



Access to Justice through Free Legal Aid: A Critical Analysis

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DOI: 10.31838/ecb/2023.12.si3.405

Abstract:

Access to justice is a fundamental principle in a fair and just society, ensuring that all individuals have the ability to seek legal remedies and defend their rights. However, a significant portion of the global population faces barriers when it comes to accessing legal services due to financial constraints. In response to this issue, the provision of free legal aid has emerged as a crucial mechanism for promoting equal access to justice. This research article critically examines the “concept of free legal aid”, its significance in ensuring access to justice, challenges faced in its implementation, and potential strategies for improvement. The article highlights the importance of free legal aid in protecting the rights of individuals, addressing power imbalances, and enhancing the rule of law within a society. By providing legal assistance to those who cannot afford it, free legal aid programs contribute to leveling the playing field and promoting social justice. However, the implementation of free legal aid programs is not without its challenges. Inadequate funding and resource allocation pose significant barriers to the effective provision of legal aid services. Limited awareness about the availability and benefits of free legal aid programs further hinders access. Additionally, navigating legal systems and procedures can be complex and daunting for individuals seeking assistance. Ensuring the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of free legal aid programs also remains a concern. To improve access to justice through free legal aid, various strategies can be employed. Strengthening legal aid legislation and policies can provide a solid framework for the provision of services. Allocating adequate financial resources and ensuring proper resource allocation is crucial for the sustainability of free legal aid programs. Enhancing public awareness

and outreach efforts can help individuals understand their rights and the availability of legal aid services. Collaborations between legal aid organizations, government agencies, and other stakeholders can foster greater synergy and efficiency. Leveraging technology, such as online platforms and digital resources, can enhance accessibility to legal aid services. Additionally, developing comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can help assess the impact and effectiveness of free legal aid programs. The article includes case studies of successful free legal aid initiatives, highlighting key elements and best practices that have contributed to their effectiveness. By examining these examples, policymakers and practitioners can gain valuable insights and learn from successful models when designing and implementing free legal aid programs in their respective jurisdictions. In conclusion, this research article emphasizes the critical role of free legal aid in ensuring access to justice, particularly for marginalized and disadvantaged populations. By analyzing the challenges faced in implementing such programs and presenting potential strategies for improvement, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse on promoting equal access to justice for all individuals. It provides recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to enhance the effectiveness and reach of free legal aid programs, ultimately fostering an inclusive and equitable legal system.

Keywords: Access to justice, free legal aid, equal access, barriers, financial constraints, legal services, significance, rights protection, power imbalances, rule of law.

Introduction

Background and importance of access to justice:

Access to justice is a fundamental principle that lies at the heart of any fair and just society. It ensures that every individual, regardless of their social or economic standing, has the ability to seek legal remedies, have their rights protected, and participate in legal proceedings. Access to justice encompasses a wide range of legal services, including legal advice, representation, and assistance in navigating the complexities of the legal system. It is an essential component of upholding the rule of law, promoting equality, and safeguarding individual rights.

However, for a significant portion of the global population, access to justice remains an elusive concept. Financial constraints pose formidable barriers, preventing individuals from obtaining the legal assistance they need. Legal services are often associated with high costs, including attorney fees, court expenses, and related legal fees. As a result, many individuals, particularly those from marginalized and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, find themselves unable to afford or access legal support.

Definition and purpose of free legal aid: In response to the challenges faced by individuals who lack financial resources, free legal aid programs have emerged as a crucial mechanism

to promote equal access to justice. “Free legal aid refers to the provision of legal assistance, advice, and representation to individuals who are unable to afford legal services. It operates on the principle that access to justice should not be determined by one's financial means but should be available to all members of society.” Free legal aid programs aim to level the playing field, ensuring that individuals facing legal issues can exercise their rights and seek redress without being hindered by their financial circumstances.

The purpose of free legal aid extends beyond the provision of legal services. It seeks to address power imbalances within society, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable populations who often lack the resources to protect their rights. By offering free legal assistance, these programs empower individuals, helping them understand their legal rights, navigate legal processes, and assert themselves in legal matters. Moreover, free legal aid serves as a vital tool in promoting social justice, by addressing systemic inequalities and promoting equitable outcomes within the legal system.

