

International report explores community legal services for better access to justice

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Drawing on the existing knowledge within a community to help established legal clinics better assist their clients.



Engaging the community to identify people experiencing problems of justice and fairness.



Developing community channels to make better referrals to reliable sources of assistance.



Developing partnerships between community legal clinics, paralegals and community organizations to provide more effective and durable solutions to problems.

Examples of what community-based justice can include. Credit: *Exploring*

Community-Based Services, Costs and Benefits for People-Centered Justice (2023).

Community legal clinics, paralegal services, social workers and others assisting those who cannot easily access legal help, are a few ways of narrowing the gap in accessing justice that's prevalent across the globe, says York University legal expert Professor Trevor Farrow, co-author of a new international report released today.

The report, *Exploring Community-Based Services, Costs and Benefits for People-Centered Justice*, is a review of recent studies conducted by researchers in Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Canada, to understand how effective grassroots support systems are in alleviating, if not eliminating, barriers to justice.

The research is part of Community-Based Justice Research (CBJR) project. The Canadian Forum on Civil Justice (CFCJ), based at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University, played a lead role in co-ordinating the project.

According to Farrow, associate dean of research at Osgoode, the inaccessibility of legal services is a common issue, be it in Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Canada, or rest of the world. In fact, the United Nations has identified access to justice as a [global crisis](#) that—through its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—requires collective efforts and shared solutions, continues Farrow.

According to earlier research from the CFCJ, approximately 50 percent of adult Canadians will experience a legal problem in any given three-year period. "Like the rest of the world, there is an access-to-justice crisis in Canada," notes Farrow, who also serves as chair of the CFCJ. "Law and legal issues are everywhere, but very few people can afford

legal help."

Grassroots-level support can help change this situation for the better, says CFCJ Senior Research Fellow Ab Currie, who also co-authored the report.

"Getting access to trained [social workers](#) at drop-in shelters, support workers at community centers, paralegals, religious advisors and many others who work and interact with people where and when they most need help, are primary goals and benefits of community-based justice," explains Farrow. "The core idea is to find ways to get legal services and law-related help to people in the places that they live and work, and to identify—and ideally avoid—legal problems or to help address them before they get worse."

"Generally, there's a benefit to having these services in the community and the recent research indicates that the cost-benefit analysis is positive for these community justice services," he adds. "There are also non-financial benefits of trust, access and awareness when it comes to supporting local help for local communities."

South African researcher Busiwana Winne Martins, of the Centre for Community Justice, agrees. "Because support workers are close to the community, they understand their problems and socio-economic conditions," she says. "They share the same geographic space and culture and can negotiate plural legal systems and determine how to straddle the formal law and traditional African customary law."

"People who work in the grassroots justice structures, especially community-based paralegals, are able to translate difficult legal and bureaucratic language into frames that local people can understand and help them to resolve their justice issues," she adds.

Farrow agrees that managing problems within a community and with the help of community members, is often simpler, quicker and allows for community values and interests to be present in the process.

"Community justice initiatives can provide exciting opportunities for innovative and inclusive problem-solving that allows for important justice options and strategies," he notes.

To help solve the access-to-justice crisis, Farrow concludes, "community-based justice provides significant and exciting opportunities for meaningful assistance—in addition to numerous other options and processes, including strong legal institutions."

With the addition of access-to-justice to the United Nations SDGs, calling on all nations to work toward [equal access](#) by 2030 is a significant move and driver for action, according to the report.

More information: Report: [cfcj-fcjc.org/wp-content/uploa ... ow-and-Ab-Currie.pdf](https://cfcj-fcjc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/International-report-explores-community-legal-access-Ab-Currie.pdf)

Provided by York University

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