



M- Muslim
A Agencies
R Recharging
C Capacity Against
H HIV/AIDS



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The M-ARCH Project: Muslim Agencies Recharging Capacity against HIV/AIDS

The M-ARCH project seeks to reduce the spread of HIV infection, by working through locally-based religious structures in Ethiopia. M-ARCH builds the capacity of Muslim faith-based NGO partners to effectively and efficiently implement development projects. M-ARCH partners address the HIV challenge through: intensifying behavioral change education aimed at reducing risk behavior for the transmission of HIV/AIDS, conducting training and mentoring, and emphasizing moral values.

M-ARCH partners receive training in HIV/AIDS prevention, utilization of strategic information, monitoring and evaluation, project surveillance and other topics. M-ARCH partners then train members of their constituency, including religious institutions at the local level, comprised of *imams*, Q'uranic teachers, *qadis* and *dawas* (village religious officials), as well as female educators and youth peer promoters. These local level implementers are trained to teach abstinence and faithfulness messages to their followers by integrating these HIV messages with related teachings in the Q'uran. The village level educators do not teach only about HIV/AIDS, but about related topics such as rape, abduction, female genital cutting and other harmful traditional practices that contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS. The cumulative effect of this training is resulting in an increase in persons trained to: promote abstinence and/or be faithful HIV messages, conduct counseling and testing according to national and international standards, and implement capacity building, including stigma and discrimination reduction programs.

M-ARCH project interventions are now resulting in expanded community outreach HIV/AIDS prevention programs and an increase in the number of individuals reached by abstinence and/or being faithful messages.

The M-ARCH project is operational in 13 woredas of Oromia, Harari, Afar, Somali, Amhara, and Tigray. M-ARCH partners include Ethiopian Muslims Development Agency and Rohi Weddu Pastoral Women Development Organization. The project is funded by USAID and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and is operational from October 2004 through September 2008.

This publication seeks to bring to light some of the successful initiatives of participants in the villages undertaking M-ARCH activities to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Rohi Weddu Pastoral Women Development Organization

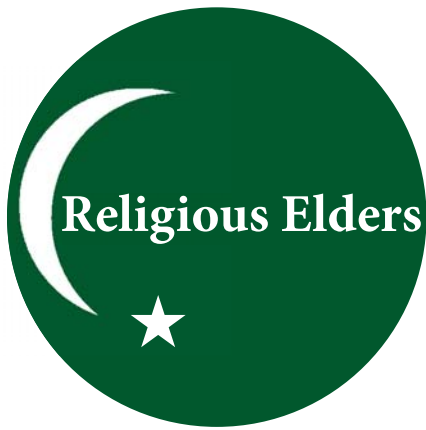
Rohi Weddu is one of the civil society organizations responsible for rolling out M-ARCH activities in the Afar region of Ethiopia. Rohi Weddu Pastoral Women Development Organization focuses on the holistic development of women in Afar. Rohi Weddu was established in 2004 and is officially approved by the Afar National Regional State Disaster Prevention and Food Security Bureau. Rohi Weddu's mission is to improve the overall social, economic and political development of women and girls in Afar. Rohi Weddu works with pastoral communities (women, men, boys, girls and children); the regional government; community based institutions; and national and international agencies. Rohi Weddu's programs focus on: the promotion of gender equality and human rights, promotion of girls formal and non-formal education, economic empowerment of women, HIV/AIDS prevention, improving maternal and child health, and enhancement of women's role in natural resource management. The following profiles document M-ARCH activities in Rohi Weddu sites.



A 360° Approach

Debel kebele is located in the Buremudaytu district of Afar, and is the hub of all the 15 settlements in the area. Rohi Weddu undertakes HIV/AIDS prevention education in five of these settlements. To carry out M-ARCH activities, Rohi Weddu utilizes a 360 degree approach, conducting training and dialogue with a wide spectrum of community constituents, including religious leaders, women-to-women peer educators, male youth leaders, and girls' clubs.

Afar regional state is majority pastoralist in terms of lifestyle, with most of the population moving with the livestock according to pasture and water availability. However, most of Burimulaytu's villagers are settled, especially the women and children, while some of the young men go out to herd the animals and come back to the village during the off-season. Therefore, Rohi Weddu conducts ongoing activities with settled villagers, but places special emphasis on reaching out to mobile pastoralists, when they arrive at the settlement.



