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March 2010

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Ugboma, Margeret U., "Provision and Use of Legal Information among Civil Rights Groups in the Oil Producing Communities of Nigeria" (2010). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 333.

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Provision and Use of Legal Information among Civil Rights Groups in the Oil Producing Communities of Nigeria

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Introduction

Information is an integral part of development. It is an indispensable factor for the development of any society. Development is hinged on the progress and productivity of the citizenry. It is therefore mandatory that the citizens are well informed of their rights, obligations, and privileges. The role of legal information in awareness of rights and obligations cannot be overemphasized. Legal information is all the published knowledge on the laws and statutes of a nation. Legal information is necessary to maintain peace and settle disputes. Legal information also promotes individual or collective rights to self defense. As posited by Omekwu (2003), legal information is critical in the administration of justice, because it reduces uncertainty while improving the accuracy of decisions. Legal information is contained in the documents of international conventions, in customs and general principles of law, and in judicial decisions (Gasiokwu and Ayewa, 2005). Civil rights groups in the oil-producing communities of Nigeria need information on various oil acts, land use acts, civil and criminal law, etc. This information is needed to carry out activities that fight for economic and political emancipation.

Civil rights groups in Nigeria predate oil exploration. These groups emerged to fight for independence and political emancipation, cultural/ethnic recognition, and autonomy for various groups. The Niger Delta today has many civil rights groups. The objectives of these groups are drawn from perceived injustices arising from oil exploitation, including the inequitable distribution of oil wealth, which is evident from the degraded landscape and lack of social and institutional infrastructure. The Niger Delta is a low-lying land of waterways and mangrove swamps located in southern Nigeria (Strides and Iteke, 1977). It is rich in crude oil wells and therefore hosts the oil producing communities of Nigeria.

Oil exploration, exploitation, and sales have left the Niger Delta environment degraded. The means of livelihood of the communities have been completely destroyed (Adebanwi 2004). The present sorry state of the oil-producing communities has led to the awakening of the citizens, who protest to draw attention to their plight and attract relief measures. These protests are coordinated by civil rights groups that have sprang up within the communities. They focus on economic and political emancipation for the Niger Delta region. These included groups of men, women, and youth, both literate and non-literate. They negotiate rights to employment, infrastructure development, and the ability to collect rent for land and passages. They negotiate based on established statutes and laws of the state and federation. The Niger Delta is witnessing methods of protest that run contrary to societal expectations, e.g., blockade, seizure of flow stations, and kidnapping. This paper explores whether the civil rights groups are aware of laws of the nation (Ugboma, 2008).

Objective of the Study

To investigate the provision and use of legal information among civil rights groups in their fight for economic and political emancipation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the study is aimed at:

- Identifying demographic characteristics of these civil rights groups.
- Identifying legal information needs of civil rights groups.
- Identifying the different sources of legal information of civil right groups.
- Identifying constraints in accessing legal information by civil rights groups.
- Investigating the use of legal information for the prosecution of civil rights activities.

Methodology

The survey research design was adopted for this study. The population of civil rights groups was drawn from Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States, in the southern part of Nigeria, which are rich in crude oil and comprise a host of oil-producing communities. The sample size was taken from the active members of the groups who engage in negotiations for rights and privileges in ten oil producing communities which include Bomadi, Oleh, Irri, Amassoma, Brass, and Ogoni. Other oil-producing communities include Oloibiri, Otor-owhe, Burutu, and Erhoike. These groups are many and varied but have similar objectives. Among these groups are Coalition of Isoko Civil Organization, Ijaw Monitoring Group, Niger Delta Equity Round Table, One Love Foundation, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People, Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta, United Niger Delta Energy Development Security Strategy, and many others.

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire, which was pretested on some members of civil rights groups in Oleh, Delta State, after having been validated by law lecturers at Delta State University, Abraka. The questionnaire was designed in a format that was comprehensible to those not trained in law. A total of 150 questionnaires were administered. The questionnaire was administered by a volunteer civil rights activist to civil rights groups of oil producing communities of the Niger Delta in Warri, Port Harcourt, and Yenagoa from November 2008-March 2009. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Findings and Discussion

Of 150 questionnaires filled and returned, 127 were usable. This 85 percent return rate is attributable to the terrain and current conflicts in the areas which made subjects suspicious. The completed questionnaires were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. These are distributed as follows:

Table 1: Percentage of Returned Questionnaire

S/N	RESPONDENTS	NO. OF QUESTIONNAIRE RETURNED	PERCENTAGE OF RETURNED QUESTIONNAIRE
1.	Civil Rights Groups (Warri Contact)	45	35%
2.	Civil Rights Groups (Port Harcourt Contact)	38	30%
3.	Civil Rights Groups (Yenagoa Contact)	44	44%
	Total	127	100%

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Civil Rights Groups

SEX	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Male	95	75%
Female	32	25%
AGE IN YEARS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
18-25	20	15.7%
26-33	35	27.6%
34-41	52	41%
42-49	20	15.7%
LEVEL OF EDUCATION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Masters/PhD	12	9%
HND/B.Sc. B.A,	26	20%
ND, NCE,	39	31%
WASC/ GCE	50	40%

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents by sex, age, and level of education. A large majority of the members of civil rights groups are male. Most members are between 26 and 41. Youths and youth groups have become a force in the local administration of the communities, and are even recognized by government and oil companies in all dealings with communities in the Niger Delta (Ugboma,2007). It is intriguing to note also that many members of these groups are holders of WASC/GCE, (40 percent). This study is tempted to conclude that the level of education of the leaders of this group, which is low, maybe have some responsibility for the inability of the groups to rationally pursue their goals and objectives, and may help account for the propensity for violence. Age and educational background notwithstanding, they are aware that they need legal information to pursue their activities.