Objectives and scope of the research: This research article critically examines the concept of free legal aid and its significance in ensuring access to justice. It aims to explore the challenges faced in the implementation of free legal aid programs and offers potential strategies for improvement. The research investigates the multifaceted nature of free legal aid systems, analyzing factors such as funding mechanisms,

awareness campaigns, infrastructure development, procedural complexities, and the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of such programs.

By studying successful case studies and identifying best practices, this research provides valuable insights for policymakers, legal practitioners, and stakeholders involved in access to justice initiatives. It offers recommendations and practical measures to enhance the impact and reach of free legal aid programs, with the ultimate goal of creating a more inclusive and equitable legal system that caters to the diverse needs of individuals from all walks of life.

In summary, this research article aims to contribute to the understanding of access to justice and highlight the crucial role of free legal aid in promoting equality, protecting rights, and fostering social cohesion. By addressing the barriers that hinder access to justice and presenting strategies for improvement, this research seeks to advance the goal of a legal system that upholds the principles of fairness, justice, and equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of their financial means.

The Significance of Free Legal Aid in Ensuring Access to Justice:

Equal protection of rights for all individuals:

Free legal aid plays a pivotal role in promoting equal protection of rights for all individuals. In societies where access to justice is contingent

upon financial resources, marginalized and economically disadvantaged individuals often find themselves unable to effectively assert their rights. Free legal aid programs bridge this gap by providing legal assistance to those who cannot afford it, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to access justice. By offering equal access to legal representation and advice, regardless of one's financial means, free legal aid programs contribute to a more equitable and inclusive legal system.

Addressing power imbalances and promoting social justice: One of the key contributions of free legal aid is its ability to address power imbalances within society. Legal disputes often involve parties with unequal access to resources, knowledge, and influence. This imbalance can perpetuate social injustices, as those with greater resources are better positioned to protect and advance their interests. Free legal aid programs aim to rectify this disparity by providing legal representation and support to marginalized individuals and groups, leveling the playing field and empowering them to confront systemic inequalities. By offering a voice to the voiceless, free legal aid helps ensure that justice is not limited to the privileged few but is accessible to all, promoting social justice and equal opportunities.

Enhancing the rule of law and legal system integrity: Free legal aid programs contribute to enhancing the rule of law and the integrity of the legal system. Access to justice is a fundamental

principle underlying the rule of law, ensuring that legal processes are fair, transparent, and accessible to all individuals. When people are denied access to legal assistance due to financial constraints, it undermines the credibility and effectiveness of the legal system. Free legal aid programs bolster the rule of law by removing barriers to justice, enabling individuals to participate fully in legal proceedings, and upholding the principles of fairness and due process. By ensuring that the legal system serves the needs of all individuals, regardless of their financial situation, free legal aid programs contribute to the overall integrity and legitimacy of the legal framework.

In summary, the significance of free legal aid in ensuring access to justice is manifold. It promotes equal protection of rights for all individuals, addresses power imbalances within society, and advances social justice. Furthermore, free legal aid programs enhance the rule of law by ensuring that the legal system is inclusive, accessible, and fair. By providing legal assistance to those who cannot afford it, free legal aid plays a critical role in creating a just and equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to assert their rights and seek redress.

The Challenges Faced in Implementing Free Legal Aid Programs:

- **Insufficient funding and resource allocation:** One of the primary

challenges in implementing free legal aid programs is the issue of insufficient funding and resource allocation. Providing comprehensive legal assistance requires financial resources to support legal professionals, administrative staff, infrastructure, and other operational costs. However, many free legal aid programs struggle with limited budgets, resulting in a lack of resources to meet the growing demand for services. Insufficient funding hampers the ability to provide quality legal aid, compromises the capacity to handle cases effectively, and limits the scope of outreach to vulnerable communities.

