Published by

British Journal of Contemporary Research

BEXFORD PUBLISHING

Bridging the Early Warning–Early Response Gap in Benue State, Nigeria: Institutional Constraints and the Challenge of Timely Conflict Intervention

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 6 | 2026 | Article Number: 012

Accepted: 12 October 2026 | Published: 10 November 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)

Crossref : **https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-LN73VQLF**

NGELE HYGINUS OPOKE[1], MUKHTAR IMAM[1]

[1]National Institute for Security Studies , Nigeria

Correspondence: NGELE HYGINUS OPOKE, opokengele69@gmail.com

Abstract

The persistence of violent conflict in Benue State, Nigeria, despite the existence of multiple formal and informal mechanisms for conflict monitoring and prevention, raises an important question about the effectiveness of early warning and early response (EWER) systems. Early warning systems are designed to identify indicators of impending violence, generate timely analysis and communicate actionable information to relevant decision-makers. Early response, however, requires political will, institutional coordination, operational capacity, resources and clearly defined responsibilities to translate warning information into preventive action. The central problem is therefore not necessarily the absence of warning signals, but the persistent gap between the production of warning information and the implementation of timely and appropriate responses. This paper examines the institutional constraints that contribute to the early warning–early response gap in Benue State, with particular attention to farmer–herder conflict, communal violence, displacement and the emergence of armed non-state actors. Drawing on conflict-prevention literature, institutional theory and evidence from Benue State, the paper argues that the effectiveness of EWER depends on the strength of the institutional linkages connecting communities, local government authorities, traditional institutions, security agencies, state authorities, civil society organisations and national conflict-prevention institutions. While Nigeria has developed national mechanisms such as the National Conflict Early Warning and Early Response System of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), significant challenges remain in translating information into timely action at the subnational and community levels. The paper identifies institutional fragmentation, unclear response mandates, weak vertical and horizontal coordination, inadequate local response capacity, politicisation of security information, mistrust between communities and state institutions, insufficient resources, weak feedback mechanisms, poor integration of traditional and community-based institutions, and the predominance of reactive security approaches as major constraints. It further argues that the problem is compounded when early warning systems emphasise the collection and transmission of information without simultaneously establishing pre-agreed response protocols, response financing and

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

accountable decision-making structures. The paper proposes a Benue State Early Warning–Early Response Framework based on subsidiarity, community ownership, integrated information management, predefined response thresholds, rapid-response teams, local peace infrastructure, conflict-sensitive security deployment, gender- and youth-inclusive monitoring, and institutional accountability. It concludes that closing the warning–response gap requires a shift from treating early warning primarily as an information function to understanding EWER as an integrated governance and conflict-prevention architecture. Such a system must connect credible local intelligence to decision-makers who possess both the authority and resources to act before local tensions escalate into large-scale violence.

Keywords: Early Warning, Early Response, Conflict Prevention, Benue State, Farmer–Herder Conflict, Institutional Constraints, Conflict Management, Nigeria, Peacebuilding, Community Security

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict prevention has increasingly become an important component of contemporary security governance. The devastating humanitarian, political and economic consequences of violent conflict have encouraged governments and international organisations to move away from predominantly reactive approaches toward systems capable of identifying emerging risks before they escalate. Early warning and early response (EWER) mechanisms represent one of the principal instruments developed for this purpose. In principle, early warning provides decision-makers with information about emerging threats, while early response converts such information into timely measures designed to prevent escalation, protect communities and address the underlying drivers of conflict.

The logic appears straightforward: if conflict risks can be detected early, relevant actors should be able to intervene before violence becomes widespread. Yet experience across Africa demonstrates that the existence of early warning mechanisms does not automatically result in effective preventive action. The African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and national governments have invested substantially in early warning structures, but the translation of warning into action remains problematic. Research on African EWER systems repeatedly identifies the gap between warning and response as one of their most persistent weaknesses (Wulf & Debiel, 2009; Noyes & Yarwood, 2013; Odote & Nzomo, 2019).

This challenge is particularly relevant to Nigeria. The country faces a complex security environment involving terrorism, banditry, communal violence, farmer–herder conflicts, kidnapping, resource competition, political violence and localised disputes over land and natural resources. In the North-Central region, Benue State has experienced particularly persistent and destructive forms of violent conflict. Farmer–herder disputes have evolved from localised disagreements over access to land, water and grazing resources into a complex security crisis involving displacement, community fragmentation, destruction of livelihoods, armed attacks and the emergence of local militias and vigilante formations.

The persistence of violence in Benue raises a fundamental question: if conflict indicators are observable before large-scale violence occurs, why do institutions so frequently fail to respond before escalation?

The question is important because violent conflict rarely emerges without preceding indicators. Changes in population movements, disputes over farmland and grazing routes, inflammatory rhetoric, destruction of crops, cattle theft, attacks on livestock, retaliatory threats, mobilisation of armed youth, circulation of small arms, communal meetings, breakdown of traditional mediation and unusual movements of armed groups can all provide warning signs. The challenge is to ensure that such signals are collected, assessed, communicated and acted upon within a timeframe in which preventive intervention remains possible.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

Research on Benue has established that the farmer–herder crisis is influenced by multiple and interacting factors, including competition over land and natural resources, demographic pressures, climate variability, changing pastoral systems, governance failures, conflicting legal frameworks and the weakening of traditional mechanisms of conflict regulation (Ijoyah, 2020; Vanger & Nwosu, 2020). More recent studies have also demonstrated that policy and institutional contradictions have contributed to the persistence of the conflict. Okoye et al. (2025), for example, found that government policies and laws have contributed to the onset and protraction of farmer–herder conflict in Benue, particularly through contradictions concerning land access and utilisation.

