

## Mobilising Citizens for Peaceful Elections: A Case Study on the #Wagepeace2015 Campaign

### Background

Politically motivated violence has remained a key challenge to electoral processes in Nigeria. Since 2000, Nigeria has lost an estimated 1,100 lives to election related violence during elections conducted in 2003, 2007, and 2011<sup>1</sup>. Given the high stakes involved in elections and the tendency for political interest groups to exploit ethnic and religious divisions in their bid to win constituencies, some of the incidents of electoral violence have taken ethno-religious and communal dimensions.



Drama display at #Wagepeace2015 community dialogue forum

It is against this background that there were heightened concerns from both international and national actors as Nigeria prepared for the 2015 general elections. Without exception, assessments of the election security scenario resulted in predictions of electoral violence and threats to national security<sup>2</sup>. These assessments were furthered fuelled by proliferation and dissemination of hate and dangerous speech on traditional and social media platforms with clear indications that voting behaviour would be influenced by ethno-regional and religious cleavages.

### The 'Do the Right Thing: #Wagepeace2015' Campaign

Consequently, the National Orientation Agency (NOA), an agency of the federal government charged with the responsibility of mobilising Nigerian citizens to act in ways that promote peace, harmony and national development, initiated the #Wagepeace2015 campaign to mitigate and counter risks of electoral violence.

The Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) supported the campaigns in Rivers, Kaduna and Kano - three of its targets states with high incidence of electoral violence. The initiative entailed forging a coalition for peace with the full participation of

<sup>1</sup>Human Rights Watch (2004). *Nigeria's 2003 Elections – The Unacknowledged Violence*. P.5; DFID. (2007) *Elections in Nigeria in 2007*. P. 2; USIP (2011). *Nigeria's 2011 Elections: Best Run but Most Violent*.

<sup>2</sup> Clean Foundation (2015) *Security Threat Assessment Towards 2015 Election*. Lagos: Nigeria.

the private sector, public sector, international organizations, community development and civil society groups and individual peace-activists to advocate for a violence-free election. Stakeholders were encouraged to utilise the #Wagepeace2015 platform to send out messages to the public to encourage non-violent political behaviour and proactive action to counter hate and dangerous speeches.

The initiative was implemented through dissemination of peace messages via the #Wagepeace2015 twitter handle and bulk SMS messaging as well as the broadcast of radio and television jingles containing peace messages in English, Pidgin English and Hausa languages. This was accompanied by community dialogue forums organized in three Local Government Areas (LGAs) of the focal states and featured peace-centred drama displays. The drama pieces sought to sensitize the public on non-violent approaches to addressing and settling election-related grievances and disputes. Participants at the dialogue forums included security operatives, religious leaders, community leaders, government officials, lecturers, teachers and youth and women leaders. Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials bearing similar messages were circulated in focal areas to emphasize the importance of peaceful coexistence and free, fair and non-violent elections.

Another interesting aspect of the mass mobilization initiative was the appointment of influential Nigerians as #Wagepeace2015 Ambassadors. The Ambassadors were notable national personalities including federal ministers at the time such as Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (minister of finance and coordinating minister of the economy), Mrs Sarah Ocheke (minister of water resources), Dr. Olusegun Aganga (minister of trade, investment and industry), Arch. Mike Onolememe (minister of works), and Mr. Shola Omole (Director General, Nigerian Television Authority).

## **Results**

One of the early indications of success of the initiative was the swift uptake of the 'Wagepeace' tagline on social media platforms. Many social media users updated their twitter, Blackberry Messenger, Whatsapp and Facebook profiles with different variations of the campaign slogan: "*wage peace not war!*", "*wage peace – election no be war*" etc. even as Nigerians engaged in animated debates on the topic. The discussions on social media platforms served to bring the much-needed counter-narrative to the prevailing rumours of violence and breakdown of law and order at the elections.

The community dialogue forums which targeted youths, politicians, faith-based organisations, media and security operatives contributed to exposing the motives of politicians who sponsor youths to engage in violence around elections. As a result of the sensitization activities, some persons who had participated in political violence in previous elections expressed regrets and vowed to resist pressures from politicians. They also committed to mobilise their peers and community members to ensue violence during the elections.

The community dialogue forums also provided an opportunity for law enforcement agencies to publicise emergency telephone numbers for reporting early signs of conflict. This had the twin effect of encouraging community members to be active in observing and reporting possible threats to peace whilst also discouraging potential vectors of violence who were thus notified that their activities would be monitored. IEC materials distributed at the forums yielded strategic gains as well – community members who wore T-shirts and stuck Peace-promoting stickers on their walls and vehicles felt constrained to avoid engaging in violent activities for fear of being mocked by other community members.

The combination of the radio and television jingles, social media engagements, community dialogue forums, SMS messaging and sensitisation campaigns involving the #Wagepeace2015 Ambassadors, contributed to generating pro-peace and non-violence messages across religious, ethnic, social and political divides.

### **Challenges**

One of the major challenges experienced was the suspicion by the public that the campaigns were politically motivated to serve the purpose of the ruling party. This necessitated further community consultations and open statements of non-partisanship.

### **Lessons Learned**

It was instructive to observe the ripple effect of individuals adopting the #Wagepeace hashtag on social media platforms. The experience of the #Wagepeace2015 campaign re-affirmed the transformational potential of social networks when harnessed for positive movements and evidenced the power of peer influence in facilitating attitudinal change.