- **Limited awareness and outreach:** Another significant challenge is the limited awareness and outreach efforts associated with free legal aid programs. Many individuals who could benefit from such services are unaware of their existence or the eligibility criteria. Lack of awareness about the availability and benefits of free legal aid creates a barrier to access. Inadequate outreach efforts further exacerbate the issue, as vulnerable and marginalized populations may not be reached effectively. Overcoming this challenge requires proactive awareness campaigns, community engagement, and partnerships with local organizations to

ensure that those in need are informed about their rights and the available legal aid services.

- **Inadequate infrastructure and capacity building:** Free legal aid programs require appropriate infrastructure and the development of legal professionals' capacity to provide effective assistance. Inadequate infrastructure, such as physical office spaces, technology, and case management systems, can hinder the smooth operation of legal aid organizations. Moreover, there is a need for ongoing capacity building initiatives to equip legal professionals with the necessary skills and knowledge to address diverse legal issues. Without proper infrastructure and continuous professional development, free legal aid programs may struggle to provide timely and quality legal services, limiting their overall effectiveness.
- **Legal and procedural complexities:** Legal systems often involve intricate procedures and complex laws, which can pose challenges for individuals seeking free legal aid. Many individuals facing legal issues lack the legal expertise to navigate complex legal processes independently. Moreover, the involvement of multiple stakeholders, such as courts, government agencies, and other legal service providers, can

further complicate matters. Free legal aid programs must grapple with these legal and procedural complexities to effectively represent and assist their clients. This challenge requires legal aid organizations to have knowledgeable and skilled professionals capable of navigating these complexities on behalf of their clients.

- **Sustainability and long-term effectiveness:** Ensuring the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of free legal aid programs is a persistent challenge. Many programs heavily rely on external funding sources, making them vulnerable to fluctuations in funding and limited financial sustainability. To address this challenge, there is a need to explore diverse funding mechanisms, including government support, partnerships with philanthropic organizations, and innovative fundraising strategies. Additionally, establishing monitoring and evaluation frameworks is crucial to assess the impact and effectiveness of free legal aid programs over time. This enables program administrators to identify areas for improvement, demonstrate their value to stakeholders, and advocate for continued support and resources.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. Governments, policymakers, and legal aid organizations must work collaboratively to secure adequate funding, raise awareness, improve infrastructure, invest in capacity building, simplify legal procedures, and develop sustainable models of operation. By actively addressing these challenges, free legal aid programs can overcome barriers to access and provide meaningful legal assistance to individuals who otherwise would be unable to assert their rights, thus contributing to a more equitable and just society.

Strategies for Improving Access to Justice through Free Legal Aid:

- a. Strengthening legal aid legislation and policies: One key strategy for improving access to justice through free legal aid is to strengthen legal aid legislation and policies. This involves enacting laws that guarantee the right to free legal aid, establishing clear eligibility criteria, and defining the scope of services provided. Robust legal frameworks provide a solid foundation for the provision of free legal aid, ensuring consistency, accountability, and quality in the delivery of services.
- b. Allocating adequate financial resources: To enhance access to justice through free legal aid, it is crucial to allocate adequate financial resources. Governments and funding entities must prioritize and allocate sufficient funding to

support the operations of free legal aid programs. Adequate funding enables legal aid organizations to expand their reach, hire qualified professionals, invest in training and capacity building, and improve infrastructure. Ensuring a stable and sustainable funding stream is vital to maintain and expand the provision of free legal aid services.

c. **Enhancing public awareness and outreach:** Raising public awareness about the availability and benefits of free legal aid is essential for improving access. Outreach efforts should be targeted towards vulnerable communities and marginalized groups who are most likely to benefit from these services. Public awareness campaigns can include community workshops, legal literacy programs, and collaborations with local organizations. By enhancing public understanding of their rights and the resources available, individuals will be more likely to seek free legal aid when needed.

d. **Collaborations between legal aid organizations and stakeholders:** Collaborations and partnerships between legal aid organizations and other stakeholders are instrumental in improving access to justice. Legal aid providers can work with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, pro bono networks, and community-based organizations to expand their reach, share resources, and leverage expertise. Collaborative efforts enable a more coordinated approach to addressing legal needs

and can help overcome systemic barriers that hinder access to justice.