The crisis has continued to produce severe humanitarian consequences. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), for example, reported that clashes across five Benue communities between 29 May and 1 June 2025 affected 943 people, displaced 615 persons and resulted in 23 deaths and 21 injuries (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2025). The Yelwata attack in Guma Local Government Area in June 2025 further illustrated the devastating consequences of delayed or ineffective preventive action. UNICEF reported that more than 200 people were killed and more than 3,000 displaced following the attack, including more than 500 children (UNICEF, 2025).

These incidents demonstrate that the cost of delayed response is enormous. Once violence has escalated, the policy options available to authorities become narrower and more expensive. Security forces must be deployed, humanitarian assistance mobilised, displaced populations accommodated, destroyed infrastructure rebuilt and inter-community relations reconstructed. By contrast, preventive interventions—mediation, community dialogue, protection patrols, negotiated access arrangements, rapid investigation of threats, deployment of early-response teams and targeted humanitarian or livelihood interventions—may be considerably less costly and more sustainable.

Nigeria has taken steps to strengthen its EWER architecture. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) operates the National Conflict Early Warning and Early Response System (NCEWERS), designed to identify conflict indicators, generate analysis and strengthen proactive conflict prevention. The system includes a National Conflict Situation Room and engages national, subnational and community stakeholders. IPCR has explicitly identified the objective of bridging the gap between warning and response (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution [IPCR], 2026a, 2026b). However, the existence of a national architecture does not automatically guarantee effective action at the local level.

This paper therefore argues that the central challenge in Benue is not simply the capacity to generate early warning, but the institutional capacity to convert warning into timely, legitimate, coordinated and context-sensitive response. The problem is consequently both technical and political. It concerns information systems, but also institutional authority, political incentives, accountability, resource mobilisation, trust and relationships between state institutions and local communities.

The paper has five major objectives. First, it examines the conceptual relationship between early warning and early response. Second, it analyses the conflict environment in Benue State and the types of warning indicators that emerge within it. Third, it examines the institutional constraints that prevent timely response. Fourth, it evaluates the implications of the warning–response gap for conflict management and human security. Finally, it proposes an institutional framework for strengthening EWER in Benue State.

2. CONCEPTUALISING EARLY WARNING AND EARLY RESPONSE

2.1 The meaning of early warning

Early warning can broadly be understood as the systematic collection, analysis and communication of information concerning potential threats in sufficient time to enable preventive action. It is therefore more

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

than intelligence gathering. Its ultimate purpose is not simply to know that a conflict may occur, but to enable relevant actors to take measures capable of changing the trajectory of events.

The literature identifies different approaches to early warning. Some systems rely heavily on quantitative indicators, including demographic trends, economic conditions, political instability, historical conflict patterns and statistical measures of violence. Others emphasise qualitative information gathered from local communities, civil society organisations, traditional authorities, journalists, religious leaders and field monitors (Wulf & Debiel, 2009).

Contemporary EWER approaches increasingly recognise that neither quantitative nor qualitative information is sufficient by itself. Statistical data can identify structural patterns but may fail to capture rapidly changing local dynamics. Community-based information can identify emerging tensions but may contain perceptions, rumours or biases that require verification. Effective early warning therefore requires the integration of multiple sources.

The African Union's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), for example, was established to anticipate and prevent conflict and to provide timely information about evolving violent conflicts. Its architecture includes a Situation Room and links to regional observation and monitoring centres (African Union, 2020). Similarly, Nigeria's NCEWERS seeks to identify conflict indicators across the country and connect warning information with preventive action (IPCR, 2026a).

The key issue, however, is that information only becomes meaningful when it is connected to decision-making.

2.2 From warning to response

Early response is the process through which actors with appropriate authority and capacity take preventive measures after receiving and assessing warning information. Responses can range from dialogue and mediation to security deployment, humanitarian assistance, public communication, legal intervention and livelihood support.

A critical distinction must therefore be made between early warning, early action and early response.

- Early warning answers: What is happening, where is it happening, and what might happen next?
- Early action asks: What can be done now to prevent escalation?
- Early response asks: Which institution should act, with what authority, resources and timeframe?

A functioning EWER system must answer all three questions.

One of the principal weaknesses of many systems is that they become heavily invested in the production of reports without developing corresponding response mechanisms. Agbo (2021) notes that many systems concentrate on identifying whether a crisis is emerging without adequately specifying how and when preventive interventions should occur. This produces what may be called the warning without action problem.

The distinction is important in Benue because information about potential conflict may reach several institutions without producing a coordinated intervention. A community may report threats to local authorities; local officials may communicate the information to security agencies; security agencies may assess the information; and yet no actor may possess a clearly defined mandate to initiate preventive action.

Thus, the central institutional problem is not always lack of information. It may be the absence of an effective decision-action chain.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Conflict prevention theory

This paper is primarily anchored in the theory and practice of conflict prevention. Conflict prevention distinguishes between structural prevention and operational prevention.

