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The Role of Early Warning Systems in Conflict Management in Benue State

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Abstract

The conditions that lead to conflict are often predictable and can be mitigated or even prevented if detected early. Early Warning Systems (EWS) are therefore designed to systematically monitor, analyse, and communicate information on potential conflict indicators in order to enable timely preventive or mitigating action. These systems focus on identifying patterns related to political instability, socio-economic inequality, competition over resources, and other stressors that heighten the risk of violent conflict, thereby allowing stakeholders to intervene before disputes escalate. Benue State has experienced recurrent communal, ethno-religious, and farmer–herder conflicts for over two decades. These conflicts, largely driven by land disputes, competition over natural resources, and ethnic tensions between farming communities and pastoralist groups, have significantly undermined the state's identity as the "Food Basket of the Nation". The aim of this study is to examine the role of early warning systems in conflict management in Benue State, Nigeria. The objectives of the study include examining the structure and functioning of early warning systems used in conflict management in Benue State and assessing the effectiveness of early warning systems in preventing or reducing violent conflicts in the state. The survey findings reveal that early warning systems in Benue State have clearly defined structures and reporting channels, help to identify potential conflicts before they escalate into violence, and that delayed response by authorities weakens their overall effectiveness. Consequently, conflict escalation in Benue State is less a failure of information availability than a failure of governance, response capacity, and accountability. Strengthening the linkage between early warning and early response, particularly at the state and community levels, is therefore essential for improving conflict management and achieving sustainable peace in the state. It is recommended that the Benue State Government, through the Office of the Governor and the Benue State Peace and Security Council, institutionalise a clear Early Warning–Early Response (EWER) framework that defines response thresholds, assigns responsibilities in advance, and mandates action once early warning alerts are issued. In addition, the Nigeria Police Force and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) should establish dedicated early response units at the Local

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Government Area level to act promptly on early warning information, particularly in conflict-prone communities such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Gwer West, among others

Keywords: The Role of Early Warning Systems, Conflict Management, Benue State

1. INTRODUCTION

Security threats continue to rise globally and within Nigeria, driven by factors such as criminal activity linked to population growth and scarce resources, terrorism and insurgency, and tensions among competing identity groups. Regardless of their origins, conflicts frequently result in loss of life and destruction of property. Notably, the conditions that lead to conflict are often predictable and can be mitigated or even prevented if detected early. Early Warning Systems (EWS) are therefore designed to systematically monitor, analyse, and communicate information on potential conflict indicators in order to enable timely preventive or mitigating action (Lund, 1996; Nyheim, 2015). These systems focus on identifying patterns related to political instability, socio-economic inequality, competition over resources, and other stressors that heighten the risk of violent conflict, thereby allowing stakeholders to intervene before disputes escalate.

Early warning systems are widely recognised as a core component of contemporary conflict management and prevention strategies. When effectively linked to early response mechanisms, EWS support informed decision-making, enhance preparedness, and reduce the human and material costs of conflict (Schmid, 2021). Their effectiveness, however, depends not only on accurate data collection and analysis, but also on political will, institutional capacity, and coordination among relevant actors (Nyheim, 2015). Consequently, early warning has become central to peace and security frameworks, where it is increasingly promoted as an essential tool for preventing escalation and supporting sustainable peace.

Experiences from West and East Africa highlight the consequences of weak early warning–response linkages. Across these regions, insurgency, terrorism, and banditry have intensified despite the existence of national and regional monitoring mechanisms. In the Sahel, warning indicators such as governance deficits, climate-induced resource scarcity, and cross-border armed group mobility were identified years before violence escalated, yet responses remained fragmented and largely reactive (Ishola et al., 2025; Nyheim, 2015). As a result, violent incidents in the region increased more than fivefold between 2016 and 2023, leading to extensive fatalities and mass displacement. In Nigeria, similar gaps have contributed to the expansion of Boko Haram insurgency and armed banditry in the north-west, where attacks, kidnappings, and displacement have persisted despite repeated warnings (Onuoha & Ojo, 2019; Ojo, Oyewole, & Aina, 2023). Haken, Nasri, and Reece (2024) emphasise that strengthening networks linking early warning to rapid, coordinated response at local and regional levels remains critical to reversing these trends. Overall, Africa's experience demonstrates that early warning systems alone are insufficient; without timely and credible responses, warning signs continue to translate into large-scale insecurity rather than effective conflict management.

