

COMEN: Replicating the gains of V2P across states and regions

A V2P story of change | July 2017



Through the activities of COMEN, the gains of V2P have proven to be sustainable in Anambra state as the more experienced COMEN are providing mentorship support to the COMEN being formed in the 9 LGAs that V2P recently moved into.

About Voice to the People (V2P)

V2P is a project supporting vulnerable communities in Nigeria to hold service providers, local authorities and state governments to account, take part in the decision-making that affects their lives and raise their voices to demand the rights and services to which they are entitled.

Location: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Kaduna state.

Duration: July 2013 - March 2018

Funded by: UK aid

Partners: It is delivered by a consortium of national and state organisations, led by international development agency, Christian Aid.

Peer support and mentorship

“COMEN is a good network. I have been hearing about it and V2P from other communities, and I am proud it has come to my community. V2P has done a tremendous job in our society; they have tried as much as possible to bridge the gap between the government and the people,” says Vitus Oraegbuman, COMEN chairman, Onitsha South LGA.

The introduction of V2P into all the 21 Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Anambra state – a rise from its initial 12 – after a two-and-a-half year period provided an opportunity to test the sustainability of the gains of the project and the effectiveness

of V2P’s role as a facilitator in the development process. V2P’s facilitation strategy includes building citizen capacity and triggering their sustained interest to continuously own and drive their development. The Community Empowerment Network (COMEN) therefore is crucial to this strategy as it provides a platform for citizens within a locality to organise themselves without any external influence in order to hold their leaders accountable. COMEN exists at both state and local government level, and are a network of all Community Based Monitors (CBMs) engaging within the different levels.

By providing mentoring support and training for their new counterparts, the 12 previously established COMEN have ensured that the principles of effective citizen participation in governance processes, including holding their government to account has spread across all the LGAs in the state. This mentorship programme has supported the drafting of constitutions, local government registration, power analysis and development of skills to tackle issues of poor public service delivery. Onitsha South LGA, one of the new LGAs has through the support and mentoring from the older COMEN been able to develop their constitution and conduct elections amongst other things.

“The old COMEN have come to our community to encourage and support us. We didn’t know how to engage and they came to tell us how. They impacted knowledge in us,” says Chika Onyeonuna, a CBM from Feggee community in Onitsha South LGA.

With V2P beginning in Feggee community in August 2016, the more experienced COMEN members supported a power analysis process that enabled the CBMs from Feggee and other communities within its LGA to involve influential members of the society as CBMs. This was strategic, given the peculiar nature of the communities in Onitsha South LGA that are made up of non-indigenes, and seen more as towns than communities. This was done as part of the mentorship programme organised by V2P to ensure that learning and the successes of COMEN spreads across the state.

“We are doing this mentoring of new communities on the platform of V2P that empowered us to engage with them,” says Ideh Godwin, the COMEN Chairman, Idemili South LGA.

“The old COMEN are our mentors; there is one [COMEN] that came to this community to guide and teach us how to develop our constitution and how to get registered. They have shown us how we will write a charter of demand; they have been of great assistance to

us. The process was very useful and a success because we would not have known what we needed to do. When they came to us, it was an eye opener because they showed us what they are doing and how they are getting success,” says Vitus Oraegbunan, the Chair of Onitsha South COMEN.

Through the support of the old COMEN, the Onitsha South COMEN were also successfully able to engage with their local government authorities on illegal taxation issues; a common trend in the state.

Strengthening engagement at the LGA level

While V2P does not directly work in all communities within a local government area, COMEN, beyond learning from and mentoring each other at the local government level, are also ensuring that citizen participation in governance processes is inclusive of all communities, regardless of whether or not they are V2P target communities.

In Ihiala LGA, V2P works in only four of the ten communities, however, through COMEN in the LGA, this reach has extended to four other communities, ensuring that 8 of the 10 communities understand the concept of active citizenship and have the knowledge and skills to engage. Christopher Onuchukwu, the Chairman of COMEN in Ihiala LGA participated in the training of other communities within the LGA, and says:

“We passed a message on rights claiming and the responsibility of the local government to the people and community. Then we asked if they are benefiting from the local government, and the answer was ‘no’. Then we educated them on why things not happening, so we are carrying them along and educating them to the best of our knowledge; asking them to get up and reclaim their rights. These communities now have CBMs who are part of COMEN.”

He confirms that there are plans to reach the remaining 2 communities

even as discussions have been had with their community leaders about this. Such inclusion of communities that are not primary V2P target communities is happening across the state even as charters of demand from all the communities within an LG are collated as a tool for engagement with the local government authorities. This strategy has enhanced the LGA wide engagements of COMEN especially on issues that are of mutual interest to two or more communities in the LGA, such as the construction of a major road that serves different communities.

Looking forward

“COMEN has worked at the state level through the various local governments, but it was just last year [that] we thought of coming together as a formidable force at the state level. If we come under one body, then we can directly discuss with the state government instead of going [to the state] local government by local government,” says Christopher Onuchukwu, the acting secretary of COMEN Anambra state.

Through learning and sharing meetings, COMEN in the different LGAs are able to identify new, better and more creative ways to handle their issues. Therefore, COMEN at the state level was inaugurated in the early part of 2017 as a way to sustain this collaboration and spread across the state, regardless of the presence and support of V2P. Godwin Ideh, the Chairman of the state chapter of COMEN states that through the state platform, the concept of the charter of demand has been introduced to more communities that V2P does not reach, “telling them about our experiences in improving service delivery and why we need to stand and demand for our rights from the government. When they understood us, we all together started coming up with our community charter of demand. It was new to them, but we made time to support them and go into details,” he said.

This was done without funding support from V2P, but as a way to ensure that at the state level, COMEN’s

engagement is representative of the needs of all the communities. Leading up to the formation of COMEN at the state level were wide engagements led by the executives of COMEN from different LGAs to traditional rulers, President-General and the Chairman of the Association of Town Union (ASATU), seeking their support.

“One of the COMEN plans for now is to reach all the communities and that is why we are approaching the traditional rulers and PGs. Our plan is what we do

in community A that succeeds will be replicated in community B, and we are open to innovative ideas,” Godwin Ideh said.

COMEN at the state level has acquired an office in the state capital, and fundraising is underway to enable effective set-up and running of the office. Going forward, the plan is to have a work plan and seek funding to ensure all the 177 communities in Anambra state are covered. COMEN has also been registered with the

Coalition of Civil Society Organizations in the Southeast.

Currently, COMEN in Anambra state is meeting with ASATU to develop strategies to ensure that the charter of demand becomes a legally recognised tool and a well-established system for citizens’ engagement and participation in budget processes in the state. This will involve joint engagements with the executive and legislature to push a bill that will institutionalise this.

