

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

# Improving Access and Inclusion in Health Services for Disadvantaged Rural Communities and Tackling Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

*Violet Tampiooru Gomba*



**Nigeria is Africa's largest and most densely populated country with approximately 218.5 million people in an area of 923,768 km<sup>2</sup> as estimated by the United Nations in 2022. Its population is expected to reach 400 million people by 2050. Despite its rapidly growing population, Nigeria faces insufficient and poor-quality healthcare facilities which is worsened by the unevenly distributed human resource capacity in the health sector.**

The most affected are the rural communities, the majority of whom are unable to access basic healthcare services which compromises their health and wellbeing. This calls for immediate action towards improving access to adequate health services to these marginalised populations.

Meanwhile, Nigeria's economic development depends largely on the fate of the youth (aged between 15 and 24) who currently make up 63% of Nigeria's population, of which 19.6% are unemployed. Consequently, youth empowerment to create employment opportunities and financial independence has moved up on Nigeria's economic development agenda making it a top priority.

Commonwealth Alumnus Violet, who completed a Master's degree in Genomic Medicine, is at the forefront of improving access to health services for disadvantaged rural communities in Nigeria and tackling youth unemployment by empowering the youths with vocational skills. Through the NGO which she co-founded, ACEYSA (Assist Children, Empower Youths, Support Adults),

ACEYSA (Assist Children, Empower Youths, Support Adults), Violet has rolled out medical outreach programmes targeted at improving access to medical care in rural Nigeria, and a skills acquisition programme focused on training the youth on vocational skills, thereby empowering and facilitating their entry into business to become financially independent and boost the economy. ACEYSA has also provided grants for small scale businesses, and awarded scholarships to the less privileged individuals who have gained access to education in primary and secondary schools, and undergraduate programmes.



ACEYSA medical project at Ilaje, Lagos in 2020, with professional volunteers offering free consultation and medication.

**Violet Tampiooru Gomba** was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2018 to study for a Master's degree in Genomic Medicine at St George's University of London. She has been instrumental during the Covid-19 pandemic, supporting the training of laboratory staff in Nigeria on Molecular Biology techniques. Violet is also the co-founder of ACEYSA (Assist Children, Empower Youths, Support Adults), an NGO that has successfully implemented projects on poverty alleviation by reducing inequalities in health and education in Nigeria. Through ACEYSA, Violet has played a pivotal role in implementing projects that have resulted in improved access to healthcare for marginalised rural communities, financial empowerment for youths, and access to education for the less privileged individuals in Nigeria.

## Educational Empowerment – A Powerful Tool to Drive Change

Growing up in a community made up of individuals with very little or no formal education was a motivation for Violet. She was very keen to obtain not only some level of education, but the ‘sky was the limit’ for her as she believes education is an ‘empowering tool’ with the potential to equip her with the necessary skills and knowledge to realise her developmental objectives in her community.

‘Very little importance was placed on education, especially for the girl child. In a bid to go against this norm, I developed great interest in education, as I believe it is an empowering tool. This interest was further fuelled by a burning passion to excel at all levels of my educational pursuits that resulted in the opportunity of winning the Rivers State Sustainable Development Agency (RSSDA) Scholarship to study for a Bachelor of Science degree in Biochemistry and Genetics at Swansea University.’

Upon completing her undergraduate studies, Violet returned to her country to serve in the National Youth Service Corp Scheme (NYSC) at the Olabisi Onabanjo University (OOU), in Ogun State. She also co-founded an NGO, ACEYSA, with the aim to alleviate poverty through implementing various projects including awarding scholarships which increased access to education particularly for less privileged individuals. As part of ACEYSA activities, Violet has conducted medical outreach activities which has improved access to medical care for the rural communities. ACEYSA has also offered grants for small scale businesses to financially empower youths.

Despite the life-changing interventions she had implemented in her community, her burning passion and thirst to pursue her career aspirations of becoming a refined molecular geneticist and medical researcher drove her to apply for a Commonwealth Scholarship to study for a Master’s degree in Genomic Medicine to sharpen her knowledge and skills in this area to effectively contribute to improving the healthcare and educational needs in Nigeria. As she wrote in her Scholarship application letter:

‘The courses taught in this programme will train me in genomic technologies, genetic basis of cancer, inherited and infectious diseases, interpretation of genomic data, counselling and research skills. This will grant me the privilege of learning from research, clinical and laboratory scientists as the Master’s programme is affiliated with NHS hospitals.’