Religious Elders Work Against Rape

Each of the villages in Burimudaytu district is home to two different kinds of religious leaders. The *qadi*, officializes marriages and the *imam* leads congregational prayers, preaches in the mosque and settles disputes. Through M-ARCH, these religious leaders are now utilizing the five daily prayer times and the Friday sermon to educate the community on HIV/AIDS, sanitation, harmful traditional practices and female genital mutilation.

Before the project, many *imams* thought that HIV did not exist in their village. However, through the M-ARCH project, they have not only learned about the existence and symptoms of HIV/AIDS, they also have become champion promoters of HIV prevention. Says Sheikh Mohammed Tayu, both the *imam* and *qadi* of Gafram village, "Since I'm a person responsible to teach the Word of God, people listen to what I say, especially the elders of the community. We started teaching in the mosque every Friday when people come to give honor to God. The project has promised to teach the community, so we have stood by the side of the project and taught the community, according to training we received. If possible, we try to give them options regarding the protection aspect of the disease. We teach about being faithful to a partner. We also teach about the ways in which one can become contaminated, through using blades, needles and fluids, especially related to blood. We also teach all about the disastrous aspects of HIV/AIDS. We also teach the people not to go outside of the wife / husband relationship and not to get married without being tested."

Religious elders are not only focusing on specific HIV prevention messages, but they are also demonstrating real courage to challenge harmful cultural practices that have become ingrained. Sheikh Mohammed Tayu continues, "We also teach the people about harmful traditional practices, in particular rape, because it paves the way for HIV/AIDS. We are also teaching about a certain type of cultural dance called *sedaa*. It gets youngsters emotional and leads them to risky behavior. So we encourage them not to practice this dance."



Mohammed Said, Imam and
Q'uranic School Teacher,
in Quda village, Afar
discussing the changes in how
rape is being handled



Ali Mujahid, Imam
of Subule Inhare village,
Afar

The religious elders explain how abduction and rape had become mainstream mechanisms for obtaining a wife. “In Afar culture, there is a tradition called *absum*, in which one of a girl’s uncles marries the girl. If there are a number of uncles, competition may arise between them and turn into abduction. *Qadis* allowed this abduction of the girl to become legal marriage in past. But now we are not legalizing it.” Says Mohammed Said, an *imam* and Q’uranic school teacher, “Before, when a man had raped a woman, he had the ability to take her as his wife. But now, he will not be allowed to automatically make that girl his wife.” Says *Qadi* Hamdu Ali, “The same is true in our village of Subuli Inhara. There was one cultural practice where a man was allowed to go to a woman while she was sleeping and have sex with her without her permission. We are trying to change this practice.”

Many of the religious elders like Hamdu Ali are using variegated approaches with the different target groups in their villages. Says Hamdu, “When young men start saluting god five times a day, it’s a chance for us discuss with them. Youth and women also come to the mosque, and we teach each of them differently.” Ali Delsa of Bidaforo village elaborates. “When teaching about the negative side of *sedaa*, it’s not a one day thing to stop this dance. It’s a continuous process. First we speak with the family of the girl about not sending her to the dance. We also work with boys, teaching not only the youth, but also their families. We try to show them the negative impact of this dance, not just at one point, but the lasting impact over time.”

Religious leaders in Burimudaytu kebele are utilizing their ability to reach people in matters of faith as a vehicle for carrying messages against rape. Sheikh Muhammad Tayu explains, “Before the coming of this project, we were trying to teach in commandment with the rules and regulations of Allah. Only a few people had enough fear of God to stop this behavior. After the project, we teach that this brings disease. We say to them, ‘There is a disease which will swallow you. It will burn you. It will kill you. Allah will take your soul from the earth.’ Now,



*Seko Mohamed, Qadi and
Sheikh of Debel village, Afar*



*Ali Delsa, Qadi of
Biidaforo village, Afar,
pondering the current changes
compared with previous times.*

the community has fear. Community members have developed fear, not just of God, but also of the disease, to the extent that if a man has three children, he is now buying three separate blades for them. During the coffee ceremony, villagers discuss previously commonly accepted harmful traditional practices, telling one another, ‘Oh you are going to die if you choose to do that.’”