Structural prevention addresses the underlying conditions that create vulnerability to conflict. These include poverty, exclusion, unequal access to land, weak governance, discrimination, poor justice systems, unemployment and institutional marginalisation.

Operational prevention, on the other hand, involves direct measures taken when tensions are already emerging. These may include mediation, preventive diplomacy, negotiation, security deployment, monitoring and confidence-building.

The African Union's Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework similarly distinguishes between direct operational intervention before large-scale violence and structural interventions addressing the underlying causes of conflict (African Union, 2018). For Benue, this distinction is particularly important. Early warning cannot be reduced to identifying an impending attack. It should also identify structural developments that increase the likelihood of violence.

For example:

- competition over land;
- blocked traditional grazing routes;
- destruction of crops;
- cattle theft;
- proliferation of weapons;
- youth mobilisation;
- inflammatory political narratives;
- breakdown of local mediation;
- movement of displaced populations;
- failure to prosecute previous attacks; and
- declining trust in government.

These may constitute indicators of increasing conflict risk even before violence becomes imminent.

3.2 Institutional theory

The paper also draws upon institutional theory, particularly the argument that human behaviour is shaped by formal and informal rules, norms and organisational structures.

Vanger and Nwosu (2020), applying new institutionalism to farmer–herder conflict in Tivland, demonstrate how conflicting institutional arrangements contribute to conflict dynamics in Benue. They highlight tensions between traditional norms governing land and resource access and formal legal and political institutions, including land-use regulations and the state's anti-open-grazing framework. The institutional perspective is useful for analysing EWER because response does not take place in an institutional vacuum. Different organisations have different mandates, interests, information systems and decision-making procedures. The effectiveness of EWER depends on whether these institutions cooperate or operate in isolation.

The institutional question is therefore:

Do the rules, structures and relationships governing conflict information create incentives for timely

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

preventive action?

Where institutions are fragmented, response becomes slow. Where mandates overlap, actors may wait for another institution to act. Where mandates are unclear, warning signals may circulate without ownership. Where institutions distrust each other, information may be withheld. Where political interests conflict with preventive action, warnings may be ignored.

4. CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND THE EARLY WARNING ENVIRONMENT IN BENUE STATE

4.1 The evolution of conflict in Benue

Benue State has long been characterised by intensive agricultural activity and interaction between sedentary farming communities and pastoral populations. Competition over land and natural resources has historically produced disputes, but the nature and intensity of violence have changed considerably.

The farmer–herder crisis became more pronounced from the 2010s. Research has associated its escalation with changing pastoral practices, demographic growth, climate pressures, land-use transformation, cattle movement, farmer expansion, political tensions and the weakening of traditional mechanisms for regulating resource access (Ijoyah, 2020; Vanger & Nwosu, 2020).

The introduction and implementation of the Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017, represented a major policy intervention. The law sought to prohibit open grazing and promote ranching. However, its implementation also became embedded within broader political and social tensions. Recent scholarship suggests that the law generated polarised perceptions among farmers and pastoralists and contributed to the complexity of the conflict environment (Okoye et al., 2025).

Research on border communities has further demonstrated that conflict and displacement have created spaces in which criminal networks and armed actors can operate, particularly in forested and weakly governed areas along the Benue–Nasarawa–Taraba borderlands (Trees, Forests and People, 2024).

Thus, the conflict environment has become increasingly complex. What may begin as a dispute over farmland or grazing can develop into retaliatory violence, communal mobilisation, displacement and criminality.

4.2 Early warning indicators in Benue

A functional EWER system in Benue must recognise that conflict indicators operate at multiple levels.

Local indicators

At the community level, warning signs may include:

- destruction of crops;
- cattle entering cultivated farmland;
- livestock theft;
- threats against farmers or pastoralists;
- isolated killings;
- revenge attacks;
- disputes over water points;
- inflammatory speeches;
- circulation of rumours;
- unusual movement of armed individuals;
- community mobilisation;
- closure of markets;

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

- abandonment of settlements; and
- movement of vulnerable populations.

Such indicators may emerge days or weeks before major violence.

Institutional indicators

Institutional warning signs may include:

- failure of local authorities to resolve disputes;
- collapse of traditional mediation;
- delayed police intervention;
- failure to investigate earlier attacks;
- unresolved land disputes;
- competing government directives;
- breakdown in communication between agencies; and
- declining public confidence in government.

These are especially important because institutional deterioration can itself become a conflict multiplier.

Structural indicators

Longer-term indicators include:

- demographic pressure;
- environmental degradation;
- changing rainfall patterns;
- competition over land;
- rural poverty;
- youth unemployment;
- displacement;
- weak local governance;
- inadequate justice mechanisms;
- proliferation of small arms; and
- exclusion from political processes.

Effective EWER must therefore operate across all three levels.

5. THE HUMAN AND SECURITY COST OF DELAYED RESPONSE

The consequences of ineffective early response are not abstract. They are reflected in deaths, displacement, destruction of livelihoods, food insecurity and the weakening of community institutions. The National Human Rights Commission has documented the severe human rights and humanitarian consequences of farmer–herder violence in the Middle Belt, including fatalities, injuries, destruction of property, displacement and increasing ethnic and religious tensions (National Human Rights Commission [NHRC], 2020).