In Nigeria, early warning systems are formally embedded within national and regional security frameworks and are intended to detect early indicators of violent conflict so that authorities can intervene before violence escalates. These mechanisms include the Nigeria Security Tracker, community-based intelligence reporting structures, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), which monitors threats related to insurgency, communal violence, and organised crime (Onuoha & Ojo, 2019; Nyheim, 2015; Haken et al., 2024). Despite the availability of these tools, persistent insurgency by Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa

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Province (ISWAP), alongside the rapid spread of armed banditry and kidnapping in north-west Nigeria, reveal serious gaps in translating early warning signals into timely and coordinated responses. Studies indicate that warning indicators, such as arms proliferation, deteriorating governance, expanding rural criminal networks, and population displacement, were evident long before violence escalated, yet responses were frequently delayed, fragmented, or reactive (Onuoha & Ojo, 2019; Ojo et al., 2023).

In Benue State, conflict is commonly associated with long-standing farmer–herder tensions, recurrent attacks on rural communities, and pervasive fear among residents. The state has attempted to respond by incorporating early warning systems into its broader security management efforts. According to Ijoyah (2020), early warning in Benue largely operates through community reports shared by local leaders, vigilante groups, and security agencies regarding suspicious movements, threats, or rising tensions. In principle, such warnings should trigger rapid responses, including security deployments, dialogue initiatives, or community engagement aimed at de-escalation. Iornumbe, Nuhu, and Zamani (2023) similarly note that these systems are intended to shift responses from reactive measures after attacks to proactive conflict prevention. In practice, however, early warning in Benue relies heavily on informal communication channels, such as word of mouth or phone calls, which often delays action. As a result, the effectiveness of early warning varies across communities and depends largely on levels of organisation, trust, and connectivity.

Despite these measures, conflict has persisted in Benue State, raising serious questions about the effectiveness of existing early warning arrangements. Research shows that warnings are sometimes ignored, arrive too late, or cannot be acted upon due to inadequate manpower, limited equipment, or unclear leadership structures within security agencies (Iornumbe et al., 2023). Eleanya (2025) further notes how weak telecommunications infrastructure in many parts of the state slows information sharing, particularly during emergencies. Consequently, even when communities detect threats early, they may struggle to communicate warnings to authorities capable of responding. Terwase (2025) also points to leadership gaps and poor coordination among state actors as key factors undermining conflict management efforts and allowing violence to recur. Therefore, while early warning systems exist in Benue State, they have not been sufficient to prevent repeated cycles of violence, displacement, and fear. This persistent insecurity underscores the need for the present study, which seeks to examine how early warning systems can be strengthened to ensure that warnings lead to timely, coordinated, and effective conflict management rather than remaining unheeded alerts.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Benue State, has experienced recurrent communal, ethno-religious, and farmer–herder conflicts for over two decades. These conflicts, largely driven by land disputes, competition over natural resources, and ethnic tensions between farming communities and pastoralist groups, have significantly undermined the state's identity as the "Food Basket of the Nation" (Tyav, 2023). Repeated attacks on rural communities have forced many farmers to abandon farmlands, particularly those located far from villages and community centres where security presence is limited (ICIR, 2021; Punch Newspapers, 2023). In several cases, crops have been destroyed, produce stored in barns burnt, and harvested food looted or sabotaged, further discouraging agricultural activity and deepening food shortages (The Sun, 2022). Business and economic reports indicate that insecurity-induced disruptions to farming in Benue have contributed to declining food supply and rising food prices, reinforcing concerns that the state can no longer sustain its former status under prevailing conflict conditions (Business Times Nigeria, 2025). Local Government Areas such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Gwer West have repeatedly emerged as epicentres of violence, resulting in mass displacement and extensive destruction of lives and livelihoods (Daily Trust, 2024).

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The scale of violence in the state is substantial. Humanitarian monitoring organisations report that, as of late 2024, over 500,000 people in Benue State had been internally displaced as a result of armed attacks by militias and herder groups, with more than 10,000 additional displacements recorded in early 2025 in Gwer West, Agatu, Logo, and Guma alone. More than 200 villages across the state have been sacked, often accompanied by the destruction of homes, farms, and community infrastructure, as well as the looting or burning of grain reserves. Farmer–herder clashes account for over 416,000 displaced persons statewide, with communal violence further compounding the crisis.