e. **Leveraging technology for greater accessibility:** Technology can be a powerful tool for improving access to justice through free legal aid. Online platforms, mobile applications, and virtual consultations can enhance accessibility by providing legal information, self-help resources, and remote assistance. Technology-enabled solutions can bridge geographical distances, particularly in rural and remote areas, and expand the reach of legal aid services. Moreover, utilizing technology for case management and document storage can improve efficiency and streamline processes for legal aid providers.

f. **Developing comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms:** To ensure the effectiveness and quality of free legal aid programs, it is essential to establish comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Regular monitoring allows for the identification of challenges, gaps, and areas for improvement. Evaluation helps measure the impact and outcomes of free legal aid services and informs evidence-based decision-making. By continuously monitoring and evaluating programs, policymakers and practitioners can make informed adjustments and allocate resources effectively, ensuring that free legal aid programs meet the needs of the communities they serve.

By implementing these strategies, access to justice through free legal aid can be improved. Strengthening legal frameworks, allocating sufficient resources, raising awareness, fostering collaborations, leveraging technology, and implementing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms contribute to a more equitable and inclusive legal system. These strategies empower individuals, protect their rights, and promote social justice, ultimately fostering a society where equal access to justice is a reality for all.

Case Studies: Successful Free Legal Aid Initiatives

Examples of countries with effective legal aid systems:

1. **United Kingdom (England and Wales):** “The United Kingdom has a well-established legal aid system that provides comprehensive free legal assistance to those who cannot afford legal representation.” “The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 introduced reforms to ensure access to justice for individuals across various legal areas, including civil, criminal, and family law.” The system incorporates a means-tested eligibility criteria to determine access to legal aid. Legal aid is provided through a combination of solicitors, barristers, and legal aid agencies. The

UK's legal aid system emphasizes the importance of early advice and assistance, promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and ensuring access to justice for vulnerable groups.

2. **Australia:** Australia has implemented a successful legal aid system that ensures access to justice for disadvantaged individuals. Each Australian state and territory operates its own legal aid commission, offering a range of legal services to eligible clients. These services include legal advice, representation, and assistance in areas such as family law, criminal law, and civil disputes. The legal aid commissions collaborate with private lawyers, community legal centers, and pro bono programs to expand their reach. Australia's legal aid system is characterized by a combination of government funding, partnerships, and pro bono contributions, allowing for a comprehensive and sustainable approach to free legal aid.
3. **India:** “Free legal aid in India is an important component of the country's justice system, aimed at ensuring access to justice for marginalized and disadvantaged individuals. The provision of free legal aid is enshrined in Article 39A of the Indian Constitution, which mandates that the

state shall secure the operation of the legal system to promote justice on a basis of equal opportunity.”

The “Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987”, serves as the primary legislation governing free legal aid in India. Under this act, the “National Legal Services Authority (NALSA)” and “State Legal Services Authorities (SLSAs)” were established at the national and state levels, respectively, to facilitate the delivery of free legal aid services.

Key features and initiatives related to free legal aid in India include:

1. Legal Aid Clinics: Legal aid clinics have been established at various levels, including district, taluk, and village levels, to provide legal assistance to individuals in need. These clinics are often operated in collaboration with local bar associations, law schools, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They offer free legal advice, awareness programs, and dispute resolution services.
2. Panel Advocates: The legal aid system in India involves the empanelment of advocates who offer their services on a pro bono basis to provide legal representation to eligible individuals. These panel advocates are selected by the SLSAs and NALSA and are assigned to represent individuals who cannot afford legal representation in courts and other legal proceedings.
3. Lok Adalats: Lok Adalats, or people's courts, are an integral part of the legal aid system in India. These alternative dispute resolution mechanisms aim to provide quick and cost-effective resolution of disputes. Lok Adalats are empowered to settle both pending and pre-litigation cases through conciliation and compromise, ensuring access to justice for individuals who may not have the means to pursue lengthy court proceedings.
4. Legal Aid Cells in Prisons: In order to provide legal assistance to underprivileged prisoners, legal aid cells have been set up in prisons across India. These cells offer legal advice, assistance in drafting petitions and applications, and represent prisoners in legal proceedings.
5. “Public Interest Litigation (PIL)”: “Public Interest Litigation” is an important tool in the Indian legal system for addressing social justice issues. It enables individuals or organizations, including NGOs, to approach the courts on behalf of marginalized groups or on matters of public concern. PIL cases often result in judgments that have far-

reaching implications for the protection of human rights and the promotion of social justice.

