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Early Warning Systems and Grassroots Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment in Conflict-Prone Nigerian Communities

By

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Abstract

This article critically examines the relationship between early warning systems (EWS) and grassroots peacebuilding across conflict-prone communities in Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods critical review of the literature, project evaluations and NGO/government reports, the study synthesizes Nigeria-wide evidence on community-based EWS, identifies strengths and persistent gaps, and assesses how grassroots peace actors translate early warnings into preventative action. Findings indicate that community-level monitoring and civil-society EWS platforms contribute significantly to conflict prevention when integrated with state and regional mechanisms; however, challenges—such as weak coordination with formal institutions, resource constraints, politicization of warning information, and limited inclusion of women and youth—undermine effectiveness. The paper concludes with policy and operational recommendations to strengthen linkages between EWS and grassroots peacebuilding, and suggests avenues for empirical research to evaluate outcomes over time.

Keywords: early warning systems; grassroots peacebuilding; Nigeria; community-based monitoring; conflict prevention

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has experienced diverse forms of communal and inter-group violence in recent years—including farmer-pastoralist clashes, communal/ethno-religious violence, and insurgency-related spillovers—that have eroded livelihoods and displaced populations (Mercy Corps; UN Peacebuilding). Preventing escalation of localized tensions before violent outbreaks is therefore a strategic priority for national and subnational actors (UN Peacebuilding; WANEP). Community-level early warning systems (EWS), often run by civil society, community monitors, or local institutions, have emerged as crucial mechanisms to detect risk indicators and prompt local prevention and response measures. Yet, despite many initiatives across states and regions, the translation of early warning information into timely, effective grassroots peacebuilding action remains inconsistent. This paper provides a Nigeria-wide assessment of how EWS interact with grassroots peacebuilding, the institutional and operational factors that shape outcomes, and practical steps to strengthen prevention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Early Warning and Grassroots Peacebuilding

Early warning systems in conflict contexts are mechanisms—ranging from formal analytic centres to village monitors—that collect, analyze, and disseminate information about threats, triggers, and risk trends to enable timely preventive action (USIP; Kaiciid). Grassroots peacebuilding refers to locally anchored processes and actors (traditional leaders, women's groups, youth associations, CBOs) that pursue reconciliation, mediation, and social repair at community level (International Alert; Mercy Corps). The literature repeatedly argues that EWS effectiveness is conditional on linkages across tiers (community ↔ state ↔ regional) and on inclusive participation of local actors in both the monitoring and response phases.

2.2 Typologies and Models of EWS

Scholars distinguish between centralized, analyst-driven EWS and decentralized, community-based systems. The latter rely on community monitors, village reporting,

and local conveners to surface early indicators (CLEEN Foundation; ResearchGate analyses). Studies from West Africa underscore that local knowledge often detects sociocultural signs of tension missed by remote or macro-level analyses (USIP).

2.3 Evidence from Nigeria

Nigeria features a mosaic of EWS initiatives: civil-society networks (e.g., WANEP's WARN), UN-supported Early Warning/Early Response (EWER) pilots in several states, state-level efforts (e.g., NIIA early warning initiatives), and grassroots village monitoring programs (CLEEN Foundation; UN/UNDP projects). Evaluations show positive results where EWS included local stakeholders in analysis and response planning, but also reveal recurring gaps in funding, data sharing, and sustainable institutionalization (WANEP; UNDP; CLEEN).

3. Methodological Note

This article is a critical synthesis of Nigeria-wide evidence. Sources include peer-reviewed articles, NGO and multilateral reports, project evaluations, and policy documents identified through targeted searches of academic databases and organizational websites. The approach prioritizes (a) recent program evaluations and (b) sources that document community-level practice or provide comparative analyses within Nigeria. The synthesis highlights recurrent patterns and points to areas where empirical evidence is still thin and requires primary fieldwork. (Methodological limitations: reliance on published and grey literature, variable methodological rigor across reports.)

This study adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to examine how early warning systems interact with grassroots peacebuilding in conflict-prone Nigerian communities. The process began with a targeted search of academic databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and JSTOR, complemented by grey literature from government agencies, civil society organisations, and multilateral actors including the National Early Warning Centre, ECOWAS, WANEP, CLEEN Foundation, UNDP, Mercy Corps, and the United States Institute of Peace. The review focused on materials published between 2010 and 2025 that provided empirical data or evaluations of interventions in Nigerian states affected by recurring conflict. Sources that documented

both successful and unsuccessful cases were included to ensure balanced analysis.

