
Sierra Leone

Law & policies

The Legal Aid Act of 2012¹ specifically recognizes paralegals. Indeed, it describes an accredited paralegal as one who is employed by the Legal Aid Board, the Justice Department or an accredited civil society organization.² In addition, the accredited paralegal should have completed a training course at the Judicial & Legal Training Institute or another educational institution approved by the Institute.³

Ratio of lawyers to paralegals

Sierra Leone has about 900 lawyers.⁴ The National Coalition for Community Legal Empowerment (NaCCLE) is the main network of paralegal organizations and paralegals. TIMAP for Justice and NAMATI are the leading paralegal organizations. The Legal Aid Board also has paralegals in its employment.⁵ Regrettably, there is no comprehensive number of paralegals across the country.⁶

Sources of funding

From inception with the likes of TIMAP for Justice, paralegal organizations have relied on donor support to undertake their activities. Domestic funding is still limited.

Legal recognition

Section 1 of the Legal Aid Act of 2012 specifically recognizes paralegals.

Challenges of paralegals

Paralegals in Sierra Leone confront several challenges including mistrust by the legal and policing communities, poor funding, sustainability and independence because legal aid is

¹ <<http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2012-06.pdf>> accessed 9 May 2023.

² Section 1 of the Legal Aid Act, 2012.

³ Ibid, Section 30(2)(b)

⁴ Interview with Sierra Leonean lawyer, Alpha Sesay. Alpha quotes Eddinia Michaela Swallow (President of Sierra Leone Bar Association) as source of this information.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Interview with Simeon Koroma on 22 May 2023.

primarily a state function and therefore paralegals have to enjoy the cooperation of state institutions – potentially impacting their independence.⁷ Other challenges include a lack of cooperation from chiefs who view paralegal mediation services as an erosion of one of their traditional functions in the communities.⁸

Opportunities for collaboration

Sierra Leone has the unique honour of being one of the pioneers of the paralegal movement in Africa. This means that organizations such as TIMAP for Justice⁹ should be available to provide support and mentorship to similar organizations elsewhere. Beyond actually showing up and providing assistance, TIMAP's rich history could provide lessons for burgeoning organizations to learn from. The conflict between paralegals and traditional leaders could be an opportunity to incorporate these leaders into the paralegal movement. They could be trained to better perform their mediatory function and they could serve as advisors for paralegal teams to identify and oversight the work of paralegals – to the extent necessary.

Recommendations

Concerning mistrust with the legal community, the paralegal community in Sierra Leone has some of the leading lawyers at its helm. It should therefore be possible to engage in constructive dialogue about a tiered approach to providing legal aid services. Under this approach, paralegals and law clinics are the first line of defence in rural areas. When the cases reach an agreed threshold, then they can be referred to lawyers. This way, everyone wins.

The question of funding is related to sustainability. Continuing reliance on foreign funding is not sustainable. The paralegal community needs to explore the possibility of getting basket funding from government, corporate institutions and citizens that can be deployed to deliver legal aid services to the poorest members of the communities.

Finally on the question of independence, perhaps tweaking the expectation a bit to interdependence might make it more realistic because so long as paralegal institutions do not have financial and structural autonomy, they must rely – to some extent – on other institutions particularly of state to get the work done.

⁷ Anyango Oyieke et al (n. 48), p. 15.

⁸ Daniel Sesay, "Community-based paralegals in Sierra Leone: Case studies and stories." NAMATI, 2014 <<https://namati.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Daniel-A-STORY-FROM-THE-FIELD-final.pdf>> accessed 9 May 2023.

⁹ TIMAP for Justice pioneered the community paralegal model in Sierra Leone in 2003. It remains the largest provider of paralegal services in the country.