



INSPIRING ABIA'S COVID-19 FIGHT

WOMEN OF CHANGE SERIES

On April 20, 2020, Abia State recorded its first two cases of COVID-19; as of June 28th, the number of confirmed cases had increased to 302. The public health concerns thrown up by the pandemic led to a near total shut down of economic activities in the state – businesses, schools and most government offices are closed. More significantly, the pandemic has severely impacted government revenues, thereby constraining the ability of the state government to implement the 2020 budget as planned. It is at this time of great uncertainty and economic slump that Dr. Nnenna Chikezie – one of PERL's Women in Governance Change Agents – found herself in a position where she could play a pivotal role in helping Abia State to navigate the emerging realities. As the Executive Secretary of the central planning and budgeting agency in Abia - the Abia State Economic Planning Commission - Dr. Chikezie leads a team of over 50 budget and planning officers to ensure that plans and budgets in Abia State conform to good practice, are realistic and deliver outcomes that respond to citizens' needs, irrespective of their gender and social status. As the ongoing pandemic has affected revenue projections upon which the 2020 budget and spending estimates were prepared, there was a need to revise it.

The preventive measures introduced by the Abia State Government to contain the spread of the virus have also thrown up social challenges ranging from increased unemployment to significant income displacement for vulnerable families. Providing palliatives and other forms of welfare by the Government in response to these social problems, will require credible data and statistics in order to ensure that these palliatives are targeted appropriately. Dr. Chikezie has rallied her team and they are stepping up to the challenge. Her experiences over the years and her interactions at PERL's Women in Governance (WinG) Community of Practice (CoP) appear to have prepared her for the circumstance.