In Benue, the humanitarian consequences have been particularly severe. Iorbo et al. (2024) document extensive displacement associated with farmer–herder violence, including loss of homes, farms, infrastructure and access to ancestral lands. Recent events reinforce this pattern. IOM reported that 615 people were displaced following a series of attacks in five Benue communities in May and June 2025, while 44 casualties were recorded (IOM, 2025). UNICEF's assessment of the Yelwata attack similarly documented mass casualties and displacement, demonstrating how rapidly a local security crisis can

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

become a humanitarian emergency (UNICEF, 2025). The cost of delayed intervention is therefore cumulative. When preventive intervention fails:

1. isolated incidents become cycles of retaliation;
2. communities begin organising self-defence structures;
3. trust in state institutions declines;
4. weapons become more attractive;
5. displaced populations increase;
6. humanitarian costs rise;
7. agricultural production declines;
8. food insecurity increases;
9. criminal actors exploit weakened governance; and
10. reconciliation becomes more difficult.

Early response should consequently be viewed not merely as a security function but as a development, governance and humanitarian function.

6. INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS PRODUCING THE WARNING–RESPONSE GAP

6.1 Fragmentation of institutional responsibilities

One of the most significant constraints is institutional fragmentation. Conflict information in Benue may pass through communities, traditional rulers, local government authorities, police formations, military units, intelligence agencies, civil society organisations, humanitarian actors and state-level institutions. Each actor may possess part of the information, but no single institution necessarily controls the complete response chain.

The result is an institutional coordination problem. The IPCR's NCEWERS model recognises the need for collaboration between formal and informal actors at national, subnational and community levels (IPCR, 2026a). However, coordination must exist not only at the level of information exchange but also at the level of decision-making. Information sharing without shared responsibility does not constitute effective EWER.

6.2 The absence of clearly defined response thresholds

A second problem is the absence of explicit response thresholds. An early warning report may state that conflict risk is "high" or "increasing," but decision-makers still require operational guidance. For example:

- What constitutes a high-risk alert?
- Who must be notified?
- Within how many hours?
- Which institution has the authority to act?
- What resources are available?
- When should security forces deploy?
- When should mediators intervene?
- When should humanitarian actors pre-position supplies?
- Who monitors whether the response occurred?

Without predefined thresholds, the system depends excessively on individual judgement and institutional discretion. A more effective model would establish categories such as:

Green: emerging tension; monitoring and community dialogue.

Amber: escalation risk; preventive mediation and intensified security monitoring.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

Red: imminent violence; immediate protective deployment and emergency response.

Such thresholds would reduce uncertainty about institutional responsibility.

7. POLITICAL WILL AND THE POLITICS OF RESPONSE

Political will is arguably one of the most difficult dimensions of the warning–response gap. Early warning can create political pressure because acting upon a warning may require government to acknowledge a security problem before it becomes publicly visible. Preventive action can also be politically costly. Deploying security forces to a community may generate accusations of bias; initiating negotiations may be interpreted as weakness; publicly identifying a conflict risk may create panic; and acknowledging institutional failure may generate political embarrassment.

The broader African experience illustrates this dilemma. Research on the AU has shown that political considerations, sovereignty concerns, institutional rigidity and inadequate communication between technical warning institutions and political decision-makers can prevent effective early response (Noyes & Yarwood, 2013; Masara, 2021).

The same logic can operate at subnational levels. Where government authorities perceive conflict through political rather than preventive lenses, they may respond only when violence becomes sufficiently visible to generate public pressure. This creates a dangerous incentive structure: the more visible the crisis becomes, the greater the likelihood of intervention. Such a system effectively rewards escalation. An effective EWER architecture should instead reward prevention.

8. INSTITUTIONAL TRUST AND THE CREDIBILITY OF WARNING

Early warning depends fundamentally on trust. Community members must trust that reporting information will not expose them to retaliation. Government officials must trust community information. Security agencies must trust civilian monitors. Civil society organisations must trust government institutions. Communities must believe that reporting threats will produce action.

Where this trust is absent, information quality deteriorates. Community members may refuse to report threats because previous warnings produced no intervention. They may also provide information selectively because they perceive government institutions as biased. This is particularly problematic in farmer–herder conflicts, where narratives of victimisation are often deeply entrenched. Each community may view itself as threatened and the other as responsible for insecurity.

Consequently, EWER systems require mechanisms for triangulation and verification. Community reports should be combined with security assessments, local administrative information, media monitoring, humanitarian observations and other sources. At the same time, verification should not become an excuse for excessive delay. The principle should be: verify sufficiently to act responsibly, but not so slowly that verification becomes a substitute for action.

9. WEAK LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY

Conflict prevention is often most effective at the local level because local actors possess contextual knowledge and can identify changes in community behaviour before they become visible at state or national levels. However, local government institutions in many conflict-affected areas face substantial capacity constraints. These may include inadequate personnel, insufficient funding, weak communication infrastructure, limited transportation and poor access to remote communities.

This creates a paradox. The institutions closest to the conflict may possess the best contextual information but have the least capacity to respond. Conversely, national security institutions may possess greater resources but may lack the detailed local knowledge necessary for calibrated intervention.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

An effective EWER architecture must therefore connect the two. The solution is not to centralise all warning functions. It is to establish a vertical information and response chain linking community monitors to local authorities, state institutions and national actors.