The work of the religious elders is gradually taking effect. Qur’anic school teacher, Mohammed Said explains, “Before the intervention of this project, people were not aware. There was no fear, no care. Every one acted according to their interest and emotions. Previously, rape was highly practiced. Due to the project and the teaching we are now conducting, rape has been highly minimized-- it’s even possible to say there is no rape.” Sheikh Mohammed Tayu qualifies this assertion, saying, “It is beyond our sight, if it is happening in secret and it’s really not possible to say there is no incidence at all, but we do know these practices have decreased. This year, we have only had two or three girls raped. They used to bring to raped or abducted girls to the *qadis* to legalize the marriage. But now the *qadis* are not allowing it.”

Mohammed Said adds, “In fact, just yesterday night, a man abducted a girl and brought her from Gawane to my village. He wanted to make the marriage legal, but we did not allow it. The *qadis* have set two conditions. First, the boy and girl must be tested for HIV/AIDS, and secondly, the girl’s family should consent to the marriage. Unless these two conditions are met, the *qadi* does not legalize the marriage.”

The efforts of the religious leaders are not only impacting the practice of rape and abduction, but also the community’s awareness about HIV/AIDS and willingness to get tested. Says Sheikh Mohammed Tayu, “The number of HIV positive and negative people can be known only through testing. A number of people have shown the symptoms of HIV/AIDS and died. We knew, but we couldn’t count them. In March and April, they

Sheikh Mohammed Tayu, Imam and Qadi of Gafram village, Afar discussing with qadis and imams from surrounding area, what motivates him to work with the community



came here for testing. During the first testing visit, people were not ready and refused to be tested. I, as a community leader and a religious leader, went and gave my blood for the test. Following this, many community members took the test, and the results were told to each person, but no one made public their status. We are trying to encourage them to admit their status so that they can get medicines and counseling. If we understand or perceive someone is HIV-positive, we take care of him. We consider him special. If a man is in bed, we take care of him, not for the project's sake, but for religion's sake. God asks us to take care of people. There is kind of cultural support called *zekat* where the community contributes to the sick person. Even though community members are poor, we collect gifts from them and give these to the sick person.”

Though M-ARCH activities are being integrated with long-standing cultural and religious practices, acceptance of M-ARCH's work has not come immediately. Says religious leader, Mohammed Said, “At the beginning of the project, it was hard to reach the community. Because people think we are paid for our work through M-ARCH, people perceived we were doing this for the sake of business. Through the course of the project, we have been teaching about being faithful and about the disease of HIV/AIDS. Over time, the community is accepting these teachings into their lives. We have gained more acceptance now.”

Religious elders remain focused on achieving the objectives of the project, because of their commitment of faith, which serves as the inspiration for participation in M-ARCH activities. Concludes Mohammed Said, “It was not this project which began these things. Rather, it is the Word of God which teaches us to be faithful.”



Work against HIV/AIDS

Rohi Weddu is working with Girls' Clubs in the Burimudaytu district to enlist young girls and women to become proponents of M-ARCH HIV/AIDS prevention efforts. Some of the Girls' Club members are secondary school students, while others are young mothers or unmarried out-of-school girls. Club members engage in community education activities, peer discussion groups, coffee ceremonies, as well as making use of the mini-media broadcasting system.

Rabia Alida is a 20 year-old Girls' Club member who is married with one child. She explains the types of M-ARCH activities she has been involved in. "Since we took HIV/AIDS training from Rohi Weddu, we've been teaching women and girls in the family and in groups. We also use the mini-media. Once in a while we have dramas in collaboration with the other clubs as well. We use every opportunity we get to teach the community."

The girls have taken training in HIV/AIDS issues and they then convey the information they learn to others. "We teach how HIV/AIDS can be transmitted by having intercourse with someone with whom you don't have a legal relationship. We teach that HIV is transmitted through cutting devices."

The girls take what they learn about HIV/AIDS transmission in their training and apply it to the local context within their village. The girls have become particularly active in educating their young peers about participation in cultural dances that have the side effects of spreading HIV/AIDS. "*Sedaa* is a traditional dance that takes place at night, usually at locations far from where people live. Many attending the dance come with a prior attraction to someone else present. After dancing, boys and girls come together, and many are tempted to have sex in the nearby bushes. We are trying to teach the community about HIV and we command them to stop *sedaa* dance."

