



Youth trainees pose for a group picture after a digital peace building training, Afar/Mercy Corps/2023

Digital Peace Building Paving the Way for Conflict Prevention and Positive Gender Norms in Ethiopia: Insights and Lessons from the GCAP Project

In recent years, online misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech on social media platforms have been observed as factors in the multiple conflicts occurring in Ethiopia, with the potential to amplify and transform resource - and identity - based conflicts. Conflict entrepreneurs employ disinformation and hate speech to fuel tensions and mobilize groups towards violence.

Coupled with the low level of media and digital literacy among the youths in Ethiopia, the spread of fake news, disinformation and misinformation aggravated the conflict and instability in different parts of the country. The lives of people living in the conflict areas were highly affected by misinformation and propaganda news that is circulated through social media platforms¹. Youth participant survey of the Gender and Conflict Sensitive Approaches to Peace Building (GCAP) at Mercy Corps showed 90% of the youth participants in Oromia believed that online harms impact their communities, while 46% in Afar and 25% in Somali regions felt the same.

This learning brief describes how the GCAP project rolled out digital peace building training for local peace groups, alongside our digital peacebuilding partner TIKVAH Ethiopia, and outlines key insights from the application of digital skills in peace building, and key learnings.

Overview of GCAP's Digital Peace Building Approach

The GCAP project, funded by the Government of Canada, and Mercy Corps' Resilience in Pastoral Areas (RIPA – North), was designed and implemented with the aim of ultimately realizing a strengthened gender sensitivity and inclusiveness of peacebuilding structures, processes, and services in Afar, Oromia, and Somali Regions, Ethiopia. The digital peace building component of the project, implemented with GCAP's partner, TIKVAH Ethiopia, focused on provision capacity building training at grass root levels on digital peace building and practical use of the skills on digital platforms by youth in peace groups.

The capacity building started with a four-day Training of Trainers (ToT) on Gender-Sensitive Digital Peacebuilding in January and February 2023 in Afar, Oromia, and Somali regions. The objective of the ToT workshop was to strengthen the capacity of youth to understand the digital framework and apply a digital peacebuilding approach to better address digital media driver of conflict, as well as leverage digital media to promote peace and social cohesion. These youth then trained an additional 280 youth across their communities.

Finally, youth digital peacebuilding groups were formed and took part in a 3- day workshop in their respective regions training on digital peacebuilding and project management approaches to develop, with their communities, youth digital peacebuilding projects. The youth learned to assess online harms based on the Digital Risk and Resilience Framework, and ultimately identify entry points and design their own project to address these harms.

Based on this selection criteria, three project proposals were selected. The selected proposals are listed below.

Region	Zone	Woreda	Project title	Score out of 100
Afar	3	Amibara	Establishing Youth Digital peace clubs in four secondary schools in Amibara woreda	92
Oromia	West Hararghe	Gumbi Bordode	Community Capacity Development and Dialogue for Strengthening Inter-Community Relationship With Neighboring Regions	90
Somali	Sitti	Mi'eso	Enhancing digital capacity to promote peace and social cohesion in Mi'eso woreda	85

Description of the projects

The projects ran for six months, and two youth groups successfully implemented their proposed projects.

At the end of the project, a short survey and KIIs were conducted in January 2023 with 90 (57M and 33F) youth participants, from Afar, Somali and Oromia regions. Eight KIIs were also conducted with 4 woreda level peace and security office representatives of Afambo and Gewane woredas from Afar region, and Gursum and Babile woredas from Oromia region. Also included were four digital youth project participants from Amibara woreda of Afar region.

AFAR:

Most of the participants lack experience and skills in using social media platforms for the purpose of building peace rather, they have been using social media for information, connections, entertainment, and gaining knowledge. The participants indicated that the training helped them to gain understanding, knowledge, and skills regarding how to use social media to mitigate harm and promote peace and harmony. (Youth Report).

They also noted that the training equipped them with skills required in identifying and reporting dis- and misinformation and hate speech on social media platforms before sharing and “liking” it. Finally, a school-specific telegram group, as well as a telegram forum page for all groups, is created in which they continue to interact and share information and positive peace messages.

- › **Youth KII:** We are able to connect students from different kebele and clan who were not having a good relationship due to different hate speeches and messages. The project promoted brotherhood among these students, and they have started sharing information and are able to disseminate for their clan.
- › **Youth KII:** They also become part of the peace committee and to make the process fair and free of bias due clan and ethnic issues.
- › **Security office KII from Gewane:** Security office and the youth peace groups who are trained on digital peace building are supporting us. They have a group in telegram, and they are sharing useful information, and they are reporting when they notice any hate messages. They took screen shots of hate messages and advocated for the youth not to follow that page. We are engaging the youth in this process and the office is supporting the youth when these youths are providing the training for the community. And we are ready to motivate these youths and provide any support they require.

