Smart Technology and Access to Justice for Under-Served Communities

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The British Institute of International and Comparative Law has published a new report, *Bridging the Justice Gap - How Smart Technology Can Support Access to Legal Advice for Underserved Communities*. The report explores how smart technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), can be leveraged to improve access to justice for individuals and groups who face persistent barriers to legal advice and representation. It is the result of exploratory research we undertook, commissioned by EdenReach.

The research focuses on how such technologies can enhance the work of legal advice providers, rather than evaluating smart tools that individuals may use independently. Although these developments are highly relevant to access to justice, they fall outside the scope of this research and would benefit from future research.

The research draws on a review of existing studies, complemented by expert interviews and two roundtable discussions with stakeholders, including academics, pro bono clinic practitioners, AI developers, and representatives from the third sector. The findings are presented in three parts: the first maps underserved communities and the factors contributing to their vulnerabilities; the second examines the organisations providing legal support and the challenges they face; and the third explores the potential role of smart tools in enhancing legal service delivery.

In the first part, the report examines the realities faced by people who struggle to access legal support in England and Wales. Vulnerabilities such as economic hardship, geographic isolation, and systemic discrimination continue to exclude individuals and communities from essential legal services. These factors often intersect, compounding disadvantage and widening the gap in access to justice.

The report categorises the barriers to accessing legal services across three axes of exclusion:

1. Situational vulnerabilities, including economic hardship, imposed vulnerability, and geographic isolation.

2. Issue-based vulnerabilities, where cuts to legal aid have left specific areas of law particularly under-served, often affecting individuals facing complex, overlapping legal problems.

3. Group-based vulnerabilities, where certain communities and groups face serious barriers due to intersecting vulnerabilities and systemic discrimination.

The second part of the report identifies a range of organisations, such as NGOs, law centres, university law clinics, and generalist advice providers like Citizens Advice, which have stepped in to fill the gap left by limitations on legal aid. Many provide vital first-line support through consultations, referrals, or assistance letters, but often lack the capacity to meet all legal needs, due to limited scope, funding and staff resources. Demand for these services continues to grow while resources remain limited. Providers are constantly required to do more with less.

In its third and final part, the report highlights how smart technology could play a meaningful role in supporting these organisations and improving service delivery. AI-powered tools can automate time-consuming administrative tasks, assist with document drafting and legal research, and improve case management systems. They can also help extend services to remote or marginalised communities through online platforms and translation tools that facilitate client engagement.

However, the report cautions that technology is not a substitute for human expertise. To be effective, smart technology must be deployed responsibly, ethically, and inclusively. Key challenges include potential bias in algorithms, data privacy concerns, integration with outdated systems, and the significant costs of implementation, maintenance and training. Many smaller organisations, already operating with limited budgets, may lack the technical capacity to adopt and maintain such systems, raising the risk that digital innovation could deepen existing inequalities.

Despite these challenges, the research found broad recognition among legal and third-sector providers that, if developed and implemented responsibly, smart technology could have a transformative impact on access to justice. It has the potential to free up time and resources for personalised and quality legal assistance, making the justice system more accessible to more people who need it most.

This research was commissioned by EdenReach. It is one project amongst many that BIICL has implemented in the fields of Artificial Intelligence and Access to Justice.

You can read the full report here.

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