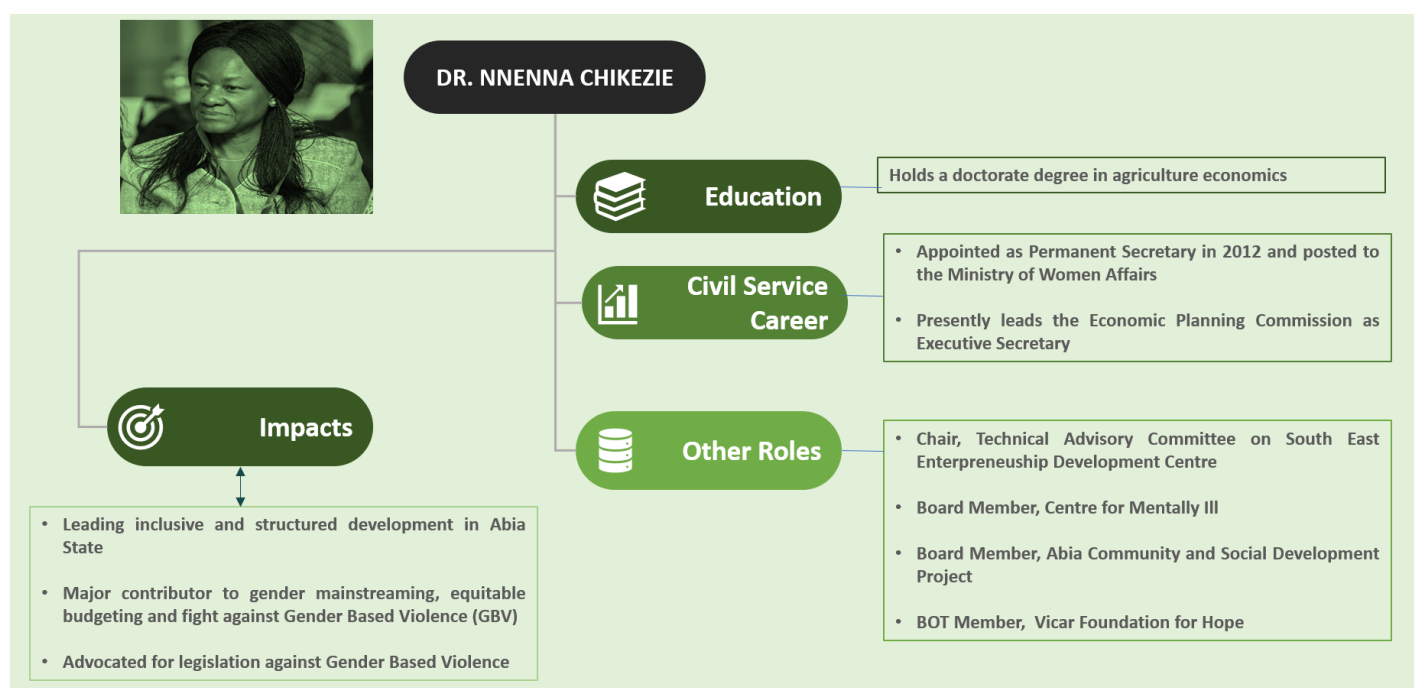
The Journey

“ When PERL met me, there was this one on one meeting, where they asked, ‘what support do you want?’ and I said, we need to be trained on advocacy. I said there is a gap and we really need to know how to go about high-level advocacy...the first thing they [PERL] did for us was gender mainstreaming. ”



A consummate career civil servant with a Doctorate Degree in Agricultural Economics, Dr. Nnenna Chikezie was appointed a Permanent Secretary in 2012 and posted to the Abia State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. She is currently the Chairman of the Technical Advisory Committee for the South East Entrepreneurship Development Centre, a Board Member of the Centre for Mentally Ill, Amaudo Itumbuzo, as well as for the Abia Community and Social Development Project. She also sits on the Board of Trustees for the Vicar Hope Foundation, a Foundation established by the wife of the Governor of Abia State to support youth and women empowerment; and to establish a flagship Sickle Cell Project. In addition to being the President for the Women Empowerment and Sustainable Advancement (WESEAI), she belongs to numerous Non-Governmental Organisations.

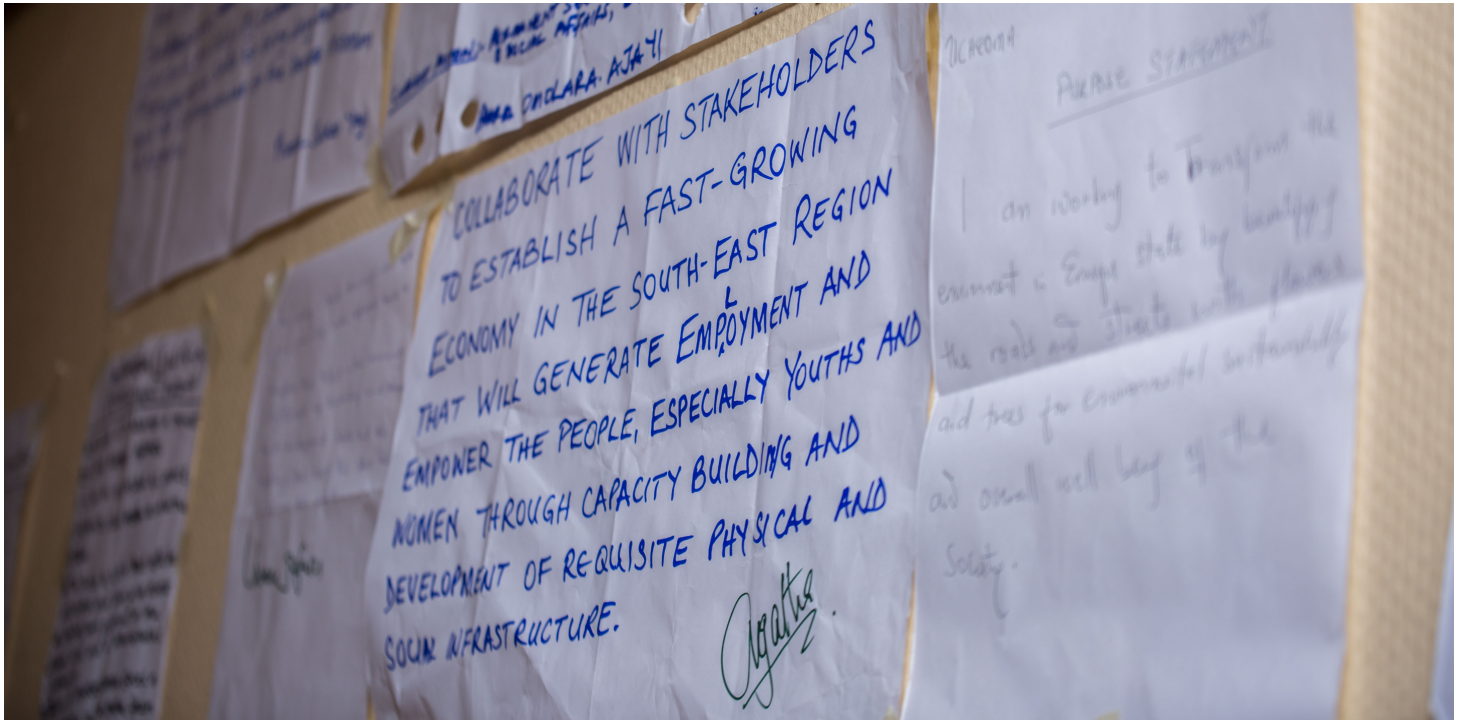
Dr. Chikezie's achievements in Abia State are the turning points that promise an era of inclusive and structured development planning for Abia State. Some of her outstanding contributions in the areas of gender mainstreaming, equitable budgeting and the fight against gender-based violence all stem from her experience with PERL's support through Women in Governance. At the time that the CoP was formed, as the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Women Affairs in Abia State, Dr. Chikezie had led the fight against gender-based violence in the state for years.