Table 3: Length of Involvement in Civil Rights Activities

LENGTH IN YEARS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1-2	59	46%
3-5	42	33%
6-10	26	21%

Table 3 reveals that most members have been engaged in civil rights activities for only one or two years, with only one-fifth have more than five years involvement. This confirms the newness of most of these groups and their youthful leadership.

Table 4: Legal Information Needs of Civil Rights Groups

LEGAL NEEDS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Land ownership/Rent age	97	76%
Compensation/ welfare	92	72.4%
Employment/ labor	83	65%
Agitations and protest	97	76%
Negotiation and Rights	97	76%
Oil exploration and exploitation	79	62%
Operational rules for the company	55	43%
Civil/ criminal law	65	43.3%

The responses show that civil rights groups particularly need legal information in land ownership and rent age, which is the most contentious issue in these communities, especially when it involves two communities or communities and oil companies or the government. They also want to know about compensation and welfare packages, and agitations and protests.

Table 5: Sources of Legal Information of Civil Rights Groups

SOURCES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Libraries	4	3%
Lawyers	93	73%
Government offices	32	25%
Seminars/workshop/conferences	87	68%
Oil companies	24	18%
Legal documents	8	6%
Community leaders	43	33%
Radio	22	17%
Television	22	17%
Periodicals/ newspapers	48	37%

Table 5 reveals multiple responses on to sources of legal information. The major sources are lawyers, but seminars and workshops are another source. Though these people get some legal information from the media (print and electronic), and community leaders, these are not viewed as trusted sources. This corroborates Ugboma (2008) who posits that community leaders and traditional rulers are perceived as extensions of government and oil companies and therefore not trusted. It is instructive to note that only 4 (3 percent) indicated libraries as a source of information as shown in the table above.

Table 6: Constraints to Access to Legal Information

CONSTRAINTS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Funds	96	75.5%
Lack of legal knowledge	55	43.3%
Cost of legal materials	37	29%
Inability to understand legal knowledge	55	43.3%
Hoarding of information	80	62.9%

Table 6 reveals multiple responses about constraints to access to legal information. Funds are a major constraint. The groups cannot retain lawyers because they cannot pay them, and cannot acquire necessary law documents because they are expensive. Another constraint is the lack of legal knowledge and inability to understand the legal documents. More than four-fifths claim that information, legal or otherwise, is often hoarded. This has been revealed in other works as a major source of conflict in the oil-producing communities (Ifidon and Ahiazu, 2005; Imobighe, Bassey and Asuni, 2002).

Table 7: Legal Information for Civil Rights Groups

WAYS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Provision of legal officers	87	68.5%
Provision of counselors	33	25.9%
Provision of grants	99	78%
Open access to information	110	86.6%

This paper has tried to pinpoint avenues through which legal information can be provided for civil rights groups. Protests and actions in the Niger Delta are carried out by means outside the law, either because of disrespect or ignorance of the law. This study reveals that there are legal information needs to be met. Nearly 70 percent of respondents stated that provision of legal officers employed by government for these groups is imperative. One quarter also expressed the need for counselors, and nearly 80 percent requested the provision of grants to these groups. These grants would enable them to procure law materials and retainer lawyers. Nearly all respondents stated that there must be open access to information, especially legal information.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the provision and use of legal information by civil rights groups. Legal information is crucial for the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. The provision of legal information is imperative, especially in the face of the daunting and escalating conflicts in these communities. Legal information is available in documents, libraries, seminars, and workshops, and from lawyers, oil companies, community leaders, and print and electronic media. These sources are not varied enough and tend to be expensive. Sources of information that would cost nothing, such as libraries, are not consulted. Constraints to access include lack of funds, lack of legal knowledge, and hoarding of information. These are problems that can be solved, and should be.

Young people are a force to reckon with in oil-producing communities' affairs, in spite of their youth and low educational background. Legal information is constantly in use amongst civil rights groups in oil-producing communities. It provides guidance for the prosecution of their demands from government, oil companies, and law enforcement agencies. It is therefore recommended that:

- Seminars and conferences on which these groups rely should be broadened to include legal education for participants, and the number of seminars should be increased. It is also important that participation should be broadened to include more youths from oil-producing communities.
- The Freedom of Information Bill currently before the National Assembly should be expanded to include prohibiting hoarding of information.
- Library management should promote the institution as an information centre for the development of the citizenry.
- Government and oil companies should initiate a scholarship programmes to educate youths in oil-producing communities from basic to tertiary institutions.

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