Returning to the UK to pursue her Master’s study course, Violet looked forward to creating networks for collaborations from a diverse cultural environment.

‘I will also have great networking opportunities from collaborations and have the opportunity of getting involved with the 100,000 Genome Project. Having studied for my first degree in the UK, the proximity to my home country, the fair weather and cultural diversity are some of the reasons I have chosen to study in the UK.’

Violet continued with her development work during her Commonwealth Scholarship. The Scholarship not only opened opportunities for her to improve her knowledge and skills but also to raise funds for her NGO and to establish networks which have remained immensely supportive of her poverty alleviation initiatives.



Professional volunteer training students on crocheting during the ACEYSA skill acquisition programme in Mushin, Lagos in 2019.

‘Although we founded the NGO before my Commonwealth Scholarship, I’ve been able to gain some skills that I’ve used to drive development of the NGO. For instance, I was able to raise funds and obtain ideas from professionals that were channelled into the projects, through the network I built during the Scholarship.’

## Transforming Laboratory Scientists to Molecular Biologists to Tackle the Covid-19 Pandemic

Following the completion of her Commonwealth Scholarship, Violet returned to her home country, Nigeria, where unfortunately she was faced with the terrible economic conditions that had hampered the labour market, leaving her unemployed for a while.

However, with perseverance and consistency Violet successfully landed a job as a Laboratory Scientist (Molecular Biology) with Demyhealth Clinic and Genomic Medicine in Nigeria. This job opportunity coincided with Covid-19 pandemic which brought the spotlight on the field of molecular biology in Nigeria.

Demyhealth Clinic and Genomic Medicine — a recognised molecular diagnostic and biotechnology solution provider in Nigeria — offers services such as the molecular diagnosis of infectious and cancer related diseases, setting up molecular laboratories, installing and maintaining laboratory equipment, and running molecular biology training workshops. Violet supported the delivery of training workshops for staff working for clients of Demyhealth Clinic and Genomic Medicine, including those who were laboratory scientists but not specialists in molecular biology. Therefore, they required training on how to perform molecular biology techniques and on how to use the corresponding laboratory equipment.

‘During my Master’s Scholarship, I received in-depth theoretical and practical training in molecular biology that did not only pave way for securing a job with a diagnostic laboratory in 2020, it enabled me to effectively carry out my responsibilities. More specifically, one of my roles included molecular diagnosis of hepatitis B/C virus (HBV/HCV), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), human papilloma virus (HPV) and acute myeloid leukaemia. My knowledge of cancer and infectious diseases and my vast experience in the extraction of DNA/RNA during my Commonwealth Scholarship was so relevant and timely in this role. The oral and written communication skills I had improved on during my Master’s study were also helpful in developing laboratory protocol and organising the training for the laboratory scientists as requested by our clients.’

While with Demyhealth Clinic and Genomic Medicine, Violet collaborated with other scientists in her team and successfully organised, delivered workshops and trained **10** laboratory scientists on how to perform molecular diagnostics of diseases, including Covid-19.

## Improving Access to Healthcare for Disadvantaged Communities

The Commonwealth Alumnus continued with her humanitarian work during and after her Scholarship through ACEYSA, her co-founded NGO, leading on the implementation of medical projects in disadvantaged communities, covering general health, payment of medical bills, first aid services, reproductive health, and infectious diseases. Moreover, the NGO offered free medical

screenings for blood pressure, HIV, and malaria. Planning the projects involved collaborating with other organisations, recruiting volunteers, reaching out to medical professionals (doctors and nurses), and drawing from their knowledge and expertise to successfully deliver the projects.



ACEYSA medical project at Ilaje, Lagos in 2020, with professional volunteers testing for HIV and offering free consultation and medication where appropriate.

‘So far, we have carried out two medical outreaches. The first was in a paediatric ward at University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH) in Rivers state, where we gave care packages to **70** children, paid medical bills for two patients who couldn’t afford it, and offered words of encouragement to the children’s parents and their communities. The second outreach which lasted for five days occurred at Ilaje, Bariga in Lagos state. Doctors were available for free consultation, free first aid and wound treatment, free testing for malaria, HIV, and blood pressure, and where appropriate free medications were given.’



ACEYSA leaders and representatives donating care items and offering words of encouragement to children’s parents at the paediatric ward at the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH) in 2020.

Violet spoke proudly about drawing from the knowledge and skills gained during the Commonwealth Scholarship and how this has enabled her to execute the medical outreach projects successfully.

