# COMMUNITY COHESION IN A DIGITAL SPACE

## Lessons from YAFE Pilot Combating Dangerous Speech

APRIL 2020

MERCY CORPS

*In 2018, Mercy Corps' Technology for Development team supported the development and proof of concept testing for a mobile app designed to address community cohesion challenges in the face of rampant misinformation and dangerous speech in Nigeria. This document covers key lessons learned.*

## Context in Nigeria

Continued violence amongst ethnically and religiously diverse populations in Nigeria's Middle Belt results in loss of life, damages livelihoods, hinders economic activity and inhibits freedom of movement for people across the area.  Circles of violent attacks, reprisals and counter-reprisals primarily around land use took a horrific toll within the second half of 2018 on the people of Barkin Ladi Plateau State, Nigeria. Resource-based conflicts between farmer and pastoralist communities, exacerbated by religious and ethnic identity, continues to threaten escalation of widespread violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

While religion is not a *source* of conflict in the Middle Belt, religious differences create an environment that is conducive to conflict, particularly in Kaduna and Plateau states. In the Middle Belt, Mercy Corps Nigeria's research[1] identified access to land and water as the primary sources of conflict that undermine social cohesion, stability and economic growth. Due to the nature of identity in Nigeria, where ethnicity and religion are deeply ingrained, the wider public often interprets resource-based conflicts with ethnic and religious labels. Nigerian media coverage further exacerbates the conflict by perpetuating stereotypes and using inflammatory language.

Mercy Corps Nigeria's conflict management programs harness dispute resolution, dialogue and mediation approaches that are appropriate to the various contexts that we work in. This includes strengthening traditional dispute and conflict management structures, and supporting communities to implement inclusive inter- and intra-faith and inter-communal projects that promote dialogue and mobilize divided groups to work together around shared interests and assets, including natural resources. Mercy Corps' Technology for Development team was excited to work with Mercy Corps' Nigeria conflict management programs to think about how technology could be utilized to forward these goals and objectives.

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[1] Impact Evaluation: Reducing Conflict and Increasing Local Economic Activities

# Mercy Corps' 'Hate Speech Hackathon'[2]

> *"Hate Speech is not a new problem, but it's a problem that has changed form in recent years due to the growing availability of new technologies and social media. As we see hate speech emerge as a conflict dynamic in the areas we work in. We strongly believe in finding creative solutions to the challenges we face and the Hate Speech Hackathon was an amazing event that opened our eyes to many new ideas," said Darius Radcliffe, former Country Director of Mercy Corps Nigeria.*



Dangerous speech and misinformation, often transmitted via websites, social media platforms and messaging apps, are being attributed as major influencers of violent conflict in Barkin Ladi. To innovatively address dangerous speech in Nigeria, Mercy Corps designed a 'Hate Speech Hackathon,' resulting in a winning mobile app concept and the identification of engaged and skilled local partners. Under the [GHR-funded](#) TARE[3] program, the Hackathon winner, alongside the [Mercy Corps Nigeria](#) and Mercy Corps [Technology for Development](#) team developed and piloted the YAFE mobile app (meaning "forgiveness" in Hausa). The project is named for, and in honor of, [Faye Mooney](#), whose leadership brought this project to life and who tragically passed away shortly after its initiation.



## Description of the App
YAFE's purpose was to support local leaders in addressing negative narratives and dangerous speech before they escalate to violent conflict or deepen divisions. The pilot also allowed for remote engagement of Mercy Corps staff with users we otherwise could not reach due to safety concerns or geographical remoteness.

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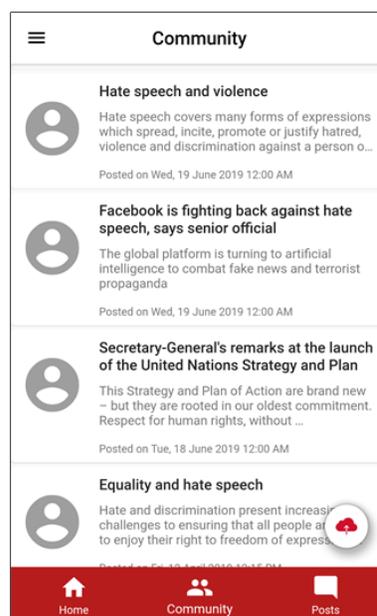
[2] [Hackathon Report](#)
[3] Supporting Harmonious Association, Religious Participation and Engagement for Northern Nigeria, (TARE, which means "together" in Hausa), was implemented in three Northern Nigerian states: Borno, Kaduna and Plateau. Mercy Corps selected these states based on the level of religious-based or religious-related conflict and the presence of Mercy Corps programming currently under implementation. In each state, TARE will implement peacebuilding programs in partnership with religious leaders. Mercy Corps used two unique approaches, one of which was implemented in Borno and the other of which was implemented in Kaduna and Plateau.

