

A VOICE FOR RURAL WOMEN IN NIGERIA

SUCCESS STORIES



A Voice for Women in Nigeria

“Women, we are so marginalised,” says Ethel Atuokwu, member of Idikacho Women in Governance, a grassroots organisation mobilising women in south-eastern Nigeria to become politically engaged.

“At times women will have something to say but they don’t know how to say it because of ‘traditional’ rules that require them not to talk in public.”

Ethel is finishing up a week-long meeting in Abuja on women’s participation in government.

Despite sitting in a hotel for five days discussing the same topic, she is clearly not tired of it at all.

On the contrary, she is excited to talk about her experience in helping women become more politically engaged.

“Because of this group, Idikacho Women in Governance,” she says, “we now have the voice to speak about our views and give opinions, and even become members in decision-making in our communities. I love that.”

For many women in south-eastern Nigeria, especially in rural areas, the idea of being able to influence government is new.

Women here do not expect politicians or the government to do much for them. While the region has seen economic development, much of this has been funded by the communities themselves, or through philanthropy, instead of by the government.

“The South East is not really developed because the government is working.

It is developed because people come together around their issues and solve their problems,” explains Ifeoma Chukwuma, Regional



Ethel credits Idikacho and PERL with giving her the confidence to be a leader.

Team Leader for the South East at PERL, a UK aid funded programme focused on improving service delivery in Nigeria.

“[Politicians] will normally come to the women and say, ‘Take rice, take salt, vote for us,’” she continues “[The women] will clap and sing for them. They never say ‘This is what we want.’”

Both Seen and Heard

Women were once more engaged politically in the region.

But their participation in politics and government has been declining, and they have not been able to unite to champion the cause of women's leadership and participation in governance.

Frustrated with this situation, in 2013 Mercy Anagbogu, a professor and counsellor at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, set up Idikacho Women in Governance in Anambra, a state in south-eastern Nigeria.

Idikacho's aim was to get more women into decision-making positions and challenge the view that women should be "seen but not heard."

From the start Idikacho was apolitical – it would not espouse any one party's views – and it would not focus on pre-selected issues. It would be a network of women who would share their experiences of advocating for change so that they could learn from each other and go out in their communities to address the issues of concern there.

With support from Voice to the People, a UK aid funded, governance project, Mercy was able to grow her small network, which then took on a life of its own.

The women began to organise themselves around problems related to service delivery – whether the lack of clean water or inadequate schooling – and advocate for change with the government.

In one town in Anambra State, for example, nurses working at a health centre were often harassed and even attacked. Ethel and other women from her local Idikacho chapter convinced the traditional ruler (the Igwe of Umuoji) to build a fence around the centre.

At the same time, funds were released to build

a surgery theatre and to renovate a well within the fenced off area.

There are so many stories in Anambra State – success stories..." Ethel says.

Ethel talks about how practices towards widows have changed – in many communities they no longer need to shave their heads and hide away in a room for a year after their husband dies; about a community where women no longer have to sit on the floor to speak to community decision-makers while the men stand or sit on chairs; about a flood situation where women were able to get life jackets from the government.

She also explains how Idikacho members monitor the implementation of government projects that have been promised or budgeted for, and follow up on any projects that are not being carried out. "Working with Idikacho makes the women to stand firm," she says.



From Anambra State to the wider region

While effective in Anambra State, Idikacho remained local until 2016. That year, the PERL programme identified Idikacho as an organ-

isation that could be expanded, not only in Anambra State but to the entire region. Idikacho was exactly the type of organisation that the programme – following in the footsteps of its predecessor, the UK aid funded SAVI – would support; it was ‘locally-led,’ addressed problems of public service delivery, and, of course, supported women.

While there are many women’s groups in the South East, Idikacho was seen as unique because it focused on women having a larger societal influence through their involvement in politics and governance, and because the women themselves were leading the change and mentoring each other.

“It’s the people who are wearing the shoes [who lead Idikacho],” explains PERL’s Regional Partnership Facilitator for the South East Judith Ugwoke. “That gives them passion and makes it more sustainable, because they are the owners of the issues.”

PERL works across Nigeria to improve the delivery of public services by both supporting citizens to have their voice heard and improving the government’s capacity to deliver services. It does not provide grants to any local organisations that it works with, but finds other ways to help self-sustaining, effective groups do their work. Crucially, it looks for ways in which existing solutions that work can be replicated or scaled-up.

“Our mandate is sharing islands of effectiveness,” Ifeoma explains.

In the case of Idikacho, this meant finding a way to bring the network to other states in the South East, a region with the same language, cultural similarities, and similar perceptions of women. The PERL team and Mercy first identified women in the other four states – Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo – who had the interest and potential to bring Idikacho to their communities – normally women active in rural politics and the NGO community.