SOMALI:

This mini-Project planned to establish Digital Youth peace committees in 3 kebeles and support digital information exchange by providing access to internet service and deliver three days training for 30 youth digital peace committees kebeles of Muli-Mieso woreda on digital countering of mis/disinformation to mitigate social media driver of conflicts.

As a result, youths created a social media platform WhatsApp Group to disseminate timely information thereby also countering misinformation, hate speech and serving as the woreda factchecks.

YOUTH VOICE

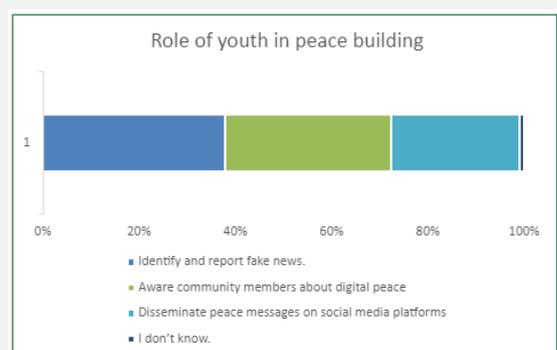


Figure: Response by youth regarding role of youth in peace building during the assessment



72.5%

PARTICIPANTS FOUND THE TRAINING HELPFUL IN IDENTIFYING HARMFUL ONLINE CONTENT AND REPORTING IT

70%

PARTICIPANTS SAID DIGITAL PEACE BUILDING IS A RELEVANT TOOL TO PREVENT CONFLICTS IN THEIR LOCALITIES

77%

PARTICIPANTS SAID THE PROJECT WAS SUCCESSFUL IN ADDRESSING ONLINE HARM ISSUES IN THE TRAININGS

INTERVENTION IMPACT **Relevance and Effectiveness**

Following the completion of the project, the assessment found that youth were more confident to identify the impact of mis and disinformation, and online harm in their communities. Through the surveys and the KIIs, the digital peacebuilding projects were determined to make inroads into social cohesion and addressing online harms.

Harms: 89% of women felt that WSM impacts their communities very much (either 1 or 2), while for men, this number was 72%

Training: 71% of women and 74% of men found the training helpful to understand these harms.

Success of Project: When asked about the success of the project addressing these harms, 82% of women said the project was very successful, while 72% of men said the project was very successful. 6% of participants said the project was unsuccessful or very unsuccessful. In the Somali region, 55% of the participants said the project addressed these harms. In Afar, 75% said the project responded to the harms and in Oromia 90% of the respondents said the projects addressed these harms.

Relevance of Digital

Peacebuilding: When asked about the relevance of digital peace building in mitigating conflict in their communities. 68% of women said it was very relevant and 21% said somewhat relevant. While for men, 72% said very relevant and 12% said somewhat relevant. In Somali region, there was the greatest divide. 65% of respondents said it was very relevant or somewhat relevant, while 20% said it was not relevant or very irrelevant. 15% were neutral.

Qualitative results showed positive impact as well.

- › **Social Cohesion:** Key informants highlighted the engagement from youth in conflict mitigation, whereby the youth groups took screenshots and reported hate speech and other dangerous online content to security officials. They also shared correct information and addressed these harms in the online spaces. One security officer even mentioned that the youth were able to quickly mitigate tensions in the border regions which are historically contentious between different ethnic groups.

› **Information sharing:** Key informants noted that misinformation and disinformation is a major problem in the communities, where different content can trigger ethnic tension and violence. Youth participants set up information sharing platforms through Telegram and WhatsApp, depending on their community preferences, and these efforts were recognized by district officials. One even noted that this should be used as an advocacy point for improved information sharing from the government.

› **Engagement of youth:** Many of the security officials interviewed noted that the youth had become more engaged in early warning and early response systems in their communities. They recognize the ability and speed of the youth to recognize online harms and the contribution to the broader response ecosystem.