Recent events illustrate the severity and persistence of the problem. In June 2025, coordinated attacks on Yelwata community in Guma Local Government Area resulted in over 100 confirmed deaths, with some reports estimating more than 200 civilian fatalities, including women, children, and internally displaced persons sheltering in the community (Reuters, 2024; Amnesty International, 2025). Thousands were displaced, and extensive property destruction was recorded. Similar attacks in Gwer West during the same period led to at least 42 deaths across several communities in a single weekend, showcasing the continuing failure to prevent violence despite repeated warning signs.

In response to persistent conflict challenges, the Benue State Peace Commission (BSPC), in collaboration with national and international partners such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Union (EU), and Mercy Corps, established Early Warning Systems to detect and respond to conflict triggers before escalation. Notably, an ICT-based Conflict Early Warning and Early Response System (CEWERS) was introduced under a UNDP-supported peacebuilding project, with procurement processes dating back to October 2019, indicating the period of its design and implementation. These mechanisms operate through community monitors, digital reporting platforms, and coordinated security networks that gather and share information on emerging tensions, providing actionable alerts for early mitigation (Mustafa & Sa'ad, 2025; Ioryue, 2024). However, despite the presence of these systems, violent outbreaks remain frequent, suggesting a weak linkage between early warning and timely response.

Studies indicate that poor coordination between state security institutions and community-based peace structures significantly undermines the effectiveness of EWS in Benue State. Although conflict indicators are routinely collected, delayed decision-making, inadequate funding, institutional bottlenecks, and political interference often prevent preventive action (Tyav, 2023; Mustafa & Sa'ad, 2025). Field alerts are frequently not escalated promptly, rendering early warning systems reactive rather than proactive and resulting in avoidable loss of lives and property (Ekanem, 2025).

The persistence of violent conflicts in areas such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Gwer West therefore raises critical concerns about the operational efficiency, coordination, and responsiveness of Early Warning Systems in Benue State. While threats are often detected in advance, the translation of early warning information into timely and effective conflict management measures remains weak. This gap underscores the need for a systematic assessment of how Early Warning Systems are structured, implemented, and integrated into broader security responses in Benue State, with a view to strengthening their role in conflict prevention and sustainable peacebuilding.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the role of early warning systems in conflict management in Benue State, Nigeria.

1.3 Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

i. Examine the structure and functioning of early warning systems used in conflict management in

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Benue State;

ii. Assess the effectiveness of early warning systems in preventing or reducing violent conflicts in Benue State;

iii. Identify the challenges affecting the translation of early warning information into timely and effective response in Benue State.

1.4 Research Question

The study is guided by the following research questions:

i. How are early warning systems structured and implemented for conflict management in Benue State?

ii. To what extent have early warning systems been effective in preventing or mitigating violent conflicts in Benue State?

iii. What challenges hinder the effective utilisation of early warning systems for conflict management in Benue State?

1.5 Scope

This study focuses on the role of early warning systems in managing communal and farmer–herder conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. Geographically, the study covers selected conflict-prone Local Government Areas such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Gwer West. Thematically, it examines the structure, effectiveness, and challenges of early warning systems within the context of conflict prevention and response.

1.6 Operational Definition of Terms

Early Warning Systems (EWS): Structured mechanisms for collecting, analysing, and communicating information on potential conflict indicators to enable timely preventive or response actions.

Conflict Management: The processes and strategies employed by state and non-state actors to prevent, reduce, contain, or resolve violent conflicts.

Farmer–Herder Conflict: Violent confrontations arising from competition over land, water, and other natural resources between farming communities and pastoralist groups.

Conflict Prevention: Actions taken to avert the outbreak or escalation of violent conflict through early detection, dialogue, and timely intervention.

Early Response: Measures undertaken by security agencies, government institutions, or community actors following early warning alerts to prevent or de-escalate violence.

Community-Based Monitoring: The involvement of local actors, including community leaders and volunteers, in identifying and reporting early signs of conflict at the grassroots level.

2. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

The key variables examined in this study are Early Warning Systems as the independent variable and Conflict Management as the dependent variable. These variables are situated within the framework of violent conflict prevention and response in Benue State, with specific focus on farmer–herder conflicts, communal violence, and broader insecurity in Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Gwer West Local Government Areas.