10. WEAKNESS OF TRADITIONAL AND COMMUNITY-BASED INSTITUTIONS

Traditional institutions remain important in conflict prevention in Benue. Chiefs, elders, religious leaders, community associations, farmer organisations and pastoralist representatives often possess information that is unavailable to formal state institutions.

They may know:

- which families are involved in disputes;
- which routes are being contested;
- which individuals are mobilising youth;
- where retaliation is likely;
- which local leaders can mediate;
- and what forms of intervention communities are likely to accept.

However, traditional institutions have also experienced weakening in many areas. IPCR has recently identified weakened traditional institutions and gaps in local governance as important challenges to sustaining peace (IPCR, 2026b). The appropriate response is not to replace traditional structures with state institutions, but to integrate legitimate community structures into a broader peace and security architecture.

11. THE SECURITY-CENTRIC NATURE OF CONFLICT RESPONSE

Another important constraint is the tendency to conceptualise conflict primarily as a security problem. Security forces are indispensable where communities face imminent armed attacks. However, not all conflict indicators require military intervention. For example, a dispute involving:

- destruction of crops,
- blocked grazing routes,
- access to water,
- cattle theft,
- land boundaries,
- inflammatory rumours,

may be better addressed initially through mediation, local administration, community dialogue or negotiated resource-access arrangements. A purely security-oriented response can inadvertently transform a manageable social dispute into a securitised confrontation. This does not imply that security intervention is unnecessary. Rather, the response should be proportionate to the warning level and nature of the threat. The most effective EWER system therefore needs a spectrum of response options:

Dialogue → mediation → administrative action → community protection → targeted security intervention → emergency humanitarian response

12. INFORMATION QUALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF DATA-TO-ACTION

Modern EWER systems increasingly use technology, databases, mobile reporting platforms and digital dashboards. These tools can significantly improve information collection. However, technological capacity does not automatically solve institutional problems. A sophisticated dashboard may show:

- where incidents occurred;
- when they occurred;

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

- who was affected;
- how many people were displaced;
- and how the risk is changing.

But the dashboard cannot itself decide whether a governor, police commissioner, military commander, local government chairman, traditional ruler or mediator should act. The critical challenge is therefore the data-to-action interface. Recent research on third-generation early warning systems identifies three recurring problems: data availability and quality, resource constraints and the difficulty of converting information into action (Palihapitiya et al., 2025). This reinforces the argument that EWER reform should not focus solely on technology. The most sophisticated information system is ineffective if:

- alerts are not read;
- decision-makers do not trust the data;
- no institution owns the response;
- response resources are unavailable; or
- political incentives discourage action.

13. THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Civil society organisations can play an important role in closing the warning–response gap. Their comparative advantages include:

- community access;
- independence from government;
- local legitimacy;
- ability to conduct dialogue;
- access to vulnerable groups;
- monitoring capacity;
- peacebuilding expertise; and
- ability to communicate concerns that communities may hesitate to communicate directly to government.

The experience of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) demonstrates the value of community-level early warning and civil society participation. However, WANEP's experience also demonstrates that funding, partnerships and the warning–response divide remain significant challenges (WANEP-related research, 2020). For Benue, civil society organisations should not be treated merely as data collectors. They should be integrated into a broader response architecture capable of implementing mediation, dialogue, community reconciliation and social cohesion initiatives.

14. GENDER, YOUTH AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY WARNING

An effective EWER system must also recognise that conflict affects and is experienced differently by women, men, young people, children and vulnerable groups. Women often possess unique knowledge of household-level changes, displacement patterns, food insecurity, community tensions and emerging threats. Young people, meanwhile, may have greater awareness of mobilisation through social networks and informal communication channels.

Excluding these groups creates information blind spots. A Benue EWER system should therefore establish mechanisms through which women, youth and other vulnerable groups can safely contribute information without exposing themselves to retaliation. This requires confidential reporting mechanisms, community protection protocols and gender-sensitive analysis.

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

15. A PROPOSED BENUE STATE EARLY WARNING–EARLY RESPONSE FRAMEWORK

The central argument of this paper is that Benue requires an EWER architecture that integrates information, decision-making, response capacity and accountability. The proposed framework can be organised into eight components.

15.1 Component One: Community Early Warning Networks

Each conflict-prone local government should establish a structured network of trained community monitors. The network should include representatives from:

- farmers;
- pastoralist communities;
- women;
- youth;
- traditional institutions;
- religious leaders;
- community-based organisations;
- local government;
- civil society; and
- relevant security liaison officers.

The purpose would be to identify local indicators before they become major incidents.

15.2 Component Two: Local Conflict Situation Rooms

Local conflict situation rooms should receive, verify and analyse information from community networks. They should maintain:

- incident databases;
- risk maps;
- community profiles;
- conflict histories;
- key stakeholder directories;
- mediation resources; and
- response protocols.

These local structures should connect directly to the state-level EWER mechanism and the national NCEWERS architecture.

15.3 Component Three: State EWER Coordination Centre

Benue should establish or strengthen a state-level coordination mechanism responsible for integrating information from:

- local governments;
- security agencies;
- humanitarian actors;
- traditional institutions;
- civil society;
- intelligence structures;
- agricultural agencies;
- environmental authorities; and

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

- relevant state ministries.

The centre should not merely produce reports. Its principal function should be to coordinate action.

