A key feature of poverty - not explicitly addressed in the MDGs - is that a large majority of the world’s poor are a part of the informal or ‘extralegal’ sector and consequently lack effective legal protection and recognition of their rights and assets. Given that this has profound consequences for development and poverty reduction in most poor countries, the movement advocating ‘legal empowerment of the poor’ (LEP) has gathered momentum in the past few years. While the relationship between law and development in the international development discourse has traditionally been too narrowly focused on law, lawyers and state institutions, the concept of ‘legal empowerment’ apparently goes beyond the confines of the purely formal legal system and entails identifying and providing the poor with legal and institutional tools. But what are the inter-linkages and distinctions between human rights-based approaches (currently popular in the development discourse) and legal empowerment? And how can the poor be empowered to actively participate in decision-making processes and consequently influence policy outcomes?

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