The Girls' Club members are finding that they receive acceptance when advocating against *sedaa* dance. Says

Members of the
kebele's Girls' Club



Rabia Alida, Girls' Club member
and 20-year old mother of
one child, Debel village, Afar



Rabia, "They always accept what we teach them so we don't have any problem."

The Girls' Club members are seeing a change in behaviors, the effect of which is beginning to inhibit the spread of AIDS. "We can see a lot of change in behavior since we have been teaching about HIV/AIDS. Many have stopped going to *sedaa*. Because of our teaching, many are now interested to go for voluntary testing. During the last campaign from HAPCO in May, almost 50 youth went for testing."

Part of the acceptance of their advocacy work may be due to the integrated programming that Rohi Weddu is undertaking with various components of the community. The girls find that their activities coincide with efforts of the religious elders, female peer educators and male youth. Rabi explains, "Because of the combined effort of *imams* and *qadis* working with families on Fridays, people have stopped going to *sedaa*. Since the M-ARCH project began in our area, *sedaa* has stopped completely."

The Kebele Chairperson agrees that the combined efforts of working with different populations are contributing to a decline in the spread of HIV. He comments, "This organization, Rohi Weddu, is unique in the way it groups us into different statuses and teaches about HIV/AIDS. This is a marketplace for 15 settlements in the district, so we are finding that people are now becoming aware of the disease. We have had many cases, but we never experienced an organization or project that teaches this way."

Facko Ali, 13-year old member
of the Girls' Club in Debel village, Afar





Work for the Rights of Women

Hussein Mohammed is 20 years old and an active member of the Debel Youth Club. He also serves as the health extension worker for the area. He suffers from a physical disability and his bones are as thin as blades of grass, but he has overcome his challenges and completed Q'uranic school, where he learned to read Arabic script. After demonstrating his ability to learn, Red Cross trained him in Afar literacy and awarded him a literacy certificate. He later went on to study and earn a health certificate from the Red Cross. Hussein finds that his knowledge of Afar language and script, Arabic language and script, and health content all blend to give him a special ability to teach other youth in his area. Says Hussein, "Q'uranic school has helped me a lot. I have received many books and brochures from Arabic-speaking countries, so I can read the Arabic literature and I teach about these issues. The teachings of this project and the Q'uran are the same. In the Q'uran, it is written that a disease without any medicine shall come to this world. The principles that I'm teaching do not clash with my religion. They harmonize."

Hussein discusses how Rohi Weddu has involved male youth in implementing M-ARCH project activities in his kebele. Rohi Weddu has set up a small hut with radio equipment and outdoor loudspeakers in the kebele marketplace through which information can be disseminated on HIV/AIDS, harmful traditional practices and other health matters. Explains Hussein, "This is the center of the district where 15 settlements come together. Rohi Weddu has given us training and established a mini-media center, and we are doing our best to work 24 hours a day with youth at the community level in these 15 kebeles and to teach about HIV/AIDS."

"Many organizations have tried to go deep into Afar, but this organization is important and unique in character. It is really helping pastoral people, especially women, with issues of infibulation and female genital mutilation (FGM). There was a high flow of blood before. Women would put urine on themselves, just to stop the flow of blood. But now FGM has decreased. As a M-ARCH collaborator, I was invited to go to Gawane to see girls who had not been circumcised. Previously, it was impossible to find one girl in Afar who had not passed through female circumcision. There used to be a tendency to use just one cutting blade for FGM, but now

Hussein Mohammed, 20-year old health extension work and youth leader, discussing how preventing abduction and rape upholds women's rights



people are beginning to stop using the same blade.

“There was a high practice of harmful traditional practices due to lack of awareness. Now we are being given education so that we practice what they tell us. We are being educated that there are no positive outputs from harmful traditional practices. We are trying to show others the positive sides of not practicing harmful traditional practices.”

Another youth club member, Ibrahim Hassan explains how he has become an active promoter of M-ARCH activities. “We use every opportunity to teach our peers. I’m studying in the local school. Within grades 1 to grade 8, you will encounter a number of community members aged 15, 18, and sometimes even 20. I obtained permission from the director and now I am educating the whole school. While teaching, I incorporate discussion of harmful traditional practices into our HIV/AIDS education. We teach about *hada* face cutting for beautification purposes, as well as female genital cutting. I’m also teaching about the prevention of gender violence, like abduction and rape.”

