

Transparency in Equatorial Guinea

Tutu Alicante, executive director, EG Justice



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It's hard to believe that [EG Justice](#) – the first and only international advocacy organisation dedicated to [transparency](#) in the central African country – is just a one-man band. Read any report, newspaper article, or campaign activity on corruption in the country – [one of the most despotic and opaque in Africa](#) – and EG Justice is likely to have been involved.

But Tutu Alicante, 40, is a lone campaigner, working from his base in Tampa, Florida, to spark the change he says his country needs. The challenge is daunting – [Equatorial Guinea](#) has a toxic mix of repressive rule, non-existent redistribution of wealth, and endemic corruption.

Alicante says the struggle for justice in his home country, the only Spanish-speaking nation in [Africa](#), starts at a much more basic level: just getting people to acknowledge it exists.

"Spain colonised Equatorial Guinea for more than 200 years, but most Spanish people don't even know where Equatorial Guinea is," Alicante explains. "Even people from other African countries don't know about Equatorial Guinea. That is a difficult starting point when you are working to give human rights a chance."

Equatorial Guinea could be a world-renowned international success story, Alicante believes. Nestled in Africa's armpit, between Cameroon and Gabon, the country's 700,000 inhabitants are sitting on top of several billion barrels of oil, making it Africa's third-largest oil producer.

But the country remains mired in poverty, and the only available information about the extent of corruption comes from the US authorities, who, in 2004 and 2010, found that millions of dollars of the country's oil income had been deposited in private bank accounts. The US is attempting to [seize \\$70m \(£44m\) worth of property belonging to the president's notorious son](#) – and vice-president – Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, whose assets include a \$30m

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/jun/13/transparency-equatorial-guinea-tutu-alicante/print>
mansion in Malibu, a \$38.5m Gulfstream jet, and more than \$2m in Michael Jackson memorabilia. A similar legal action is under way in France.

The opportunities for reform within Equatorial Guinea are limited, principally due to the iron grip of president Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who – since seizing power in a coup in 1979 – is Africa's longest-serving leader. Critics have been tortured and imprisoned, earning the country a place among the "worst of the worst" human rights abusers.

So Alicante focuses on building pressure from outside, trying to shame his government into releasing political prisoners, and lobbying for PEPs lists – databases of "politically exposed persons" whose private financial transactions banks are required to scrutinise – to be made publicly available. "One thing we know, for example, is that the minister does not actually go to London to pay for his children's fancy school, he wires the money to his girlfriend, and no one can link it to him because his wife is there with him at home," says Alicante, who is a qualified lawyer. "It takes citizens of Equatorial Guinea to make these links – if these databases were publicly available, people could contribute their knowledge."

One of the biggest victories for Alicante and his colleagues in the Publish What You Pay coalition, which campaigns for transparency in the natural resource sector, was the enactment of the US Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform Act. The act requires oil and gas companies to publish details of their payments to foreign governments.

But the law is being challenged in court by the American Petroleum Institute, the industry's lobbying group, which is seeking to overturn it.

"The industry is claiming that the law goes overboard, is too expensive, and violates the first amendment," says Alicante. "But we have already defeated them in the court of appeal, and now it is being sent down to a lower court. The amount of money that oil companies can make in a country like Equatorial Guinea is astonishing, and they don't want anything that is going to compromise that."

Clear thinking

What does transparency mean to you?

It means having mechanisms for citizens to know what is happening, a free press, and being able to interrogate our leaders.

Why is access to information important in development?

We should be able to hold our government officials accountable. We elect them to manage the resources of the people for the benefit of the nation – how can we do that if we don't know what they are doing?

What is the one piece of information you most want released?

How much money are oil companies paying our government in Equatorial Guinea, and where is that money going?