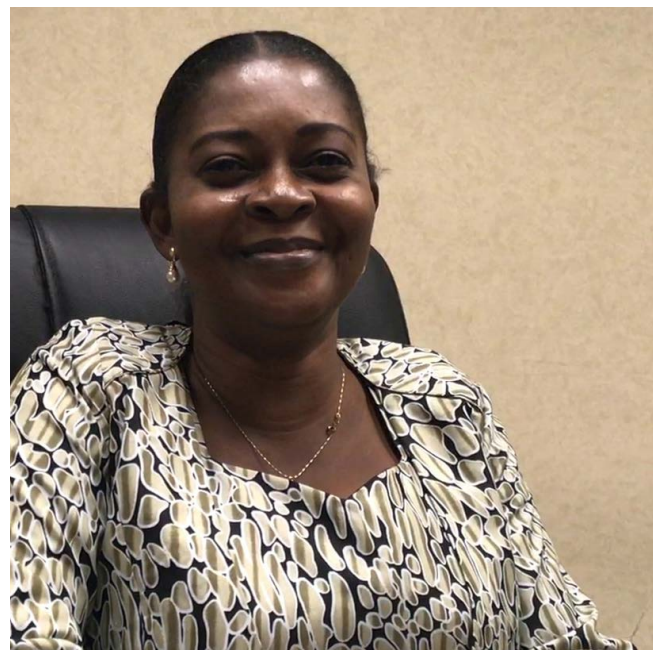
PERL invited these ‘women champions’ to a

meeting with Mercy and the Anambra State Idikacho chapter. The women discussed service delivery issues as well as how they had gone about trying to influence those in power to address these issues. They learned about Idikacho and were encouraged to replicate in their communities, if it made sense for them.

Not all the ‘women champions’ then went on to spread the Idikacho philosophy, but enough did to bring the model back home and begin building their own Idikacho networks. In three of the four states, they set up the networks that parallel geopolitical structures – with Idikacho coordinators at the state, senatorial zone, local government area and ward levels.

While PERL only interacts with Idikacho coordinators at the state and senatorial zone levels, these coordinators in turn mentor the women at the more local levels.

Nancy Oko-Onya was one of the women who attended the PERL-organised meeting in December 2017. Already a local politician, she had been identified as a potential leader to help grow the network.



Nancy brought the Idikacho philosophy to Ebony State.

When asked why she got involved in Idikacho, she spoke for nearly nine minutes. While that might be the politician in her, her passion for working with women is clear.

“I grew up in a rural community and saw everything,” she says. “It wasn’t easy growing up as a girl in the midst of boys. As time went on, I saw the need to have women know who they are and the potential in them.”

Nancy started working with women early in her career. Then, after returning from the PERL-organised meeting she began sharing the Idikacho philosophy in Ebonyi State and quickly realised that it had a lot of merit.

“When I got to believe in what I shared,

I said, ‘Wow, this means this can work... OK, can we have a larger group? Can we have more women work with us?’ And that worked!”

Nancy is now the Ebonyi Idikacho State Coordinator. She works with 17 ward-level coordinators, the local level at which most of the members’ advocacy occurs. She says Idikacho membership in Ebonyi is “not great” for now – about 260 women spread across the state, but that her aim is to grow.

“My vision is to have a very large number of women who are informed, equipped, educated - it might not be the formal education, but they have the basic information they need to demand that their development needs are met by the duty-bearers - the government and those who represent them in policy-making.”

Despite its size, the Ebonyi chapter is making in-roads. When asked for one example – her favourite – of what impact Idikacho has had in the state,

Nancy shares the story of a primary school that was built by the government. But when she’s done, she launches right into another example, and then a third.

And what about PERL? How has that programme contributed?

“[PERL] made me understand that I cannot work alone,” Nancy says. “Working alone I can move faster, working with others I can achieve more.”

Currently, there are about 6500 members in the five states.

Male champions and traditional leaders are also being converted to the view that women need to be more vocal about their communities’ needs.

PERL now supports the entire network across the region.

The bulk of this consists of bringing the women together for meetings where they can learn from each other, and where they receive training on leadership, public speaking, effective political participation, the generation of evidence for advocacy and the monitoring of election promises. The participants develop short-term work plans – outlining who they are to speak to, when, using which arguments - and discuss how they will overcome likely obstacles, such as the lack of men’s support for their causes.

Conscious of keeping costs down, PERL has helped set up WhatsApp groups through which the women share their experiences, so that they don’t need to spend money on travel to meet up.

Those who don’t have WhatsApp call each other to connect.