2.1 Early Warning Systems

Early Warning Systems (EWS) in conflict management refer to structured mechanisms designed to

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systematically collect, analyse, and interpret data on potential indicators of violent conflict in order to enable timely preventive or mitigating action. Over the past three decades, the concept of EWS has evolved alongside advances in computing, data analytics, and a growing international commitment to conflict prevention (Muggah & Whitlock, 2022). Rather than reacting to violence after it occurs, contemporary EWS focus on anticipating conflict by monitoring social, political, economic, and security-related stressors that signal rising risk. This shift reflects a broader move from crisis response to proactive conflict prevention within peace and security frameworks.

At its core, an EWS functions as both a technical and institutional tool that bridges the gap between data generation and policy action. Ackermann (2020) defines EWS as mechanisms that gather and analyse information from multiple sources in order to generate timely alerts for decision-makers. Modern systems integrate diverse data streams, including local community reports, official security data, and digital or satellite-based information, to improve accuracy and reliability (Muggah & Whitlock, 2022). Through systematic risk analysis, EWS transform raw indicators into actionable intelligence that can inform early intervention and conflict management strategies.

An effective conflict-related EWS typically consists of three interrelated elements: data collection, risk analysis, and communication of warnings to relevant authorities. Data collection focuses on tracking indicators such as political instability, ethnic tensions, resource competition, and patterns of violence, while risk analysis assesses trends and projects the likelihood of escalation (Halkia et al., 2020). Communication mechanisms ensure that warnings reach appropriate actors in time to act, linking early warning directly to preventive response. In this sense, EWS are not merely information-gathering tools but essential components of conflict management systems aimed at reducing violence, supporting peacebuilding, and enhancing human security (Ackermann, 2020; Muggah & Whitlock, 2022).

2.2 Conflict Management

Conflict management refers to the processes and strategies used to address, regulate, and guide conflict in ways that minimise its destructive effects while promoting peaceful and constructive outcomes. The concept is rooted in the recognition that conflict is an inevitable feature of social, political, and cultural interaction, particularly in pluralistic and post-colonial societies, and that unmanaged conflict often escalates into violence and social breakdown (Lundy & Njonguo, 2019). Rather than seeking to eliminate conflict entirely, conflict management focuses on influencing how disputes are expressed, handled, and resolved, emphasising prevention, dialogue, and non-coercive intervention over purely legal or force-based approaches.

Scholars generally define conflict management as a patterned process through which individuals, groups, and institutions control and channel disagreement. Kim and Leung (2000) describe it as the behavioural strategies employed to handle disputes, especially in culturally diverse contexts, highlighting that conflict can produce positive outcomes when managed effectively. From this perspective, conflict management is both strategic and context-dependent, shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and communication styles. Effective conflict management therefore requires sensitivity to social dynamics and an understanding of how different actors perceive authority, cooperation, and confrontation (Zhang, 2017).

Mafela and Ntuli (2017) conceptualise conflict management in African societies as grounded in indigenous values such as consensus-building, respect for elders, and the restoration of social harmony. In the Nigerian context, Aboh et al. (2023) define conflict management as a community-centred process involving dialogue, mediation by respected figures, and reconciliation aimed at repairing damaged relationships rather than assigning blame. These perspectives underscore conflict management as a continuous and culturally informed process that integrates prevention, regulation, and reconciliation to

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promote sustainable peace (Lundy & Njonguo, 2019; Kim & Leung, 2000; Mafela & Ntuli, 2017; Aboh et al., 2023).

2.3 Theme of the Study

2.3.1 Structure and Functioning of Early Warning Systems in Conflict Management

Eze and Frimpong (2020) and Souaré and Handy (2013) both speak from long engagement with Africa-wide early warning efforts, especially through the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the African Union's Continental Early Warning System, with their studies focused mainly on West Africa and the broader African continent. They explain that early warning systems are usually built around community monitors, civil society organisations, and regional hubs that collect signals of tension and pass them upward for analysis and response. One clear finding from Eze and Frimpong is that local networks are often better at spotting early signs of violence because they are close to everyday realities, while Souaré and Handy find that many warning signals fail to lead to action because political leaders ignore or delay responses. Both studies also show that strong data collection alone does not stop conflict; what matters is whether institutions are willing to act on warnings. They conclude that early warning systems are structurally sound on paper but weak in practice due to poor political commitment and slow decision-making. Their shared recommendation is that early warning must be directly linked to clear response mechanisms, with roles defined in advance and political leaders held accountable for inaction (Eze & Frimpong, 2020; Souaré & Handy, 2013).

