

From Mali to Geneva and back again:

Rural citizens' voices enter global dialogue on child and maternal health.

The **Citizens' Hearings** movement, successfully piloted in 2015 by a coalition led by World Vision, Save the Children, International Planned Parenthood Federation and White Ribbon Alliance, involved close to 10,000 participants in its first year. These grassroots consultations, held in 100 communities across 19 countries, brought together diverse groups of stakeholders to identify gaps and propose solutions for women's and children's health care. Through this local-to-global movement, concerned citizens provided input for improving health where they live — and secured a hearing at the world's highest-level forum on those issues. Here is an example from Mali:

Mali, the eighth-largest country in Africa, has one of the world's poorest child survival rates and an ongoing scarcity of health professionals. Much of the country's diverse population lives in rural or remote locales that remain underserved by the health system. Although its child mortality rate has dropped by half since 1990, the country failed to meet targets set for 2015 and much acceleration is needed to reach the Sustainable Development Goals target to end preventable newborn and child deaths by 2030 (i.e. as low as 25 per 1,000 live births). Policies and plans at the national government level have yet to be fully implemented and made accessible for poor and rural populations.

World Vision Mali has been supporting a social accountability approach called **Citizen Voice and Action (CVA)**, for



National Citizens' Hearing for maternal and child health

Photo World Vision Mali

several years, where local residents are trained to mobilize and engage their peers and neighbors to be aware of their rights and form action groups to monitor health services and engage in dialogue with local authorities to improve service delivery in line with national standards. These discussions seek to include marginalized and vulnerable families that are often excluded from the health system. It was in this context that community members at all levels of society began to meet for the country's first-ever series of local Citizens' Hearings, starting in April 2015. The local CVA action groups led the citizen hearings at local level, using methodology they were familiar with from their ongoing social accountability work.

In Mali, these public consultations took place in 15 different communities, culminating in regional and national

“We (the Government) went to the Citizens Hearings at the national level and asked the people what their needs were at the local level...we understand that the community is essential to bring down mortality”

Dr Binta Keita,
National Health Director
of Mali (2015)





District Citizens' Hearing in schools, San, Mali

Photos: World Vision Mali

hearings in early May 2015 where the Minister of Health, other key decision makers, United Nations officials, civil society groups and national media were present.

More than 900 Malians overall participated in the public meetings, where they drew up priority recommendations for improving maternal, newborn and child health. By the end of that month, as the **World Health Assembly** gathered in Geneva, their recommendations were featured by Mali's outgoing National Director of Health, Dr. Binta Keita, at the first Global Citizens' Dialogue, where she spoke on behalf of Mali's government. This is the first time in the Assembly's history that citizens could participate in a public dialogue with governments, with the opportunity to share their views, experiences and recommendations.

The Citizen's Hearings complement a similar process the government of Mali conducted at the same time to receive community recommendations on health delivery, and as a result of its engagement, World Vision has been asked to work with the government to ensure the recommendations from the citizen hearings are implemented.



District Citizens' Hearing in San, Mali

WHO PARTICIPATES?

- Local women, men and children
- Health workers
- Faith leaders such as pastors and imams
- Village chiefs and councilors
- Government officials
- Volunteers and members of community groups such as Citizen Voice and Action
- District- and National-level policy makers

MALI HEALTH SYSTEM IN NUMBERS

Mali has the seventh-worst child mortality rate in the world. **One** child out of **10** dies before the age of five (UNICEF, 2015).

The country has long been mired in a health workforce crisis: for every **100,000** people, there are only **8** doctors and **43** nurses and midwives (WHO, 2014). Although most of its **17 million** people live in rural areas, most health professionals are based in Bamako, the capital city (UN, 2015).

More than **two** thirds of the country's midwives are based in Bamako, while more than four in **10** births in Mali don't have any skilled health worker attending. The maternal mortality rate is high, at **587** maternal deaths per **100,000** live births, though it has declined by more than **40%** since 1990.

