

Call for Contributions

ESR
REVIEW

Economic & Social Rights
Review in Africa

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SPECIAL ISSUE

COMMUNITY-BASED PARALEGALS IN AFRICA: ACCESS TO JUSTICE, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

The ESR Review invites written submissions for a Special Issue on *Community-Based Paralegals in Africa: Access to Justice, Challenges and Lessons*.

Access to justice remains central to constitutional governance, socio-economic rights realisation and sustainable development in many African countries.

Community-based paralegals occupy a distinctive position within African justice systems. They operate close to the communities they serve, translate legal rights into accessible knowledge, assist individuals in navigating formal and informal institutions, and help resolve disputes before they escalate. Their work is particularly important where lawyers, courts and state-funded legal aid services are geographically inaccessible, unaffordable or poorly adapted to local realities. Yet their contribution often remains insufficiently recognised in law, public policy, institutional planning and justice-sector financing.

Yet, despite progressive constitutional frameworks and international commitments, many communities across Africa, particularly women, children, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, informal workers and rural communities, continue to face systemic barriers to justice.

This Special Issue is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 16, particularly target 16.3 on promoting the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice for all. It builds on ongoing research by the Dullah Omar Institute based at the University of the Western Cape on the role, legal recognition and contribution of community-based paralegals in advancing access to justice in both Anglophone and Francophone African contexts.

The issue also acknowledges the important work of the African Centre of Excellence for Access to Justice in Africa (ACE-AJ), a continental network that advocates for people-centred justice, legal empowerment and the recognition of community-based paralegals and community advice offices. ACE-AJ is housed by the Legal Aid Forum in Rwanda.

Through partnerships with civil society organisations across Africa, ACE-AJ has helped foreground the role of paralegals and other homegrown justice institutions in reaching poor, rural and marginalised communities often excluded from formal justice systems.

The Special Issue therefore seeks to move the debate beyond general claims about the value of paralegals by examining the conditions under which community-based paralegal programmes can be effective, accountable, sustainable and rights-compliant. Contributions should interrogate both achievements and limitations, including questions of legal status, independence, professional standards, supervision, funding, data collection, referral systems and relationships with lawyers, courts, customary institutions and state agencies. Particular attention is encouraged to reforms that can convert successful local practice into durable, adequately supported and people-centred justice systems.

Against this background, the ESR Review invites scholarly, policy and practice-based contributions that examine the recognition, regulation, training, sustainability and broader contribution of community-based paralegals to inclusive, participatory and rights-based justice systems across Africa.

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THEMATIC FOCUS

We particularly encourage submissions that draw on African case studies, comparative regional analysis, or grounded empirical research. We welcome contributions that explore contemporary debates, empirical insights, policy developments, case studies and advocacy strategies relating to access to justice, including (but not limited to):

1. Community-Based Paralegals, Legal Empowerment and Access to Justice

- The role of community-based paralegals in advancing access to justice through grassroots legal empowerment, human rights awareness and community education.
- Training, ethics and professional standards for community-based paralegals, including key challenges, gaps and emerging lessons.
- The contribution of community advice offices, civil society organisations and social movements to early dispute resolution, referral pathways and community-based legal support.

2. Legal Aid, Institutional Reform and Justice Systems

- The role of paralegals in bridging the gap between formal justice institutions and underserved communities.
- Legal aid models, including public defenders, pro bono schemes, law clinics and paralegal services.
- Institutional reform to strengthen access to justice for persons who cannot afford legal representation.
- Legal aid and community-based support for victims, witnesses, detained persons and persons in conflict with the law.

3. Access to Justice for Vulnerable and Marginalised Groups

- Access to justice in contexts of poverty, inequality and social exclusion.
- Justice barriers affecting women, children, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, rural communities and persons living in poverty.
- Gender, poverty and the lived realities of accessing justice.

4. Informal, Customary and Community-Based Justice

- The role of customary, informal and community-based justice systems in resolving disputes, particularly in rural and traditional settings.
- The relationship and legal tensions between formal courts, customary law and community-based justice mechanisms, including areas of cooperation, overlap and tension.
- Human rights and constitutional safeguards in informal and customary justice processes, including the role of community leaders in civic education on legal rights, duties and remedies.

5. Sustainability, Accountability and Evidence-Based Reform

- Recognition, accreditation, training and regulation of community-based paralegals in Africa.
- Funding models, sustainability and partnerships between the State, civil society, law clinics and community advice offices.
- SDG 16, Agenda 2063, empirical research and evidence-based approaches to improving access to justice.



TYPES OF CONTRIBUTIONS

The ESR Review publishes accessible, policy-oriented and advocacy-driven pieces rather than purely doctrinal or technical legal analyses.

We invite:

- Feature Articles - 3,000 words
- Case Reviews - 3,000 words
- Current Policy Debates and Developments - 3,000 words
- Book Reviews / Report Reviews - 2000 words
- Event Reports - 1,500 words

REFERENCING STYLE

- No footnotes.
- Use abbreviated Harvard style referencing (e.g., Author 2022: 15).
- Keep references to a minimum.
- Where possible, contributions can use hyperlinks instead of references.
- Include a short list of key references at the end of the article.

ABOUT THE ESR REVIEW

The ESR Review is produced by the Socio-Economic Rights Project of the Dullah Omar Institute for Constitutional Law, Governance and Human Rights at the University of the Western Cape. Previous editions of the ESR Review are available at: <https://dullahomarinstitute.org.za/socio-economic-rights/esr-review>

IMPORTANT DATES

- Abstract submission (250 words): 15 August 2026
- Full article submission: 30 September 2026

SUBMISSION PROCESS

Please send abstracts and full article:

- MS Word format
- Email subject line: ESR Review : Paralegals and Access Justice Special Issue
- Email to: serp@uwc.ac.za ; rnanima@uwc.ac.za;
CC: fakanbi@uwc.ac.za;
gmirugi-mukundi@uwc.ac.za

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Contributions should:

- Reflect contemporary debates or spark new conversations on access to justice.
- Advance discussion on socio-economic rights at national, regional or international levels.
- Serve an advocacy or reform-oriented function.
- Avoid purely descriptive exposition of legal principles.
- Be written in clear, accessible language that avoids unnecessary legal jargon.
- Consider that the Review is read by legal practitioners, policymakers, civil society actors and grassroots organisations.
- Not duplicate previously published ESR Review content unless clearly advancing the debate.

To facilitate the anonymous review process, authors should provide:

- Full name
- Institutional affiliation
- Current position
- Brief biographical note (50–70 words)
- Any relevant acknowledgements
- If the article has been published elsewhere, please provide full publication details and confirm that permission for republication has been obtained.

Previous Issues ESR Review are available online at [ESR Review](https://dullahomarinstitute.org.za/socio-economic-rights/esr-review) or [Journals.co.za](https://journals.co.za).

We look forward to your insightful contributions and to advancing the conversation on law, human rights and non-communicable diseases in Africa.