15.4 Component Four: Predefined Response Protocols

Every major warning category should have a corresponding response package.

Risk level	Typical indicators	Recommended response
Green	Local dispute, rumours, minor resource tensions	Monitoring, dialogue, mediation
Amber	Repeated threats, crop destruction, mobilisation, retaliatory rhetoric	Mediation, local government intervention, increased security monitoring
Red	Armed mobilisation, imminent attack, organised displacement	Immediate security protection, mediation, emergency humanitarian preparation
Crisis	Active mass violence	Coordinated security, humanitarian and emergency response
Recovery	Violence reduced but displacement continues	Return planning, reconciliation, justice and livelihood recovery

The key principle is that a warning should automatically trigger consideration of a response.

16. ESTABLISHING RAPID RESPONSE TEAMS

A major institutional weakness in conflict prevention is the absence of readily deployable preventive teams. Benue could establish multidisciplinary rapid response teams comprising:

- conflict mediators;
- security liaison officers;
- local government representatives;
- traditional leaders;
- civil society representatives;
- humanitarian officers; and
- technical specialists where required.

Their role would vary according to the warning level. In a low-level dispute, the team could mediate. In an emerging crisis, it could facilitate negotiations and coordinate protection. In an imminent attack scenario, it could support security authorities while ensuring civilian protection. Such teams should have predefined activation procedures.

17. RESPONSE FINANCING

A warning system without resources is incomplete.

Preventive action often requires modest but immediate funding—for transportation, mediation meetings, community mobilisation, emergency communication, local protection and rapid assessment. The state should therefore establish a Conflict Prevention and Rapid Response Fund with transparent rules for activation. The fund should support:

- emergency mediation;

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

- transportation;
- community dialogue;
- local early warning operations;
- emergency protection;
- communication infrastructure;
- rapid assessments; and
- temporary humanitarian assistance.

Financial autonomy would reduce the delays associated with waiting for emergency budgetary approvals.

18. STRENGTHENING INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

A formal coordination structure should establish clear institutional responsibilities. For example:

Community structures: detect and report.

Local government: verify and coordinate local administrative response.

Traditional institutions: mediate and mobilise community cooperation.

Police: law enforcement and immediate protection.

Military: support where threats exceed conventional policing capacity.

Intelligence agencies: threat assessment and strategic warning.

State government: policy direction and resource mobilisation.

Civil society: community engagement, mediation and independent monitoring.

Humanitarian actors: protection, displacement and emergency needs.

IPCR/NCEWERS: national-level analysis, coordination and technical support.

Such role clarity would reduce duplication and institutional paralysis.

19. CREATING AN ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM

One of the most important innovations should be the introduction of an **Early Warning Response Accountability Register**. Every significant warning should generate a record containing:

1. date received;
2. source;
3. nature of threat;
4. risk level;
5. institution notified;
6. action required;
7. officer or institution responsible;
8. deadline for action;
9. action taken;
10. outcome; and
11. lessons learned.

This would make it possible to determine whether a conflict occurred because:

- no warning existed;
- warning existed but was not communicated;
- warning was communicated but not believed;

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

- warning was believed but no authority acted;
- authority acted but lacked resources;
- response was inappropriate; or
- response occurred too late.

This distinction is essential for institutional learning.

20. THE IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK LOOPS

EWER systems must be learning systems. After every major conflict incident, authorities should conduct a structured review. The review should ask:

- What warning signs existed?
- When did they first appear?
- Who knew about them?
- What was communicated?
- To whom?
- What action was taken?
- Why was action delayed?
- What resources were missing?
- Which institutions performed effectively?
- Which institutional arrangements failed?

This process would transform individual incidents into institutional knowledge. Without feedback, the same failures will recur.

21. INTEGRATING EWER WITH DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Conflict prevention cannot be separated from development. Where early warning repeatedly identifies:

- water shortages;
- land pressure;
- unemployment;
- displacement;
- deteriorating agricultural livelihoods;
- poor roads;
- inadequate markets;
- weak justice systems;

the information should feed into development planning.

This is consistent with the African Union's emphasis on structural conflict prevention, which seeks to address vulnerabilities before they become violent crises (African Union, 2018). In Benue, therefore, EWER should not be located exclusively within security institutions. The Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Environment, local government authorities, social development agencies and other relevant institutions should be incorporated.

22. ADDRESSING THE FARMER–HERDER DIMENSION

The warning–response framework must recognise that farmer–herder conflict cannot be solved solely through security operations. The deeper challenge involves creating predictable rules for access to land and resources. Vanger and Nwosu (2020) demonstrate the importance of institutional contradictions surrounding land access and grazing. Okoye et al. (2025) similarly highlight the role of policy and legal

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

contradictions in the persistence of conflict. An EWER system should therefore monitor:

- grazing-route disputes;
- farm expansion into traditional pastoral routes;
- livestock migration;
- water-point disputes;
- crop destruction;
- cattle theft;
- retaliatory attacks;
- enforcement tensions;
- community expulsions; and
- inflammatory narratives surrounding government policies.

The system should then connect these indicators to mediation and resource-management mechanisms.

23. REBUILDING TRUST BETWEEN COMMUNITIES AND THE STATE

A sustainable EWER system cannot be built solely through government institutions. Communities must believe that the state will:

- protect them;
- listen to them;
- investigate attacks;
- treat different groups fairly;
- respond to warnings;
- punish perpetrators;
- and avoid collective punishment.