In addition to the shortage of health workers at all levels, Mali's health infrastructure has been weakened by violent conflict, internal displacement, the Ebola outbreak and recent food crises, resulting in further difficulties for many Malians to find care. Overall life expectancy is **55** years (UN, 2015).

The government is currently working towards meeting its national policy of employing one community health worker per **1500** people.

These hearings exemplify **social accountability's role** in development, through empowering citizens to identify priorities for improving their communities, become aware of their rights, make sure their voice counts in decision-making, and hold leaders to account for their pledges. This

approach strengthens the connection between citizens, government officials and frontline health service providers so that policies and plans address local challenges and realities. The aim is for people with a stake in the outcomes to drive their own sustainable development.

CITIZEN VOICE IN ACTION: WORLD VISION'S APPROACH TO SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

CVA is World Vision's flagship approach to social accountability. CVA works by educating citizens about their rights and equipping them with a simple set of tools designed to empower them in protecting and enforcing those rights. First, communities learn about basic human rights, and how these rights are articulated under local law. Next, communities work collaboratively with government and service providers to compare reality against government's own commitments using an adaptation of the "social audit" tool. Communities also have the opportunity to rate government's performance against subjective criteria that they themselves generate, using an adaptation of the "community score card". Children in particular, play a critical role in identifying service-delivery gaps at places like schools that others cannot. Finally, communities engage in constructive, local, multi-stakeholder dialogues in which citizens, government and service providers commit to an action plan to improve the service being monitored.



Photo World Vision Mali

SINCE THE 2015 CITIZENS' HEARINGS...

World Vision Mali is continuing to champion social accountability in 2016, spearheading a community consultation process involving thousands of people across the country, from the local to the national level, together with partners. This ongoing effort aims to gather citizens' priorities for implementing the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** in Mali, which will eventually feed into the Malian government's national development plan to implement the SDGs.

World Vision and its partners have also prioritized creating of a **'feedback loop'** in which the activities at global forums such as the World Health Assembly and United Nations General Assembly are reported back to community members on an ongoing basis.

THE TOP RECOMMENDATIONS THAT EMERGED FROM THE CITIZEN'S HEARINGS IN MALI WERE:

- Recruit and train an increasing number of qualified health personnel to serve at the community level, and provide incentives for midwives to work in rural areas.
- Increase health funding to 15% of the entire national budget by 2017, in alignment with the pledge made in the Abuja Declaration of 2001.
- Further integrate services, such as providing treated mosquito nets and appropriate preventive measures to families for free during antenatal care visits and after delivery
- Expand awareness-raising activities to promote behavior change so people adopt essential practices that combat malnutrition, engage in family planning and encourage women to attend community health centres for delivery
- Create a high-level national council that mobilizes the government in fighting against maternal, newborn and child mortality.
- Remove financial barriers to essential health services, such as to:
 - Make antenatal care, delivery and postnatal care services free of charge to the beneficiaries (with a third party co-payer)
 - Inform communities and raise awareness around the benefits of health insurance, to expand usage

“ Now that this (global citizens dialogue) has happened it cannot stop. We cannot now turn back the tide of strengthening accountability for what takes place in this building every year, and you are the beginning of that change, that historic, groundbreaking change.”

Richard Horton,
The Lancet Editor



ABOUT SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE SDGS

Social Accountability is about driving change for and by citizens, including children. As country governments transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the SDGs, 2016 presents a landmark opportunity for community engagement work.

To achieve the best possible outcomes from development pledges that affect them, citizens must have the information they need to give relevant input, ensure leaders are working to include all communities at the heart of their local and national action plans, and to monitor progress. Evidence gathered at community level can feed into various stages of multi-stakeholder dialogues and contribute to SDG implementation as well as reporting. In light of this, social accountability is more important than ever.

These dialogues can occur in 'invited' spaces, in which government encourages people's participation, or 'claimed/created' spaces, in which people themselves join together in pursuit of accountability. Tools for this kind of sustainable engagement include participation in public policy-making processes, monitoring public service delivery, creating citizen advisory boards, forging citizens charters, social auditing, and more.