**‘With my scientific and medical background, I engaged in reviewing and discussing the technicalities within the scope of my practice that were relevant to the project.’**

Through the medical outreach project, which improved access to medical services for rural communities, over **500** people were reached with healthcare services by ACEYSA, improving their health and wellbeing.

## Vocational Skills Training: Empowering Youth to Become Entrepreneurs

With challenging economic conditions and high unemployment rates in Nigeria, equipping the youth – who make up 63% of the total population of Nigeria – with critical livelihood skills to start their own businesses is expected to make a significant improvement to Nigeria’s economy. Through the skills acquisition programme, designed to promote financial wellbeing of underprivileged youth, ACEYSA conducts training workshops on vocational skills for the youth, empowering and facilitating the entry of the youth into entrepreneurship and financial independence.

**‘We did a skill acquisition project for the youths which lasted for about a week where over 20 individuals were trained. We taught skills with low-income start-ups like nail art, crocheting, beadmaking, baking, make-up and gele tying. We got volunteer experts to champion this. We know they appreciated the new skills learned, and if they needed to establish a business, they felt empowered to do so.’**



Professional volunteer training students on nail art during the ACEYSA skill acquisition programme in Mushin, Lagos in 2019.

To successfully implement this project, Violet built a network to identify trainers and volunteers to support her work on upskilling the youth.

**‘I was able to use my communication skills to build a network. During my Scholarship I met different people and being in a different country, I had to adapt to their communication style. So that made me flexible in my communication to be able to speak to different people, and to do it boldly.’**

The Covid-19 pandemic made the delivery of face-to-face projects challenging. Determined to keep the projects running, Violet and her team channelled their efforts towards reaching out to the youth through advertisements on their social media platforms requesting for proposals to support small businesses.

**‘The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted a lot of things including sources of livelihood. We did not want to just offer a one-off financial contribution as our projects are geared towards financial independence. In 2021, we offered business grants to individuals struggling and small-scale businesses, selecting one beneficiary every month. Eight different businesses received a grant of 100,000 Naira. The selection criteria were based on the completion of the application form, the feasibility of their proposals, evidence of financial need and whether they were small-scale businesses. A shawarma business, food restaurant, nail technician, fashion designer, sport viewing centre business, petty traders of agricultural and dairy products were supported to either restock or scale-up their business after being affected by the pandemic. The grants enabled the beneficiaries to maintain their sources of livelihood and provide for their families.’**

## Promoting Access to Education for Marginalised Groups

Driven by her passion for development, Violet believes education plays a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development. She has been instrumental in contributing to the ACEYSA Scholarship Project which focuses on providing educational scholarships to disadvantaged students, mentorship, and support on career guidance. The beneficiaries include primary and secondary school students as well as individuals pursuing undergraduate studies who have received funds to cover their tuition fees. Violet has been a key player in raising and sourcing funds for the scholarships targeted at students in need of financial assistance.

‘Our projects are centred on people that would not be able to afford to access education without help. Since the inception of ACEYSA in 2017, 50 scholarships have been awarded to primary and secondary school and undergraduate students. And these people, without the support of the NGO would not be able to stay in or continue with school. So, in a broader sense it minimises the number of out-of-school children in the country, even if it’s on a small scale. We’ve just had a nurse that has just finished studying, we supported by paying for her tuition fee and her professional exam. We also assisted a lady who was financially stranded and could not pay school fees for her two children, now they are back to school because of the scholarship made available to them.’

Apart from offering scholarships, Violet and volunteer career counsellors (organised by ACEYSA) visited a secondary school in Lugbe in 2021. The career counsellors delivered a workshop on career guidance to support and enable students to make informed choices about their career paths. In addition, educational materials such as books and writing materials were distributed to the less privileged students in rural communities of Lagos, Abuja, and Rivers states of Nigeria.

‘We [ACEYSA] raised over USD\$5,000 and led a team of more than 50 volunteers. The funds allowed us to provide scholarships, organise skill acquisition training and medical outreaches, and distribute educational materials to indigent students in rural communities in Lagos, Abuja, and Rivers states.’

Having been empowered through the education obtained while on her Commonwealth Scholarship, and realising the benefits and impact of her developmental activities in her local community, Violet feels that ‘knowledge is power.’ Therefore, the ACEYSA Scholarship Project which focuses on providing educational scholarships to disadvantaged students is an important initiative that has awarded people from communities a life-time opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills which will remain a major contributing factor to improving their quality of life.