Looking more closely at how early warning systems actually work in practice, Rød, Gåsste, and Hegre (2023) and Lynam et al. (2023) examine global and field-based systems, with studies covering Europe, Africa, and conflict-affected regions worldwide. Rød and colleagues compare different early warning models and find that many rely heavily on statistical forecasts and conflict data, which can predict broad trends but often miss local triggers. Lynam and others, drawing from field experience, find that systems work better when technical analysis is combined with human judgement from practitioners on the ground. A second key finding across both studies is that overly complex systems tend to fail because decision-makers struggle to understand or trust the outputs. Both sets of authors agree that early warning systems should support decision-making, not replace it. They conclude that structure matters less than usability; systems must be simple, trusted, and timely. Their main recommendation is to design early warning tools around the needs of users, policy actors, peacebuilders, and communities, rather than academic or technical perfection (Rød et al., 2023; Lynam et al., 2023).

From a regional and national perspective, Arulogun (2023), Wagobera (2020), Lahmood and Mutlak (2024), Muggah and Whitlock (2022), and Olofinnika (2023) provide useful insights from Nigeria, the African Great Lakes region, the African Union and Organisation of American States, and historical cases such as Rwanda. Arulogun's Nigerian study finds that early warning structures exist but are fragmented and poorly coordinated across agencies. Wagobera shows that in the Great Lakes region, early warning systems often detect risks early but fail because responses come too late. Lahmood and Mutlak find that regional bodies have formal tools and indicators, but these are weakened by political interests. Muggah and Whitlock observe that early warning has improved over time but still struggles to influence policy decisions. Olofinnika's historical analysis shows that ignored warning signs can lead to catastrophic outcomes. They conclude that early warning systems tend to fail not because of lack of information, but because of weak governance and poor response culture. Their shared recommendation is to strengthen institutional coordination, ensure political ownership, and embed early warning into everyday governance processes rather than treating it as a stand-alone system (Arulogun, 2023; Wagobera, 2020; Lahmood & Mutlak, 2024; Muggah & Whitlock, 2022; Olofinnika, 2023).

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2.3.2 Effectiveness of Early Warning Systems in Preventing and Reducing Violent Conflicts

Odote and Nzomo (2019), Engel (2018), and Ackermann (2020) all approach early warning systems from a broad African and international perspective, drawing mainly on cases across sub-Saharan Africa and multilateral peace operations. They agree that early warning systems are effective only when they move beyond collecting information to shaping timely action. Odote and Nzomo find that early warning frameworks in Africa often succeed in identifying rising tensions, especially where local actors and civil society are involved. However, they also show that these warnings frequently fail to stop violence because responses are slow or politically constrained. Engel similarly finds that early warning improves understanding of conflict risks but rarely leads to prevention unless backed by strong political will. Ackermann adds that international actors often know violence is coming but hesitate to act due to sovereignty concerns. Together, their studies conclude that early warning systems reduce violence only when they are linked to clear response duties. Their shared recommendation is that early warning must be treated as a responsibility, not just a technical tool, with agreed actions triggered automatically once risk levels rise (Odote & Nzomo, 2019; Engel, 2018; Ackermann, 2020).

From a more data-driven angle, Hegre et al. (2019), Muggah and Whitlock (2022), and Suyono (2020) examine global and regional systems, including the ViEWS model, with evidence drawn from Africa, Asia, and conflict-prone states worldwide. Hegre and colleagues find that early warning models can accurately predict patterns of political violence months in advance, which shows strong preventive potential. However, they also find that predictions alone do not stop conflict unless decision-makers trust and use them. Muggah and Whitlock reach a similar conclusion, noting that early warning has become more accurate over time, yet violence persists because warnings are ignored or politicised. Suyono's study shows that early warning indexes help governments prioritise risks but struggle to reduce violence when local realities are overlooked. All three conclude that early warning systems are effective at anticipation but weak at prevention. Their recommendation is to simplify outputs, combine data with local insight, and focus on decision-making rather than prediction accuracy (Hegre et al., 2019; Muggah & Whitlock, 2022; Suyono, 2020).

Arulogun (2023), Ijoyah (2020), Kimaita and Irungu (2024), Rochana et al. (2024), and Wulf and Debiel (2010) provide grounded evidence from Nigeria, Kenya, Indonesia, and regional organisations. Arulogun finds that Nigeria's early warning systems identify threats but rarely prevent violence due to poor coordination. Ijoyah's study in Benue State shows that community-based warnings can reduce herder–farmer clashes when acted upon early, but failure to respond leads to escalation. Kimaita and Irungu show that technology improves speed but does not replace trust. Rochana and colleagues find that WhatsApp-based alerts spread quickly but can also increase panic. Wulf and Debiel conclude that institutions often know what to do but fail to act. They recommend strengthening local response capacity, clear leadership, and trust-building alongside warning systems (Arulogun, 2023; Ijoyah, 2020; Kimaita & Irungu, 2024; Rochana et al., 2024; Wulf & Debiel, 2010).

