
Nigeria

Law & policies

The Legal Aid Act of 2011¹ makes three references to the word “paralegal.” The first is section 19(2) which empowers the Legal Aid Council (LAC) to grant licenses to persons who go through a prescribed course of training in “paralegal services.” Next is section 23(4) which invests LAC with the responsibility to make regulations for the conduct of “paralegal aid provision.” Finally, section 24(1) defines a paralegal as anyone who is not a lawyer but performs “substantial legal tasks” under the supervision of a lawyer.

Ratio of lawyers to paralegals

Nigeria has “over 140,000 lawyers on its Supreme Court roll.”² There is no umbrella network of paralegal organizations. However, paralegal organizations such as Isa Wali Empowerment Initiative (IWEI) and Justice and Empowerment Initiatives (JEI) collaborate with others within and beyond Nigeria. There is no officially available total number of paralegals.

Sources of funding

Organizations providing paralegal services have traditionally relied on internal and external donor funding for their work. Although the Legal Aid Act establishes a legal aid fund³ which could potentially become available to paralegal organizations, the fund is not operational at the moment. Therefore, there is currently no government funding for paralegal services.⁴

Legal recognition

In principle, paralegals are legally recognized under the Legal Aid Act. However, in the absence of specific regulations, a prescribed course of training and the grant of licenses, paralegal organizations train and deploy paralegals. They also self-regulate.

¹ <<https://legalaiddouncil.gov.ng/lac-laws/>> accessed 7 May 2023.

² See website of Nigerian Bar Association <<https://www.nigerianbar.org.ng/>> accessed 19 May 2023.

³ Section 9

⁴ Namati, “Nigeria: Community Paralegals – Recognition and Financing.” Nigeria Research Brief, March 2019 <<https://namati.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Nigeria-Community-Paralegal-Research-Brief-Final.pdf>> accessed 7 May 2023.

Challenges of paralegals

Paralegals confront several challenges ranging from limited funding, non-standardized training, and lack of support from the legal community to practical recognition by relevant institutions in the public sector.

Opportunities for collaboration

LAC has been trying to trigger the provision of section 23(4) of the Legal Aid Act concerning making regulations for paralegals. The council has also hosted a couple of meetings to discuss possible standardization of training curriculum and licensing of paralegals. These activities present an opportunity to collaborate with paralegal organizations in Nigeria but also those outside Nigeria with more experience dealing with the aforementioned issues. One point to note is that the Council is under-resourced so it is quite a challenge to add the regulation of paralegal work to its core mandate of providing legal aid to indigent persons.

Recommendations

Rather than overburden itself with regulation, quality control and curriculum development, the Legal Aid Council might wish to stick with regulation and encourage a network of paralegal organizations to handle quality control and curriculum development – both of which these organizations are already heavily invested in and committed to. That way, the Council can devote more energy to fulfilling its core mandate. Given its limited financial support from the government, the Council might also wish to work with civil society to get the Attorney General of the Federation to trigger the legal aid fund to unlock more financial resources in support of legal aid, including paralegal work.