Success Story

Ethiopian woman on the fore front in gender focused peace building initiatives, digitally



The use of social media in Ethiopia is a recent phenomenon mostly enjoyed by young people who aim for more connections with their peers of similar interests. Some have also advanced their political and social aspirations, as well as hope for their country using the various platforms, mostly Facebook. While some good has come out of these social media engagements, the platform has also brought the worst in people. Aggravating conflicts, breaking social norms, invading privacy, and causing harm has been evident in the past few years. For some, the damage is too personal to ignore and move on. Hodan Mohamud, 19, a resident of Erer district in Somali Region of Ethiopia, is one of them. She was a very active Facebook user.

“I enjoyed the platform until it became no more fun and created a mess in my personal life,” she says. Hodan used her Facebook page to interact with friends, exchange information and at times shared some private photos to friends. But her private photos were no more private as her account was hacked and the contents were shared widely without her consent.

“Those were very private photos I can never share to my family members or relatives. They were meant for specific person. I panicked fearing the reactions from people,” said Hodan. Her family did not take the incident lightly. It was considered disrespectful and shame for the family. It has taken quite some time for Huda’s family to forgive her and move on. “I deleted my Facebook account and stayed away for quite some time,” she said.

Hodan is just one of the many Ethiopians who are affected by breach of privacy and social trauma. For others, the damage caused because of privacy flaws, fake news, disinformation, and misinformation was not limited in a single family. Ethnic and religious conflicts exacerbated by ills of social media created havoc and rifts among the population and threatened peaceful co – existence of communities. The low level of digital media literacy has notably contributed to the increase in harmful effects of social media.

Mercy Corps’ Gender Equality and Conflict-sensitive Approaches to Peacebuilding (GCAP) project has been working to bridge the gap in social media literacy and minimize the harm caused by ill use of social media, involving key stakeholders under its digital peace building pillar targeting the youth.

One of the project activities includes training of trainers on the digital peace building, implemented in partnership with TIKVAH ETHIOPIA, a popular social media outlet and digital literacy training provider. Hodan participated in one of the gender sensitive digital peace building trainings held in February 2023 for three days in Jigjiga town, Somali Region.

The training of trainers (ToT) aimed to enhance the knowledge, skills, and practices of Youth Gender Equality and Peace Champions on the use of digital tools and frameworks to understand and address digital drivers of conflict.

“I did not have a good experience on social media. I think this partly because I had very little knowledge and skills of using social media to my advantage. I was even engaged in sharing posts containing information that was not confirmed to be true and reliable,” said Hodan.

She says the training has equipped her with the knowledge and skills on how to identify and report on potential fake news, dis/misinformation, and hate speech on various social media platforms. “I also learned that there are many ways we can use social media to bring about positive change, build peace and community cohesion. I am confident that I can protect myself from violence in the digital space and promote positive engagement to prevent conflicts,” she noted.

The contents of the training of trainers that Hodan and other youth received is meant to be disseminated to fellow youth. Hodan has already started sharing what she learnt to other girls. “From my experience, I learned that girls are more vulnerable harassments in the digital space. I am passing on the knowledge I gained to girls in my community,” she said.

Through analysis of the evaluation as well as reflection with GCAP team members and partners, there were several lessons around this approach. Digital peacebuilding is a new area of interest, and online harms are of growing concern. Our approach looked across online and offline ways to address these complex dynamics.

- 1) Digital peacebuilding has enabled youth a platform to build social cohesion, working across clan/ethnic groups on online challenges and enabling them to participate in other fora.** Highschoolers of the digital peace club are supporting conflict resolution between students.
- 2) Although mixed digital literacy, the framework that enables online and offline approaches enables inclusion, particularly around misinformation and information sharing.** Recommended from KII with high school student that support continues at the high school groups to provide resources and more tailored training material.
- 3) Sustainability is difficult because of costs associated with phone use and connectivity access by participants.** Despite internet connectivity issues, young people continue to use mobile data to share information on digital platforms. Sustainability and incentives to use limited resources for this type of work will be an issue and will continue to need support from donors.
- 4) Youth designed and youth owned processes generate interest and support from youth participants and the community.** Given the interaction of online and offline factors, from inter-ethnic tension to rapid spread of hate speech in Telegram and WhatsApp, youth were engaged in projects that addressed what they found to be most important in their communities.
- 5) Working with a local media partner built joint capacity sharing between Mercy Corps, TIKVAH, and youth.**



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Gender and Conflict Sensitive Approaches to Peace Building (GCAP) project, funded by the Government of Canada, and Mercy Corps' Resilience in Pastoral Areas (RIPA – North), a USAID activity, works towards realizing a strengthened gender sensitivity and inclusiveness of peacebuilding structures, processes, and services in Afar, Oromia, and Somali Regions, Ethiopia.