Where communities repeatedly report threats without receiving protection, they may conclude that self-defence is their only option. That creates a dangerous cycle:

weak response → loss of trust → self-help security → proliferation of weapons → greater violence → greater insecurity → further loss of trust.

Breaking this cycle requires visible evidence that reporting threats produces action.

24. FROM REACTIVE SECURITY TO PREVENTIVE SECURITY GOVERNANCE

Nigeria's security architecture has historically been heavily reactive. Security agencies frequently become most visible after violence has occurred. This is understandable because armed attacks require immediate response. Yet a prevention-oriented security system must allocate institutional attention to what happens before violence. Preventive security governance involves:

- monitoring;
- mediation;
- community engagement;
- intelligence analysis;
- risk assessment;
- preventive deployment;
- protection planning;
- strategic communication;
- local conflict resolution; and

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

- institutional learning.

This does not diminish the role of conventional security institutions. Rather, it expands their role from responding to violence toward preventing violence.

25. DISCUSSION: WHY WARNING DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY PRODUCE RESPONSE

The evidence suggests that the early warning–early response gap in Benue can be understood as a **chain of institutional disconnects**.

The first disconnect is between communities and government.

The second is between local authorities and security institutions.

The third is between security information and political decision-makers.

The fourth is between warning information and operational resources.

The fifth is between emergency intervention and longer-term conflict prevention.

Consequently, strengthening one link alone is insufficient.

Improving community reporting without improving response capacity will produce frustration.

Increasing security capacity without improving warning quality may produce excessive or poorly targeted intervention.

Improving technology without strengthening institutions may simply produce faster reports.

Increasing political attention without local legitimacy may produce unsustainable interventions.

The solution must therefore be systemic.

This conclusion is consistent with broader African research. Noyes and Yarwood (2013) identify human-resource limitations, weak coordination and political constraints within the AU's EWER architecture. Wulf and Debiel (2009) similarly identify institutional and political factors that prevent regional organisations from translating warning into effective response. More recent research continues to identify resource limitations, data-quality problems and data-to-action challenges as central weaknesses of EWER systems (Palihapitiya et al., 2025). The Nigerian experience is therefore not unique, but Benue provides a particularly important case for understanding how the warning–response gap operates at the subnational level.

26. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following measures are recommended.

1. **Establish a permanent Benue State EWER coordination mechanism**

   The state should maintain a permanent institution responsible for integrating conflict information and coordinating preventive action.

2. **Develop community-based warning networks**

   Conflict-prone communities should have trained focal persons connected to local government and state-level EWER structures.

3. **Establish clear warning thresholds**

   The state should define Green, Amber, Red and Crisis categories with predetermined actions.

4. **Create rapid response teams**

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

Multidisciplinary teams should be available for immediate preventive deployment.

5. **Establish a Conflict Prevention and Rapid Response Fund**

   This would ensure that lack of immediate funding does not prevent action.

6. **Integrate traditional institutions**

   Traditional rulers, religious leaders and community elders should be formally integrated into the EWER architecture.

7. **Strengthen farmer–pastoralist dialogue**

   Permanent dialogue platforms should address resource-access disputes before they become violent.

8. **Develop an early-warning accountability mechanism**

   Every significant warning should have an identifiable recipient, responsible institution and response deadline.

9. **Improve data integration**

   Community information, security intelligence, humanitarian data and administrative information should be systematically integrated.

10. **Protect community informants**

    Confidentiality and protection mechanisms should be introduced to prevent retaliation against people who report emerging threats.

11. **Integrate women and youth**

    Women and youth should have structured roles in community monitoring and peacebuilding.

12. **Strengthen coordination with IPCR/NCEWERS**

    Benue should use the technical capacity and national architecture of IPCR to strengthen state-level EWER.

13. **Link warning to development planning**

    Recurring conflict indicators should inform agricultural, environmental, infrastructure and social-development policies.

14. **Institutionalise post-conflict reviews**

    Every major violent incident should generate a warning-response review to identify failures and lessons.

27. Proposed Institutional Architecture

A functional Benue EWER system can be conceptualised as follows:

Community Level

Community monitors → traditional institutions → farmer/herder representatives → women/youth networks

↓

Local Government Level

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

LGA EWER Desk → local government authorities → police/security liaison → mediators

↓

State Level

Benue State EWER Coordination Centre → Governor/appropriate executive authority → security agencies → ministries → humanitarian actors → CSOs

↓

National Level

IPCR/NCEWERS → national security institutions → relevant federal agencies

↓

Response

Dialogue → mediation → administrative intervention → preventive security → emergency protection → humanitarian action → recovery and reconciliation

The essential feature is that the system must operate in both directions.

Information must travel **upward**.

Response must travel **downward**.

Without this two-way architecture, early warning remains disconnected from communities.

28. CONCLUSION

The persistence of violent conflict in Benue State demonstrates that the existence of early warning information does not necessarily translate into early response. The central challenge is institutional. Benue has a complex conflict environment characterised by farmer–herder tensions, competition over land and natural resources, displacement, communal violence, weak local governance, institutional mistrust and the emergence of armed and criminal actors. These conflicts do not generally emerge without warning. Indicators often appear in the form of resource disputes, threats, crop destruction, cattle theft, retaliatory mobilisation, population movements, inflammatory narratives and institutional breakdown. The critical problem is therefore the failure to convert these signals into timely, coordinated and appropriate preventive action.

