

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: Promoting Collaboration in Communities of Damisa and Bala Kaze of Jos North, Plateau State

The **Jos Stakeholders Centre for Peace** with support from **Search for Common Ground** through its working group on the culture of violence prevention has been promoting intra and intergroup dialogues in communities of Bala Kaze and Mai Damisa of Jos North amongst and between Christian and Muslim groups which commenced from July 31st 2019. JSCP chose these communities in response to escalating, violent conflicts, which have accounted for several deaths, destruction of valuables and displacement of more than 50 households. Tearfund Nigeria supported the network and two other organizations with funds for a period of three months to consolidate JSCP's existing work by training and commissioning **breaking the border ambassadors** and commencing dialogue in Rafin Pa and Bible Faith communities of Laranto of Jos North, Plateau state.

Communities of Bala Kaze and Damisa are communities situated within Rikkos and Jos Jarawa Districts of Jos North, Plateau State, Nigeria. These communities were previously mixed with residents across religions but after a series of violent conflicts, the two communities divided with regards to residence and relations. Each of the communities became polarized/segregated Muslim or Christian habitation due to heightened destruction of lives and property. Such soured relations have resulted in the breakdown of communication as most of the interface have been characterised by violent confrontation thereby resulting in increased crime as most of the remnants of the burnt houses especially along the joint border axes were used as a hideout to commit acts of criminality. Such has limited the collective use of a stream which over time has served the two communities as a source of livelihood and home use and restricted use of roads that pass through the next community.

RESULTS:

1. **Increased solidarity among the communities:** The communities have narrated that at intervals, they now host feasts together during major religious celebrations like Sallah and Christmas. The celebrating community would normally host the other while key security issues that would impact the celebration are discussed and actions are taken like providing security at places of worship. Also, they are currently mobilizing financial support for a member of the community whose house was destroyed at one of the crises and is erecting in a manner the two communities felt it can be dangerous to his safety in the future.

2. **Improved collaboration:** They are currently working together to address issues that impact on their joint wellbeing, security and dignity. Key amongst some of those efforts include the collective cutting of grasses along the stream that have been a cover for people exhibiting acts of violence, the same action of cutting grasses almost caused violence before the project. They have been organizing discussion sessions on areas of religious controversy aimed at improving religious harmony and cooperation. They were able to collectively distribute COVID-19 palliative without conflict. According to the Divisional Officer of Nassarawa Gwong Police Division **SP Musa Hassan**, from January to July 2020, the ambassadors were able to collaborate across communities to make 15 citizen arrests, which were then handed over to the police. This represents a marked improvement over similar incidents in the past, which were met by acts of “jungle justice” against the suspects, increased tension or further polarization within the community.
3. **Increased feeling of safety:** The roads that pass through the two communities that were initially isolated and the stream initially abandoned by members of one of the communities due to insecurity are currently in use. This has been associated with a feeling of safety as the people do not feel endangered like they felt before the intervention.

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. **Involvement by trusted security officials strengthens community buy-in:** While working on peace and security issues at the community level, the role of security personnel acting as key actors is one of the most strategic things to do. Majority of community people know that the state agencies still control security architecture in every Nigerian community, so any action that has their full involvement is accepted because of the power granted to them by the constitution. In this context, the Divisional Officer of Nassarawa Gwom Police Division **SP Musa Hassan** was instrumental in penetrating the communities as he has been perceived to be transparent and dedicated to his duties and this has played a great role in advancing confidence in the intervention.
2. **Flexible donor support to expand on existing work:** The support granted by Tearfund Nigeria for the training and commissioning of the **breaking the border ambassador** is a classical example of how donors can collaborate to achieve goals that are aligning. Search through the JSCP Network has been working in the two communities through dialogues and when Tearfund indicated interest to give the network and two other organizations a short time funding support, such intentions came with much flexibility that leveraged on existing work, JSCP and team took advantage of such flexibility and had this expanded impact. This is slightly unlikely within the donor space where each donor would often want a fresh project to sponsor even if it's within a period of 6 months or less.
3. **Local relevance over high budgets:** Through feedback from community members especially the local power holders, it has been discovered that communities troubled by insecurity are more interested in actions that can address their concerns rather than the thought of expensive food, hotels away from their communities and huge participants transport reimbursement. According to them, they use such to measure the genuineness

of interventions and that affects their cooperation on any project. According to them, JSCP was among more than 10 organizations that made attempts to restore peace in their communities but it was the least with costly spendings and interestingly, the one with the greatest support from them. According to them, they were impressed with the approach due to the use of local resources like schools hall and JSCPs' approach even at the start of the engagements.

4. **Location-focused networks:** The significance of community-based ambassadors network has been projected as an effective way of promoting community-based peace and security movements. Membership to such platforms is expected to be drawn from communities whose members strongly hold to the conviction that collective action will restore peace in their communities thereby making them beneficiaries of their actions. Projects within Plateau state and Jos, in particular, have trained many ambassadors but these clusters are believed not to be clustered within communities but across the state addressing ambiguous peacebuilding issues that may not have a direct impact on their communities. The ambassadors are often spread across communities thereby limiting group solidarity and consistency and would hardly do a follow-up after each activity they do in conflict communities.