Violet identified the ACEYSA Scholarships as **the most significant change that she brought to her community as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship.**

‘I would say the ACEYSA scholarship scheme has helped indigent students to access education. When I reflect on the impact of the Scholarship on my life, even though the Commonwealth Scholarship is over, the knowledge I have acquired, the exposure I have gained, ten years, fifty years down the line it’s something that will always be part of my life. It has formed my culture, it has formed a lot of behaviours, it’s transformational. Also, I’m always passionate about education, I advocate for education, so for me, I would say the most significant change to my community is the scholarship project, because that empowered them [disadvantaged students] with the knowledge required to navigate life. I think that when you give people the right knowledge they need to navigate life, you’ve done, I would say 90% of what is needed for them to have a better life.’

## Looking Ahead: Supporting Healthcare Innovation in Nigeria

To build on the knowledge and skills honed during her Master’s studies under the Commonwealth Scholarship, Violet is currently pursuing PhD opportunities to enhance her research skills in molecular biology and support healthcare innovation in Nigeria.

‘The Commonwealth Scholarship gave me the opportunity to advance my career. My Master’s degree, which is a consequence of my Scholarship has always given me the competitive advantage in both jobs and PhD applications. For instance, leveraging my Master’s degree with the corresponding scientific knowledge and skills has resulted in interview calls for PhD positions in top universities in the world. I am interested in pursuing a PhD, because I’m passionate about higher education, I feel there’s a lot Nigeria can achieve and needs to attain in the academic sector. After my PhD I’ll be in academia where I intend to head a research group to support healthcare innovation through research. Compared to many developed countries, Nigeria is lagging behind in the field of molecular biology and I would like to have a research lab and mentor young scientists in that field.’

With regards to the future of her NGO, continuing with the ACEYSA Scholarships Project is at the top of Violet's priority list. As the project is currently focused on supporting primary and secondary school students and undergraduate students, Violet hopes to expand project outreach in future to support postgraduate students.

'I'm passionate about two things, education and health. So, I hope in coming years we would have more funding, having more structured scholarships, like the Commonwealth, and be able to monitor progress. For now, our scholarships are restricted to Nigeria, so we are thinking in the long run that every graduate from ACEYSA's Scholarship Project, will be assisted with their applications to study abroad for postgraduate studies.'

Also in the pipeline is the potential expansion of the medical projects, which will involve partnering with hospitals to ensure the long-term sustainability of the projects. According to Violet, the hospitals will play a pivotal role in maintaining health records of patients that were offered a 'one off' free testing service, medical screening for diseases, and free medication through the ACEYSA medical outreach programme. ACEYSA intends to follow up with patients to offer financial support, particularly those diagnosed with a terminal illness or health conditions that require a significant amount of funds for further treatment.

Additionally, many individuals with genetic conditions are stigmatised and do not receive appropriate care, an area Violet would also like to explore and offer support. To achieve all this, Violet intends to continue building her skills, knowledge and networks from which she hopes to receive support for ACEYSA's long-term goals.

'As I progress in my career, I hope to meet like-minded individuals who will buy into this vision and offer support with their skills and their networks. The successful implementation of projects require funding and having the right team. I believe that I'm on that path, I have a good network already and I'll continue to improve on that.'

Reflecting on the impact of the Commonwealth Scholarship, Violet identified **the most significant change to herself as a result of her Scholarship.**

'Frankly, I would not have been able to afford a Master's degree abroad and in the UK without funding. Thus, the Commonwealth Scholarship enabled me to acquire my Master's degree from a top university and in one of the biggest and most beautiful cities in the UK – London. The Scholarship eliminated financial pressure which allowed me to focus on my studies and culminated in my receipt of a distinction grade. I have honed scientific writing, research, and critical thinking abilities. I have also gained specialist knowledge and diverse skills to contribute positively to the field of genetics. In addition to the opportunity to advance my career, through the Scholarship I formed life-long relationships and obtained financial resources to support the NGO I co-founded prior to the receipt of my award. My experience during the Scholarship is something that I will always refer to as I progress through life. There are so many reasons I like the UK including the multicultural and organised environment. Finally, the cutting edge, encouraging, and conducive learning environment it provides. I'm grateful for the Scholarship, it really provided a platform for me to grow in dimensions I did not think would be possible. Moreover, as the first person to be awarded a Master's degree in my family, my Scholarship journey has inspired close family members and friends to pursue their postgraduate studies, and this will improve the literacy rate in my family.'

**More about Violet Tapiooru Gomba's work**

<https://aceysa.com/>

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