The analysis followed two theoretical lenses—Conflict Transformation Theory and Systems Theory—guiding the thematic coding of evidence into categories of strengths, challenges, and opportunities. Patterns emerging from the literature were interpreted with attention to the dynamic relationships among community monitors, state actors, and regional mechanisms. While the approach allowed for the synthesis of diverse perspectives, it was constrained by reliance on secondary data and by the uneven geographic distribution of available evidence. States such as Plateau, Kaduna, and Benue were more frequently represented than others like Zamfara or Cross River, and in some instances, donor-funded evaluations may have overstated successes due to reporting incentives.

4. Findings: How EWS and Grassroots Peacebuilding Interact Across Nigeria

4.1 Strengths and Positive Practices

1. Local knowledge and speed of detection. Community monitors and women's and faith groups often detect tensions early—rumours, sudden movements, local resource disputes—before these appear in regional dashboards, enabling grassroots mediation and containment. This local vantage is repeatedly praised in program reports (CLEEN; WANEP).

2. Civil society networks as bridging actors. WANEP and affiliated national platforms have built networks of monitors that aggregate local information and link it to ECOWAS and national stakeholders, helping escalate issues requiring state intervention (WANEP; USIP).

3. Integration with donor-supported peace projects. UNDP/Peacebuilding Fund and other donors have supported EWER pilots that combined early detection with capacity strengthening for local response and trauma-healing, which contributed to reduced violence recurrence in targeted locales. Evaluations show measurable improvements in coordination in pilot states (UNDP; UN Peacebuilding evaluation).

4.2 Persistent Challenges

1. Weak response pathways from warning to action. Multiple reports document gaps

between the issuance of warnings and concrete follow-through actions—especially where local actors lack trusted channels to security agencies or where state response is slow (Mercy Corps; CLEEN).

2. Politicization and trust deficits. In polarized settings, warning signals can be politicized, with parties contesting the interpretation of data; this erodes trust and constrains neutral, preventive interventions (NAP Global Network report; academic reviews).

3. Resource and sustainability constraints. Community systems often depend on short-term project funding. When donor projects end, reporting networks and data flows weaken, reducing resilience of EWS (UNDP evaluation; WANEP documentation).

4. Inadequate inclusion of women and youth. Despite evidence that women's engagement improves peace outcomes, many monitoring and response structures remain male-dominated, limiting social reach and the quality of interpretive analysis of warning signs (BBforPeace; Guardian reporting).

5. Discussion

5.1 Why linkages matter: multi-tier integration

The evidence suggests EWS are most effective when embedded in multi-tiered architectures: grassroots monitors feed local analysis into state and regional nodes, which in turn mobilize resources and mediation when local capacities are insufficient. The USIP and WANEP frameworks show how tiered linkages enable appropriate escalation while preserving local agency (USIP; WANEP).

5.2 Operationalizing linkages: pathways and barriers

Operational pathways require (1) clear protocols for information flow and verification, (2) routine joint planning sessions between community actors and state actors, and (3) locally owned rapid response capacities (trained mediators, local peace committees). Barriers include lack of trust, competing mandates among agencies, and inadequate financing for local response. Program evaluations (UNDP, CLEEN) indicate that investments in joint drills, shared communication platforms, and inclusive governance of EWS improve both response speed and legitimacy.

5.3 The role of women and local institutions

Women's groups and traditional authorities often spearhead de-escalation and reconciliation. Inclusion of these actors in monitoring and analytical roles improves early detection and contextual interpretation of threats. Programs that intentionally mainstream gender and local customary processes see stronger sustainability and acceptance of interventions (BBforPeace; local evaluations).

6. Policy and Practice Recommendations

1. Institutionalize multi-tier referral protocols. Develop standardized, legally recognized protocols defining pathways from community data to state/regional response, including timelines and verification steps. (Operational models exist in WANEP/USIP materials.)

2. Sustain and mainstream community monitoring. Government and donor partners should co-finance hub models where community volunteers are trained and supported through modest stipends, digital reporting tools, and continuing capacity building to avoid collapse when projects end.

3. Build trust through joint exercises and transparency. Regular joint scenario exercises, shared dashboards accessible to community stakeholders, and feedback loops will reduce politicization and improve legitimacy.

4. Gender-responsive EWS. Mandate women's representation in monitoring and decision bodies and invest in safeguarding and psychosocial support services as part of response planning.

5. Data protection and ethical protocols. Develop and adopt community-level ethical guidelines for data collection and storage to protect sources and prevent misuse of sensitive information.

8. Conclusion

Community-based EWS in Nigeria form a critical layer of conflict prevention architecture, providing timely local detection and the raw material for grassroots peacebuilding. When coherently linked to state and regional actors, and when inclusive and well-resourced, they help prevent violent escalation. Yet persistent gaps—weak

institutional linkages, funding insecurity, politicization, and limited gender inclusion—constrain full effectiveness. Strengthening protocols, financing local capacities, and centring inclusive governance are practical steps toward more reliable EWS-to-action pathways that can reduce violence and protect communities across Nigeria.

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