Title of Project: Preventing Farmer-Herder Violence in Nigeria through Solution Journalism
Country of Implementation: Nigeria
Sponsoring College: International House
Designated Project Leader: Chikezie Omeje, Nigeria, Columbia University in the City of New York
Project website: inclusivepress.io

The overall goal of this project was to use a deeply reported data-driven and solution journalism approach to advance peace between farmers and pastoralists in Nigeria. One of the assumptions of this project is that if data on the patterns and trends of the conflict are linked with good storytelling, a positive impact can be made for peace and security at the communities that have faced reoccurring killings between indigenous farmers and nomadic Fulani herders.

The project was initiated in 2020 but was implemented during the summer of 2021. The funding from the Davis Projects for Peace was enough to carry out the project as proposed, and we did not seek additional funding nor organize any fund-raising activities.

The idea of this project came when I was living at the International House in New York City while I was studying for an MS in data journalism at Columbia University. Then I participated in a program at I-House organized by The Groundtruth Project, a United States-based non-profit media organization. One of the guest speakers at the event made a profound argument that stuck with me. What I learned from the speaker was that it is difficult to negotiate or make peace with a humiliated opponent. Eventually when I learned about the Davis Projects for Peace, I knew immediately the project that I would do.

As a journalist in Nigeria, I have covered the lingering conflict between indigenous farmers and nomadic Fulani cattle herders which has resulted in the deaths of thousands of people while displacing hundreds of thousands of others. I reported about this conflict, but the stories had been about communities that had been raided. However, the questions I wanted to answer in this project were about communities in which farmers and herders have been able to live in peace. What did they do differently from the communities that have been under attacks? In designing the project, I sought to use data to bring out possible solutions to the conflict and teach local journalists how to report about the crisis in a way that would facilitate peace.

The first step in the project implementation was to gather data on the patterns of the conflict. Working with the team from Inclusive Press, a local media organization, we gathered data on the attacks, locations, and fatalities on this conflict from across the country. This data enabled us to choose states and communities that we would visit to report how they had maintained peace. After analyzing the data on the conflict over the years, Benue state in north central Nigeria stood out. The state had been the most affected in the conflict with not less than 303 attacks from the herders on vulnerable communities. The crisis snowballed after the state passed an anti-open grazing law which prohibited movement of livestock to curb the clashes between farmers and herders. While the attacks increased following the anti-grazing law, some areas in the state have been very peaceful.

We travelled to the state to speak and interview stakeholders on the effort to restore peace in the state. We found that an area in the state called Otukpo has maintained peace. We spent a few days in the place, observing and interacting with the people on the arrangement they have put in place to keep peace between farmers and herders while the rest of the state is roiled by the conflict. The people were receptive, and we did not have any problems getting access to all the people we wanted to talk to. We interviewed the local leaders, youth, women, farmers, and herders.

From Benue, we moved to Kogi, another state that has also been widely affected by the conflict. Akabe, a community in the state, was particularly interesting because it has never had any killings between farmers and herders. Akabe is a remarkable example of how people could engineer peace on their own. We interviewed farmers and herders as well as their leaders on how they have been able to sustain peace over the years. Akabe and Otukpo were unlike other places we visited that still had mutual suspicion between farmers and herders. We concluded that the two communities deserved to serve as models for peace.
Making a Case for Peace

After our peace tour, Otukpo in Benue state and Akabe in Kogi state stood out as having the best models for peace between farmers and herders among all the places we visited. We decided to focus on these two places in our reports because they have replicable peace models. In our stories, we detailed how Otukpo and Akabe have been able to maintain peace with the pastoralists. Our two separate stories: How Otukpo Became An Oasis Of Peace In Benue After Fulani Militia’s Attack and How To Replicate Akabe’s Model For Peace With Fulani Herdsmen were published by Sahara Reporters, a leading news website in Nigeria with over 20 million monthly visitors and more than 10 million followers on social media. Other news outlets in Nigeria republished the stories as well. They include: WikkiTimes here and here, Cross River Watch here and here and The Whistler here.

The stories had a remarkable impact. They were widely shared across social media and received wide commendation. Our report was added to Solution Stories Tracker, a global database of best solutions-based stories, maintained by Solutions Journalism Network, a United States-based non-profit organization that champions solutions journalism. With this inclusion, Otukpo has become a model for communities facing similar conflict, not only in Nigeria but also around the world. The story would continue to inspire people to make bold moves to peace.

Following the wide reception and success of the stories, we organized a workshop for local journalists on how to use data to tell the kind of stories we did. We had initially planned to have an in-person workshop for 10 journalists, but we decided to have a remote training for 20 journalists. The coronavirus pandemic has normalized virtual events and it was an advantage to us because we were able to support additional 10 journalists in our training. Some of the workshop participants work for the leading news outlets in Nigeria. Many of the journalists wrote news stories about the workshop which further spread the possibility of how journalism can be used to bring about peace between farmers and herdsmen. Here are the media outlets that published stories on the workshop with the story hyperlinked: The Sun, The Nation, Prime Time News, The Authority, Blue Print, Vanguard, The Leadership, The New Telegraph, The Authority, The News Ville, Summit Post News, Plateau News, The Paradise, Global Upfront, Metro Wire, Nigerian News Sphere, and Capital Post.

We also built a database where the journalists and other members of the public could have access to the data on the patterns and trends of the conflict. We built interactive visualizations of the data with maps and charts. The essence is to give everyone access to the historical data on the conflict and help inspire them to take actions that would prevent such wanton killings and destruction of properties. We would continue to update the database as we collect more data on future attacks.

Lesson

I have been a journalist for about a decade, but I have never done the kind of work I produced from this project. This project has changed my notion of how I should go about my journalism knowing that behind any issues, there are people working towards solutions. Rather than amplifying the voices of divisive elements, I now feel obligated to project those who are trying to make the society better because where we focus our attention matters in problem-solving. Are we laying much emphasis on the problems without highlighting the solutions? A shift in perspective helps to inspire similar positive actions across boards as the local journalists I taught during this project has demonstrated. They have shown commitment to cover the conflict from the lens of solutions.

Quote

The greatest measure of enlightenment is peace. We can’t continue to claim that we’re the most intelligent species who built airplanes and computers but can’t live in peace with one another. The people of Otukpo and Akabe have taught me that peace is the ultimate treasure of mankind.

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Section II: Photographs