Ibrahim discusses how abduction and rape are the predominant method for obtaining a wife. “There are lots of cases where people have abducted girls. The boy takes a girl for two days in his home. There he will take away her virginity. And in that situation, the family of the girl does not have a right to say no and refuse the marriage.”

Hussein explains how abductions are orchestrated. “When a person wants to abduct a girl, he discusses with his friends first. Then he identifies the best friend of the targeted girl, and he takes that friend aside, and shares his idea with her. If she is convinced, they set a time when the girl will go into the brush to use the toilet or when she will pass a place where she cannot easily be reached. It is at that point that the boy and his friends abduct the girl. The girl’s friend will wait to tell other people about the abduction until she is sure the group



*Ibrahim Hassan,
9th grade
youth club member*

*Right: Mini-media broadcasting
center in the center of
Debel Kebele.*

can't be found. When she is certain the girl is far away, she will go to the elders and tell them, "We were going to toilet and someone took my friend!" When asked why a girl would corroborate to enable the abduction of her own best friend, Hussein explains, "The boy tells the girl's friend, "I'd like to marry your friend". She tries to look at positive side of abduction. So she believes she is helping her friend. This is especially common when there are two or three uncles of the girl waiting for her, competing to get her first. This is the way that the abduction happens. It is our culture to abduct and marry. In fact, abduction is the only way to marry. It is because of lack of awareness that people don't know any other way of marriage. But there is a proper and legal way of getting into marriage.... a legal way of getting married does exist".

Ibrahim details how abduction is gradually being rejected by the community. "In the past, after the *qadi* [religious official] officialized the marriage by abduction, it was sealed. Now a drastic change has occurred, which is demonstrated by a decrease in number of abduction cases. When a case happens, the family is against the act. Now the *qadi* will set her free. In towns, there are no more cases like this. When it happens in marginalized, rural communities, people now rescue the girl. These are the changes that have occurred."

Ibrahim and Hussein recount an instance when they were firsthand witnesses of the changes occurring in the community. "Once we were on our way to school, and one man abducted one of my friends. He was hiding in the bush and he took back her to the jungle with him. The family and the community shouted against this act. Because of the fear this made the men feel, they let the girl go. We can see there is a decrease in abduction, even though we are not sure what is happening in villages far from this project. Even in those locations, we know there is a transfer of knowledge. Most people from the rural areas come to this kebele center, where they learn new information, then they take it with them when they go back to their places."

Both Ibrahim and Hussein are articulate advocates for the rights of women. Says Ibrahim, "I'm trying to stop this practice. I wish it would stop totally - - because abduction is against all women's rights and human rights.

Mohammed Ali,
9th grade
youth club member



After I took this training, I have not witnessed a boy who has abducted or raped a girl. If I do encounter this, I will try to mediate in a peaceful, amicable way.”

Many of the boys’ faces look hungry as the lunch hour has arrived. The group moves to conclude, but Ahmed speaks up, “I’d like to share my comments as well. Rohi Weddu is doing something to tackle the root causes of the problems of the Afar people. This club is one example.” Ahmed describes the collaboration and integration that is occurring between the various members and institutions at the grassroots level. “Student club members here are also health extension workers. Even among this group of male youth, there are also agricultural extension workers and *qadis*. So the club is organized from different corners of society. We are teaching about health matters. Health will come. Agriculture will also come. The mini-media system is being used to teach about and research aspects of pastoral life. Students bring different articles, and magazines that they think will be useful to share and they read them on the air.”

The young male club representative explains the hunger for information that has been generated by M-ARCH activities and requests the extension of M-ARCH activities into villages still unreached. He explains, “The *qadi* and secretary have created dialogue sessions and people are taking training in order to teach one another. When there are questions that they cannot respond to, they bring their questions to us and we discuss together... because doubtful things should not be said. Not only in this village, but in surrounding villages, people are requesting further information. I ask, on behalf of this group, that all of the 15 villages in this kebele be reached by Rohi Weddu’s M-ARCH activities. Because in these areas, people believe. The Afar people drink milk, so because of this, they are clever. When you tell them the truth, they believe that truth and they will die with the truth.” Hussein, the health extension worker adds, “It was due to the fact that people were ignorant that they have been engaging in these kinds of process. The Afar people are unique in character. Even though they are ignorant in terms of education, with practice... they become the best.”