“ I will say I am well prepared to deal with the crisis because in moments like this, you are looked upon to show leadership. I remember that when the Governor was talking about reviewing the budget, they were at peace when I told them we had already started. That is leadership because in a time of crisis you do not wait to be told what to do. We are also providing data and statistics to guide the government in providing palliatives in order to ensure it reaches the most vulnerable population.

Dr. Nnenna Chikezie, Executive Secretary Abia State Economic Planning Commission

However, her efforts did not yield the expected result. Inspired by the knowledge gained from the Women in Governance Community of Practice, it became obvious that the resolution to the long-standing challenges in the fight against gender-based violence was a legal framework. The task of effecting this in a state that was laced with strong cultural influences and political apathy on the subject matter seemed insurmountable. Dr. Chikezie turned to the PERL Women in Governance practice for support. With high-level advocacy, the Wife of the Governor, Dr Nkechi Ikpeazu, leveraging on her platform - Vicar Hope Foundation, the Ministry of Women Affairs and The International Federation of Women Lawyers pushed for legislation against gender gender-based violence in the state. The legislation titled Violence Against Persons Prohibition Law, was passed into law in 2019; and it protects individuals - particularly the over 1.8 million women and girls in Abia State - against harmful traditional practices and all forms of violence including physical, sexual, psychological, and domestic. It also provides effective remedies for victims and punishment for offenders.