Nancy presenting the community’s needs as written by the women at a meeting

Linking women's groups, spreading the message of women's empowerment

PERL has also played a crucial role in connecting the network to other women's groups, including many groups that are not at all active in influencing government.

The Idikacho women then share their ideas for political engagement with these groups, trying to get them to see that they should expect government to be a source of solutions for their service delivery problems.

In the summer of 2018, PERL brought together Idikacho women and helped them to strategise and develop action plans on how to build alliances with the 'August Women Meetings.' Every August, women from the South East who reside in different parts of the country go back to their hometowns and participate in meetings organised by various groups – communal, kindred or faith-based.

The annual meetings have been traditionally focused on self-help rural development, with the women planning projects to address community and church needs.

The meetings rarely, if ever, focus on how to get the government to fund such projects. But nearly all women attend at least one meeting – they are therefore a great opportunity to reach a large number of people who are already interested in contributing their ideas to solve local problems, but who may not know how to engage with government.

In 2018, Idikacho members attended 44 August Women Meetings in 14 senatorial zones across the five states, reaching over 6,000 women. Idikacho members argued that meeting participants should start advocating for change. They also gathered lists of the service delivery needs identified during the meetings

to bring these to state decision-makers. Some of these decision-makers have now signed memorandums of understanding as

a commitment towards delivering on these needs.

PERL has also linked Idikacho with the programme's media partners – the South East Media Executive Roundtable. As a result, at the August Women Meetings Idikacho's participation was covered by two journalists in each state, resulting in publicity that helped spread the messages further.



Idikacho members attended 44 August Women Meetings in 14 senatorial zones across the five states.

If there's no money on the table, no way

A major contribution PERL has made was demonstrating to the Idikacho members that they don't need external funding to build their networks and get things done. For many women, this had seemed impossible.

"Some people felt it could never work," Ifeoma explains. "If there's no money on the table, no way," they said."

But those who did think it was possible are now the Idikacho coordinators.

"They're not getting any money. All of them are self-motivated to take on this initiative," she continues.

Nancy was very clear about this point. "PERL taught me in particular how to achieve a lot with a little.

I've been thinking I need so much money to engage the communities, to work with women...

But [the PERL team] said, 'Just go, just get something done.' And it's been working! I discovered that I don't need to move too far - there are immediate communities that are quite close I can work with; that a community can work with another community..."

The only financial support PERL has ever offered was to pay for travel costs of Idikacho members coming to the August Meetings. Despite this, Idikacho's impact is spreading. Across the region, the movement is both increasing women's political participation and leading to tangible changes in service delivery.

In Enugu State, for example, 14 women were inducted into a traditional rulers' cabinet - one woman from each village - where previously no women had had a voice.

In another community in Enugu men were too afraid to contradict herders who had demanded that farmers stop growing potatoes because they make their cattle

ill. Idikacho women marched to their local representatives and argued the case for being able to grow potatoes on their land; they were told that they should resume potato farming.

In Ebonyi State, Idikacho women identified and lobbied government representatives who had enough political influence to be able to get a primary school built.

The resulting three-classroom solid construction replaced a thatched roof on wooden poles that had served as a classroom.

The school also came with a water borehole, reducing the time women and children had to walk to fetch water as well as the incidence of water-borne disease.

Idikacho is also inspiring the next generation of women to stand up for their rights

and think about their future.

They've brought together young people, and in particular girls, in a 'summer school' to discuss topics such as education and marriage - encouraging them to stay in school and delay marriage until they are adults.

Girls who attended the summer school are talking to their peers about the same topics.

And Idikacho women in Anambra state are reaching out to the state government to support the spread of the summer schools in rural communities.

Idikacho members in Ebonyi State lobbied government representatives to get a primary school built.



Classroom before - with pupils



School classroom - Ebonyi



Idikacho women advocated for boreholes to be built in a number of communities, reducing the time women and children have to travel to fetch water.



President of Agbani Idikacho members tried to convince attendees at the August Women Meetings that they should advocate for change with the government.

Transformation that lasts

PERL does not want to be needed – it wants to help organisations like Idikacho, which are already effective, to see that they can grow, without external funds, without continuous assistance.

That's why the PERL team decided to work with Idikacho - the network has expanded throughout the South East because it's effective in bringing about positive change for people. And programmes such as PERL have certainly helped with that. However, it has also expanded because of the personal impact it is having on women – an impact that won't disintegrate once the programme is out of the picture. Members are motivated to keep working because they see what other women are able to accomplish.

Many of them undergo personal transformations themselves, and this, in turn, inspires other women still.

“Before I could not stand in the public and speak...” Ethel says. “I was a stammerer. I felt shy talking to people, I couldn't address groups. But since I engaged [PERL]... they gave me a kind of strong mind. They gave me courage.”

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