Work against Female Genital Cutting

Rohi Weddu has trained groups of female educators, who then carry out the education sessions with other women in their village. Adida Dabus is a peer educator of women in her village of Subila Inahara. She explains how, “based on our training, we educate the public. We teach the community one day a week, and we carry out our work in collaboration with *imams* and *qadis*. They teach on Fridays, while we work with women, teaching them on other days. One peer educator teaches 30 women. We focus on teaching young girls and women, but we don’t tell the old ones to go away. Every week we pick one topic, and we usually agree on some results or come to some understanding during the session. Then the next week we pick another topic.”

Rohi Weddu has given the peer educators a rich curriculum with a host of topics on HIV/AIDS, harmful traditional practices and reproductive health. The curriculum is written in Amharic script, but the women have adapted to make it accessible according to their level of literacy and language comprehension. Says Adida, “I don’t understand Amharic, but we have been taught the contents of the book. There are people who can read Amharic in our village. They read the book aloud to us and we memorize the contents. We then teach women about harmful traditional practices and how HIV is transmitted. In particular, we discuss the harmful, bad effects of abduction and how it can transmit HIV/AIDS. We also teach that using one blade to cut different people can spread the disease. Culturally, we Afar people traditionally have used one blade for cutting. Now we recommend each person to use their own cutting device. We also teach traditional birth attendants not to use one blade and to use gloves when attending a birth. We also teach families who have people living with HIV/AIDS to use gloves when washing the person’s clothes, and when washing the patients’ bodies. We teach the women about cutting the uvula, traditional piercing and we teach them not to practice female genital mutilation (FGM).”

The female educators have found that some topics were more difficult than others, in terms of reaching the community and gaining acceptance of messages. FGM was particularly difficult because of the village

Adida Dabus,
Adult Female Peer Educator,
Subila Inhara village, Afar



institutional support of the practice. Explains Adida, “When we started teaching about the dangers of FGM, there was confusion because this is what we have been practicing traditionally. This practice has always been supported by the village institutions themselves. It was accepted by people because they thought the religious leaders were telling them to do it. But they have started listening now. One day, we talked about FGM and we

discussed the effects of FGM during and after child delivery and its impact on a cut woman. We agreed that it was a harmful practice. We agreed we should fight to abolish this practice. Now, the *imams* and *qadis* are always teaching about the negative effects of female genital cutting in the mosque. The people now accept what we say. They usually listen and distribute the message to those villagers not in the session, especially during the coffee ceremony.”



Through M-ARCH, female educators and religious elders have begun working hand-in-hand. The female educators can begin to see the effects of this collaborative endeavor on change in behavior among the female population in the practice of female genital mutilation. “Since we have started teaching about the dangers of FGM, there are some ladies who have not allowed their girls to get cut. We are now witnessing fewer women dying due to FGM,” says Adida.

Poster advocating against female genital cutting in the village’s mini-media broadcasting center.



Tayeba Ali, 16 year-old Female Peer Educator, Subila Inhara village, Afar

Among women who do choose to continue cutting their girl-children, many are deciding not to use a common cutting device during ceremonies. The changes in behavior are not limited to FGM, but to many of the messages that the female educators are conveying. “We teach attendees to get voluntary testing and counseling before entering any marriage. We advise family members to accompany youth to get tested. Since we have started, five couples have gone, accompanied by their families, to get tested. The marriage would definitely have been called off if one of parties had had HIV/AIDS,” Adida explains.

Female educators like Adida and her peers, Tayeba Ali and Asiya Yusuf, are learning to discuss extremely sensitive issues with their community members, as well as with outsiders and M-ARCH project staff. These female educators play a key role because of their access and ability to discuss openly and frankly with village women themselves, who are the key implementers and upholders of the tradition of female circumcision. Through their implementation of M-ARCH activities, Adida Dabus is finding that it is women working with women that is becoming the agent of behavior change at the village level.



Female peer educators discussing with male youth leaders in the community