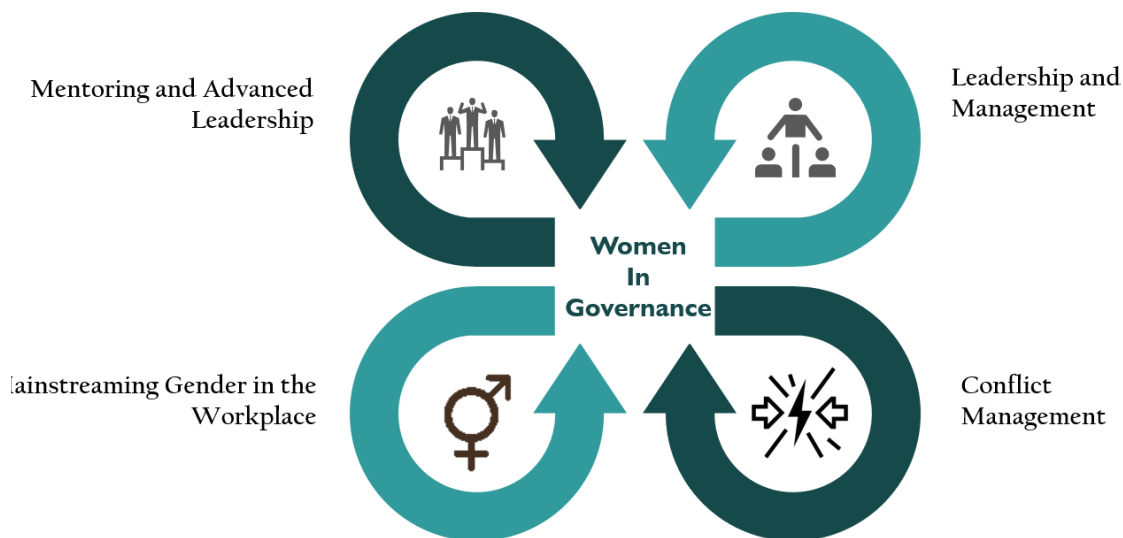
The budget revisions have been finalized, showing that revenue and capital expenditure proposals in the original 2020 budget were reduced by 58% and 34% respectively. Dr. Chikezie worked with her team to apply scientific rigour to the process by using PERL's Government Revenue Estimation and Allocation Tool (GREAT) to arrive at final revenue projections. Not only did Dr. Chikezie and her team produce a credible and realistic revised budget for 2020, she also inspired her team to ensure the assignment was concluded in good time.



We have reviewed the 2020 budget to mitigate the impact of COVID-19; and the revised budget was passed by the House of Assembly on 23 July 2020. The revised budget speaks to the economic realities on ground now in the nation and in the state... we did everything to make sure we finished in good time so the state can access the SFTAS grant and use it for further development.



The Women In Governance Initiative



The Women in Governance Community of Practice (CoP) was officially launched on the 28th of February 2018, just ahead of International Women's Day with 15 members and the theme: “Stronger Together.” By March 2020, its membership had grown to 52. Since the launch of the Community of Practice, there have been three training programmes to improve the overall performance of these change agents to deliver better services. The first, held in February 2018, provided AWARD certified leadership and management skills building through well-defined modules and team building activities. In September 2018, there was a second Community of Practice gathering for a one-day conflict management training. In January 2019, the expanded Community of Practice met again for an AWARD certified four-day advanced leadership and mentoring training, following the identification of the women to understand and deploy mentoring skills within their organisations to optimise performance.

For women in governance who are often excluded from trainings and skills building that would facilitate the progression of their careers and strengthen their capacity for service delivery, such platforms are vital. An assessment of the CoP, testimonials and evidence from members of the community, as well as reflections from those working alongside the Women in Governance and a study of other CoPs, indicate that the CoP’s approach to supporting its members has strengthened their capability to perform in their functions. It was assessed that the CoP is contributing to the achievement of reforms to improve service delivery through creating value for individual members that lead to wider institutional reform.



When I think of PERL’s Women in Governance Forum, a few words come to mind: inspiration, knowledge sharing and motivation. Each time I leave my house for any forum, what’s on my mind is that I’m going to be inspired; when I get to the meeting, what’s on my mind is to get all the knowledge and I can; and when I leave, I’m motivated... so it’s not just like other workshops and conferences you attend and you come back and sit down...





Through the CoP, linkages are being created, including networking with likeminded individuals and peer learning that have led to collaborations across states and sectors. These have fostered adaptation and adoption of good reform practices, removed bottlenecks that have allowed for merit-based promotions and provided opportunities for collaboration and peer learning. In addition, the access to trainings on leadership, management, conflict resolution and mentoring, which many of these women may not have received otherwise, has been vital to improving performance, confidence, staff and situation management, and ultimately better service delivery.

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