The paper has demonstrated that the warning–response gap is produced by several interconnected factors: fragmented institutional responsibilities, weak local capacity, inadequate coordination, unclear response thresholds, insufficient resources, political calculations, weak accountability, mistrust, inadequate integration of community institutions and an excessive emphasis on reactive security responses. The implication is clear: strengthening early warning alone will not solve Benue's conflict problem. The state requires an integrated early warning–early response architecture in which warning is directly connected to decision-making, resources and action. Communities must be connected to local authorities; local authorities must be connected to security and state institutions; and state institutions must be connected to national conflict-prevention mechanisms. Most importantly, every serious warning should answer four questions:

Who knows?

Who decides?

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

Who acts?

By when?

If these questions cannot be answered, an early warning system remains primarily an information system rather than a conflict-prevention system. The future of conflict prevention in Benue therefore depends on moving from information production to institutional action, from reactive security to preventive security governance, and from centralised warning to community-connected response. The recent strengthening of Nigeria's NCEWERS provides an important institutional foundation. IPCR's current architecture explicitly seeks to connect national, state and community structures, while its Situation Room provides a platform for more systematic conflict monitoring and response coordination (IPCR, 2026a, 2026b). The challenge is to ensure that these national capacities are translated into practical local response mechanisms in states such as Benue.

Ultimately, an effective EWER system should not be judged by the number of reports it produces, the sophistication of its technology or the number of indicators it monitors. It should be judged by whether it can prevent violence, protect vulnerable populations, preserve livelihoods and create opportunities for peaceful intervention before the window for prevention closes. For Benue State, bridging the early warning–early response gap is therefore not simply an administrative reform. It is a fundamental requirement for human security, good governance, sustainable development and long-term peace.

References

African Union. (2018). *Continental structural conflict prevention framework*. Peace and Security Department, African Union.

African Union. (2020). *African Union handbook 2020: Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)*. African Union Commission.

Agbo, S. O. (2021). Early warning and early response systems: An overview of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution's framework. *Journal of Conflict Early Warning and Response, 2*(1).

Ijoyah, E. (2020). Early warning mechanism for mitigating herders and farmers conflict in Benue States, Nigeria. *International Journal of African and Asian Studies, 69*. https://doi.org/10.7176/JAAS/69-03

Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution. (2026a). *National Conflict Early Warning Early Response System*. Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nigeria.

Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution. (2026b). *IPCR strengthens Nigeria's conflict prevention through National Early Warning System*. Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nigeria.

International Organization for Migration. (2025). *Nigeria—North-central—Benue State Flash Report 216 (2 June 2025)*. Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM Nigeria.

Iorbo, R., Sahni, S. P., Bhatnagar, T., & Andzenge, D. T. (2024). Social inclusion and justice for the internally displaced by the herdsmen-farmers conflict in Benue State, Nigeria. *Journal of Migration and Human Security*.

Masara, W. B. (2021). Biting the bullet: Interrelating early warning to early action in the Continental Early Warning System of the African Union. *Journal of African Union Studies, 10*(3), 5–17. https://doi.org/10.31920/2050-4306/2021/10n3a1

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd

National Human Rights Commission. (2020). *Integrating human rights in UN peacebuilding response to farmer-herder crisis in Middle Belt Nigeria*. NHRC.

National Human Rights Commission. (2021). *Final report on integrated approach to building peace in Nigeria's farmer/herder crisis project in the Middle Belt Nigeria*. NHRC.

National Human Rights Commission. (2023). *Annual report 2022*. NHRC.

Noyes, A., & Yarwood, J. (2013). The AU Continental Early Warning System: From conceptual to operational? *International Peacekeeping, 20*(3), 249–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2013.838393

Odote, P. O., & Nzomo, M. (2019). Role of early warning systems in conflict prevention in Africa: A framework. *In Factis Pax: Journal of Peace Education and Social Justice, 13*(1).

OECD. (2009). *Preventing violence, war and state collapse: The future of conflict early warning and response*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264059818-en

Okoye, K. E., Ezeani, E. O., Onah, F. N., Ekekwe, E., Akov, E. T., & Agbo, P. O. (2025). "When we believe in state power, it tends to fail us": Insights into the management of herder-peasant farmer conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. *Journal of Asian and African Studies, 60*(6). https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241243052

Palihapitiya, M., Khan, S., Ahmed, F., Shenouda, B., Nelson, E., et al. (2025). Addressing critical gaps in data collection and analysis in atrocities prevention early warning systems. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 20*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/15423166241293353

UNICEF. (2025). *Nigeria humanitarian situation report No. 2: Farmer-herder conflict*. United Nations Children's Fund.

Vanger, E. T., & Nwosu, B. U. (2020). Institutional parameters that condition farmer–herder conflicts in Tivland of Benue State, Nigeria. *African Security Review, 29*(1), 20–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2020.1763413

Wulf, H., & Debiel, T. (2009). *Conflict early warning and response mechanisms: Tools for enhancing the effectiveness of regional organisations? A comparative study of the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, ASEAN/ARF and PIF* (Working Paper No. 49). Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science.

© 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the **Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence** (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

© 2026 The Authors. Published by Bexford Publishing Ltd