**The Pilot was meant to:**

- **Educate** users to identify dangerous speech both online and within their communities in order to better support and in turn educate each other;
- **Allow users to report** context-specific dangerous speech appearing in social media feeds;
- **Create a digital community of practice** providing a platform for TARE staff to share capacity building and educational materials and for program participants to carry on a dialogue about how to address hate speech both on and offline.
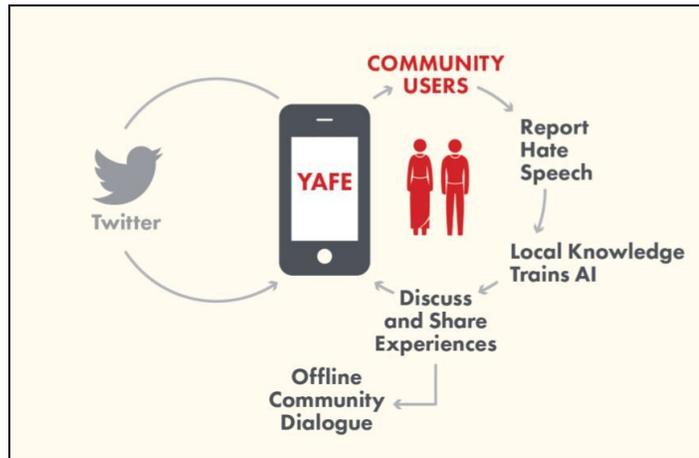


34 community, religious, and youth leaders in TARE implementation communities (Barkin Ladi) participated in the YAFE pilot. Participants received training on the use of the app, which included a curriculum about basic digital literacy and recognizing dangerous speech and the risks associated with it. Among these 34, 4 were identified as "super-users" who provided leadership and facilitated conversation among the other users. The pilot ran from August 2019 through October 2019. We also incorporated a Whatsapp group to communicate with users and accommodate any technical difficulties throughout the pilot period. At the end of the pilot, feedback regarding impact and usefulness of the approach was gathered from the pilot participants for use in future programming. Below is a timeline of YAFE's development and piloting.

| November 2018 | May – August 2019 | August 2019 | October 2019 | November 2019 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| • Hatespeech Hackathon<br>• Winner selected | • Development of the app begins<br>• Preliminary user testing<br>• Identification of super-users | • YAFE Pilot launch<br>• Hatespeech and app training<br>• Prototype live in Nigeria<br>• Users suggest feedback<br>• Users engage with hatespeech content on the app and report bugs. | • User testing<br>• Feedback and updates<br>• Conclusion of pilot | • Endline conducted |

# Key Takeaways: Design
## General Pilot Design and Development

1. **Set Expectations and Frame Hypotheses Early**

To set expectations, ensure that pilots are clearly defined, while also recognizing that due to the nature of a pilot,course corrections, adaptation and change is likely. It should be clear that tech pilots are meant to develop AND TEST a proposed solution, and that the process to arrive at a final product involves trials, bugs, and time to fix problems. Additionally, *by definition*, failure of a pilot is a significant possibility - but should *NOT* be viewed as a negative outcome - rather one for learning and future application. Therefore, goals should be set in terms of testing project outputs,milestones and fit for purpose. Emphasis should be placed on staying true to an agile development process to the degree possible so that adjustments can be made mid-pilot, as needed. This ensures accurate expectations about the purpose of a pilot and prototyping process are clear, and that outcomes are not overpromised.

With the increasing complexity of technology - and a growing pressure to use tools like AI and machine learning in the field - it's important to trial these tools in the field to truly test assumptions and understand what limitations may exist in actual implementation. Challenges, potential failure, and significant adaptation must be expected. To account for the potential increased risk that may be introduced with testing and piloting tools like this, ensure that any pilots run are reviewed for safety and security risks within the given context. Always keep Protection and Do No Harm principles at the forefront of any activity.

2. *Ensure clear focal points and key responsibilities between HQ and field staff are established.*
There need to be clear focal points and responsibilities allocated and assigned between technical advisors and field staff. This should include clarity about who is managing any additional consultants or staff (i.e. software or app developers), who has ultimate authority over the management and implementation of the pilot, which field staff are operating as key focal points for the pilot activities and testing, etc. These delineations help both teams to make decisions quickly and in line with their program objectives and responsibilities.

3. **Have a thorough understanding of limitations posed by the available technology and infrastructure.**

Often tech pilots incorporate cutting edge technologies that may not function on older or less sophisticated devices - or they must be developed in a way that takes potential technical constraints into account. In the case of YAFE, overall networks were poor, and while the users had smartphones, they varied in quality and operating systems. A thorough needs assessment or digital landscape assessment can help identify these potential challenges as well as opportunities for a digital intervention.

4. **Adapt to and account for digital literacy constraints and incorporate training in pre-work and implementation.**

In any tech project, it is important to bear in mind the level of digital literacy both among participants as well as the field team. Training and pre-work for participants and staff is sometimes necessary as new tools are introduced. This training process is ongoing, and must develop and adjust as the pilot evolves. As any new component is introduced, there must be clear guidance alongside the roll-out that includes both training on to use it, as well as provide feedback and improvements.