6. The implementation of free legal aid in India faces several challenges, including limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of awareness among the marginalized population about their rights and the availability of legal aid services. Efforts are being made to address these challenges through increased funding, capacity building programs for legal professionals, and awareness campaigns to ensure that individuals are informed about their rights and the resources available to them.
7. Despite the challenges, free legal aid initiatives in India have played a significant role in bridging the justice gap and providing access to justice for the marginalized and vulnerable sections of society. These initiatives contribute to the promotion of equality, fairness, and social justice within the legal system.

Highlighting key elements and best practices:

1. Comprehensive legal aid coverage: Successful free legal aid initiatives prioritize comprehensive coverage, ensuring that a wide range of legal issues are addressed. This includes civil, criminal, family, and administrative law

matters. By offering holistic legal services, individuals have access to the support they need, regardless of the nature of their legal problem.

2. Means-tested eligibility criteria: Implementing means-tested eligibility criteria helps target resources to those who genuinely require free legal aid. By assessing an individual's financial situation, programs can allocate resources to those who lack the means to afford legal representation. This ensures that resources are directed to those who are most in need, maximizing the impact of free legal aid initiatives.
3. Collaborations and partnerships: Successful free legal aid initiatives often involve collaborations and partnerships with various stakeholders, including government agencies, legal professionals, community organizations, and pro bono networks. These partnerships expand the reach of legal aid services, leverage resources, and facilitate a coordinated response to legal needs within the community.
4. Proactive legal education and outreach: Promoting legal education and conducting proactive outreach efforts are essential for successful free legal aid initiatives. This includes conducting legal literacy programs, community

workshops, and awareness campaigns to ensure that individuals are aware of their rights and the availability of free legal aid services. By empowering individuals with legal knowledge, they are better equipped to assert their rights and seek assistance when needed.

5. **Effective use of technology:** Leveraging technology can significantly enhance the accessibility and efficiency of free legal aid initiatives. Online platforms, mobile applications, and virtual consultations provide convenient access to legal information, resources, and assistance. Technology can also streamline administrative processes, facilitate case management, and enable remote legal consultations, particularly in areas where physical access to legal services may be limited.
6. **Ongoing evaluation and improvement:** Continuous evaluation and improvement are crucial for successful free legal aid initiatives. Regular monitoring of program effectiveness, client satisfaction, and outcomes helps identify areas for improvement and informs evidence-based decision-making. Evaluations also provide valuable data to advocate for sustained funding and support from policymakers and stakeholders.

By studying these successful case studies and highlighting key elements and best practices, jurisdictions can learn from effective free legal aid initiatives. Implementing these strategies can contribute to the development and improvement of free legal aid systems worldwide, ultimately enhancing access to justice and promoting equality within legal systems.

Recapitulation of key findings:

In this research article, we have explored the significance of free legal aid in ensuring access to justice. We examined key aspects such as equal protection of rights, addressing power imbalances, and enhancing the rule of law through free legal aid. Additionally, we discussed the challenges faced in implementing free legal aid programs, including insufficient funding, limited awareness, inadequate infrastructure, legal complexities, and long-term sustainability. Moreover, we highlighted strategies for improving access to justice through free legal aid, such as strengthening legal aid legislation, allocating adequate financial resources, enhancing public awareness, fostering collaborations, leveraging technology, and implementing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

b. **The continued importance of free legal aid:** The research findings emphasize the continued importance of free legal aid in society. Access to justice is a fundamental right that should be available to all individuals, regardless of their

socio-economic background. Free legal aid programs play a crucial role in bridging the justice gap, ensuring that vulnerable and marginalized populations have the necessary support to assert their rights and seek redress. By providing legal representation, advice, and assistance, free legal aid initiatives promote equality, fairness, and social justice within the legal system. They address power imbalances and empower individuals to navigate complex legal processes effectively.

