Imagine living in an economically vibrant city with an estimated population of 41,106, where the official city boundaries and locations of vital basic services are a mystery. That was the case in Gompa City before the Local Empowerment for Government Inclusion and Transparency (LEGIT) project and Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team (HOT) implemented their city mapping activities.

With no official map demarcating town limits or services, both city officials and residents found themselves at a disadvantage. Knowing where private businesses are located, for example, is key for helping governments collect public revenues, which go on to fund vital public services for Gompa’s citizens. Citizens, in turn, need accurate, up to date information on the locations of public services such as police stations, schools, and hospitals. In the case of emergencies and natural disasters, not having such information can prove disastrous for both the city and its inhabitants. The absence of such reliable information has plagued Gompa City since its incorporation in 1975.

With its high growth rate and rapid expansion, addressing this challenge was a top priority for Gompa city. The LEGIT and HOT teams, along with members of local community-based and civil society organizations took to the streets, armed with their mobile mapping tools, to pinpoint the locations of town boundaries, local businesses, and points of service delivery, such as hospitals. For the LEGIT team, it was especially important to include Gompa’s residents in the exercise to build local knowledge and skills that can be deployed to update these maps as the city continues to grow.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this exercise for a city which has never had an official map. “With this map…even strangers [will be able] to locate hospitals and clinics, mobile money deposit and also know where the city stops” reports John Wonkiapeh, an employee of the Gompa City Corporation. The benefits are equally important for residents, who, thanks to HOT’s easily accessible mobile map, can now pinpoint the locations of services such as hospitals and police stations in times of emergency.

With the official Gompa map, the LEGIT project and Gompa’s residents now have an understanding of the current state of public services in the city. As LEGIT continues its partnership with Gompa, this map will be vital for identifying key areas where such services are lacking, and can be improved.

After a successful pilot exercise in Gompa, LEGIT and the HOT team have replicated this activity in Gbarnga and Zwedru cities. As LEGIT continues to partner with cities and counties in Liberia, exercises such as these will build local knowledge in mobile mapping technology, ensuring Liberian citizens are empowered to access and generate information key to citizens and cities alike.