Community-oriented initiatives can strengthen the connection between these institutions and residents who experience barriers to accessing formal services. The integration of legal literacy with practical simulations was particularly valuable. Participants were not merely told what their rights were; they were encouraged to consider how those rights could be exercised in real situations. This approach can strengthen confidence, procedural understanding, and decision-making.

The program further demonstrates that legal empowerment should be understood as a continuing process. A single training session may increase awareness, but sustainable empowerment requires repeated education, accessible information, community facilitators, and reliable referral mechanisms. Overall, the findings show that community legal empowerment can contribute to strengthening marginalized communities' capacity to understand and exercise their rights. By combining accessible legal education, participatory discussion, practical simulations, and referral to appropriate legal services, community engagement can help reduce informational barriers to justice and encourage more active citizenship. The approach is particularly valuable when implemented collaboratively with local communities and connected to existing legal aid and public justice institutions in Brazil.

CONCLUSION

The community engagement program demonstrates that community-based legal empowerment can strengthen legal awareness and access to justice among marginalized communities in Brazil. Through legal literacy sessions, participatory discussions, case simulations, mentoring, and information about available legal services, participants gained a better understanding of their basic rights, legal responsibilities, complaint mechanisms, dispute-resolution procedures, and institutions that can provide legal assistance. The program also increased

participants' confidence in identifying potential rights violations and determining appropriate steps to address legal problems. The use of accessible language and practical examples made legal information easier to understand and connect with everyday experiences. Community participation further strengthened the process by creating opportunities for residents to share experiences, identify common problems, and support one another in accessing appropriate services.

The program confirms that access to justice should not be understood solely as access to courts or professional legal representation. Legal knowledge, information, community participation, and the ability to identify appropriate assistance are also important components of meaningful access to justice. Community legal education can therefore function as a bridge between marginalized residents and formal justice institutions. Sustainability requires continued collaboration among community organizations, facilitators, legal professionals, the Public Defender's Office, and other relevant institutions. Future programs should expand legal literacy materials, strengthen community facilitators, and establish sustainable referral mechanisms for cases requiring professional legal assistance.

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