## Key Takeaways: Implementation
## Using a Digital Platform for Mediation and Community Cohesion

1. **Plan and design content production alongside participants, allowing for content to evolve and be shared in meaningful, actionable ways.**

While the pilot predominantly focused on the development and design of the app, content really began to be driven by users. In the beginning, the Mercy Corps Nigeria team came up with content related to dangerous speech in Nigeria to set the tone and give examples, which led to conversation and users beginning to post their own content. Therefore, we found it relevant to have content planned for each week, more in the beginning and fewer as the pilot progressed. As users began to post more, the team transitioned from posting to help facilitating conversation about the posts that were user-generated.

> *"There were recent killings of police officers. The first I heard about it was on the YAFE group. The YAFE group is an important way to share information quickly. It is more meaningful than other Whatsapp groups we have because the posts are meaningful - it's a closed group and we can stay focused."*
> - *YAFE pilot participant[4]*

2. **Create a closed, curated group. This allows for safe, trusting digital spaces where users can build relationships with each other.**

Overall, the pilot participants felt that the YAFE pilot created a **safe**, **dedicated space to discuss hate speech**, as opposed to other commonly used, and minimally governed, Whatsapp groups which can become large, leading to various, unfocused conversations, they knew they could trust the other users because all of the participants had been trained together in person first. Unlike WhatsApp groups, which can extend to hundreds of people that they may not know or trust. For one

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[4] Endline KIIs

female participant, the only other online groups she belongs to consist of former school groups, so she is happy to be connected with other leaders and have a new network of information. One user also mentioned that the app is good because they can hear about information quickly, then can call up people to verify or fact-check.

As part of this process, an in-person training was critical to the building of trust between users. Not only did this provide the essential tools and guidance on how to use the platform, but it established a certain level of trust from meeting and getting to know their peers. This trust was foundational to the use of YAFE for combatting rumors and learning about events.

While most felt the group was positive, some users already had personal connections with each other, potentially decreasing the relevance of the digital community created by the YAFE pilot. One user felt YAFE made relationships more challenging because when you are face-to-face, you can assess how people feel and react, but online, you might hurt someone and never know. However, it was found that these in-person relationships were often only intra-faith, as opposed to *inter*-faith. The YAFE pilot created a safe and secure digital community where people of multiple ethnic and religious groups were included.

> *"I am part of different online groups, but this is unique because Muslims and Christians are together. Now, I can call [other users] and we now have a friendship. We know what the other can do. I can ask a favor of him, and he can ask a favor of me."*
>     - *YAFE pilot participant[5]*

3.  **Bringing together diverse groups of people helped to spread trustworthy information between key leaders, despite distance that would have previously limited ongoing discourse.**

Users felt that the platform was useful for **sharing and verifying information and dispelling rumors**. Because it was a smaller, trustworthy group, they could share and verify information quickly. The respondents mentioned content relating to current events and information about dangerous speech (ie: rumors, misinformation, hatespeech) was most helpful. The users were not able to regularly communicate between themselves in person, so the trusted, digital space provided the platform despite distance and insecurity. Because of YAFE, users who otherwise are unable to meet and develop relationships in person were able to connect and have a trusted conversation in this digital space.

4.  **When creating digital communities, there needs to be mediation, monitoring and management.**

Information sharing in these groups must be relevant and verified to maintain trust of these groups. In some cases, the participants can verify the information among themselves, but quality control

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[5] Endline KIIs

must be practiced by an assigned (and neutral) Group Manager - in this case, a Mercy Corps team member.

Identify a moderator for the group who can ensure that disputes or tensions that arise are settled, particularly if they are public as all users would be seeing them. This person must check in on conversations daily, particularly on the content shared among the group, and monitor the reactions. By analyzing reactions to content, the program team can evaluate and cater content production and sharing.

Additionally, that person needs to ensure privately with the individuals involved that the dispute is settled in the aftermath of the online conversation. Users pointed out that in an online forum, a natural resolution comes from the end of a conversation, but when you can only see the text that someone writes, we cannot know from other cues if the person is actually feeling that the conflict is resolved. This leads to the need for one-on-one confirmation of the moderator during and after the dispute, and  also leaves a space for in-person dispute resolution.

# Next Steps

Overall, the YAFE pilot discovered the importance of closed, private groups in creating trust and developing relationships among users for community mediation activities. This opened the door to dispelling rumors and addressing events occuring in the community, particularly as they were triggered by dangerous speech. It is critical that a moderator is always ensuring mediation and dispute resolution in this space, to maintain the relationships and trust between users.

Because of the ability for the YAFE digital community to bring together users across geographically remote and insecure locations, and thus aggregate potentially dangerous narratives or rumors being spread, there would be a potential use case for an approach like this to inform an early warning system, allowing for identification and tracking of indicators that may indicate an escalation in violence or group tensions.

The Mercy Corps T4D and Nigeria teams are currently working together to further hone our utilization of digital communities and ICT tools to combat the spread of misinformation and to support the creation of digital communities that support cohesion between groups.

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