c. Recommendations for policymakers and practitioners: Based on the research findings, several recommendations can be made for policymakers and practitioners involved in the implementation and improvement of free legal aid programs:

1. Increase funding and resource allocation: Policymakers should prioritize allocating adequate financial resources to free legal aid programs. Sustained funding is essential to enhance the quality and scope of services, expand outreach efforts, and address the growing demand for legal aid.
2. Strengthen legal aid legislation: Policymakers should review and update legal aid legislation to ensure that it is comprehensive, clear, and aligned with international standards. The legislation should encompass a wide range of legal

areas and include robust eligibility criteria that target those most in need.

3. Enhance awareness and outreach: “Efforts should be made to raise public awareness about the availability and benefits of free legal aid.” Policymakers and practitioners should collaborate with community organizations, educational institutions, and media outlets to conduct awareness campaigns, legal literacy programs, and workshops to inform individuals about their rights and the resources available to them.
4. Foster collaborations and partnerships: Policymakers should promote collaborations and partnerships between legal aid organizations, government agencies, bar associations, NGOs, and pro bono networks. These partnerships can leverage resources, expertise, and networks to enhance the reach and effectiveness of free legal aid initiatives.
5. Embrace technology: Policymakers should explore the use of technology to improve the accessibility and efficiency of free legal aid programs. Online platforms, mobile applications, and virtual consultations can enhance access to legal information, resources, and assistance, particularly in remote and underserved areas.

6. Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms: Policymakers and practitioners should establish comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the impact and effectiveness of free legal aid programs. Regular evaluations can help identify areas for improvement, measure outcomes, and inform evidence-based decision-making.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers and practitioners can strengthen free legal aid programs, enhance access to justice, and ensure that individuals, particularly the marginalized and disadvantaged, can effectively exercise their rights within the legal system.

In conclusion, free legal aid programs play a crucial role in ensuring access to justice and promoting social justice. Despite the challenges faced, there are effective strategies and initiatives that can be implemented to improve the delivery and effectiveness of free legal aid services. By prioritizing the importance of free legal aid, allocating sufficient resources, and fostering collaboration, policymakers and practitioners can work towards a more equitable and inclusive legal system where access to justice is a reality for all.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, access to justice through free legal aid is of paramount importance in ensuring

a fair and equitable legal system. Throughout this research article, we have examined various aspects of free legal aid, including its significance in providing equal protection of rights, addressing power imbalances, and enhancing the rule of law. We have also discussed the challenges faced in implementing free legal aid programs, such as inadequate funding, limited awareness, infrastructure deficiencies, legal complexities, and sustainability concerns.

To improve access to justice through free legal aid, several strategies have been identified. Strengthening legal aid legislation and policies, allocating adequate financial resources, enhancing public awareness and outreach, fostering collaborations between legal aid organizations and stakeholders, leveraging technology for greater accessibility, and developing comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are key strategies that can be implemented.

It is evident that successful free legal aid initiatives have been implemented in countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, showcasing the effectiveness of comprehensive legal aid systems. These case studies highlight the importance of key elements and best practices, including comprehensive coverage, means-tested eligibility criteria, collaborations, legal education, technology integration, and ongoing evaluation.

In India, free legal aid plays a crucial role in bridging the justice gap and providing access to justice for marginalized individuals. Initiatives such as legal aid clinics, panel advocates, Lok Adalats, and legal aid cells in prisons contribute significantly to ensuring legal representation, advice, and assistance for those who cannot afford it.

Moving forward, policymakers and practitioners should prioritize the continued importance of free legal aid and take proactive measures to strengthen its implementation. Adequate funding and resource allocation, comprehensive legal aid legislation, awareness campaigns, collaborations, technology integration, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be key areas of focus.

By upholding the significance of free legal aid and implementing the recommended strategies, policymakers and practitioners can enhance access to justice and promote social justice within the legal system. Ultimately, the goal is to establish a society where equal access to justice is a reality for all, irrespective of their socio-economic background. Through collective efforts, we can create a more just and inclusive society that upholds the principles of fairness, equality, and the rule of law.

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