2.3.3 Challenges in Translating Early Warning Information into Timely and Effective Response

Pescaroli, Dryhurst, and Karagiannis (2025) and Frank (2019) approach the problem from a broad, cross-sector angle, drawing evidence from global early warning practice in disaster, financial risk, and conflict settings. Their work is not limited to one country but reflects experiences across Europe, Africa, and international systems. A shared view in their studies is that early warning often breaks down at the point where information meets people and institutions. One key finding by Pescaroli and colleagues is that warning messages are frequently misunderstood or ignored because they do not align with how communities perceive risk or urgency. Frank also finds that institutions often receive warnings but delay

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action due to fear of political cost or uncertainty about consequences. A second finding is that warnings are commonly framed as advice rather than triggers for action, which allows decision-makers to postpone response. Both studies conclude that the main challenge is not lack of data, but weak communication and unclear responsibility. They recommend that early warning systems should include clear response thresholds and shared understanding between experts, officials, and communities on what action should follow a warning (Pescaroli et al., 2025; Frank, 2019).

Similarly, Ijoyah (2020), Arulogun (2023), and Ogundiran et al. (2025) provide grounded evidence from Benue and Borno States. Ijoyah's study in Benue State shows that early warnings about herder–farmer tensions were often available through community leaders, yet violence still occurred because responses were slow or absent. One finding is that local warnings rarely move beyond the community level to authorities who can act. Another is that even when government actors are informed, security responses tend to come after violence has started. Arulogun similarly finds that Nigeria's early warning structures suffer from poor coordination among agencies and unclear leadership. Ogundiran and colleagues, studying the health-focused EWARS in Borno State, find that alerts were technically accurate but response was delayed due to logistics, insecurity, and weak institutional follow-up. They conclude that early warning in Nigeria fails mainly at the response stage. Their recommendation is to strengthen coordination, clarify roles, and ensure rapid response resources are available once alerts are raised (Ijoyah, 2020; Arulogun, 2023; Ogundiran et al., 2025).

Looking beyond Nigeria, Omer, Abdi, and Mohamed (2026) and Backer and Billing (2021) examine early warning systems in Somaliland and across Africa's food security context. Omer and colleagues find that community members often trust early warning systems but lose confidence when alerts do not lead to visible action. One finding is that repeated inaction makes people less likely to respond to future warnings. Another is that local actors are rarely empowered to act independently while waiting for central approval. Backer and Billing find that famine warnings in Africa are usually accurate, yet humanitarian response often comes late due to funding delays and political hesitation. Both studies conclude that early warning without timely response can worsen harm by creating false reassurance or frustration. They recommend decentralising response authority, pre-positioning resources, and treating early warning as an action system rather than an information tool (Omer et al., 2026; Backer & Billing, 2021).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

To better elucidate the key variables of the study, early warning systems and security management, three theoretical perspectives were reviewed. These are the Conflict Early Warning–Early Response (CEWER) Theory, Human Needs Theory, and Decision-Making Theory. Together, these theories provide an analytical framework for understanding how early warning information is generated, interpreted, and acted upon within the context of conflict management.

2.4.1 Conflict Early Warning–Early Response (CEWER) Theory

Conflict Early Warning–Early Response (CEWER) Theory was advanced by Michael Lund (United States, 1996). The theory assumes that violent conflict follows identifiable patterns and that systematic monitoring of indicators, political, social, and economic, can generate timely warnings that enable preventive action. Lund argues that early warning has value only when it is directly linked to early response mechanisms (Lund, 1996). The relevance of this theory to the present study lies in its emphasis on the warning–response nexus, which is central to understanding how early warning systems in Benue State can prevent or manage communal conflicts when acted upon promptly.

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2.4.2 Human Needs Theory

Human Needs Theory, proposed by John Burton (United Kingdom, 1990), assumes that conflicts emerge when fundamental human needs such as security, identity, recognition, and livelihood are threatened or denied. The theory suggests that these needs are non-negotiable and that unresolved needs inevitably lead to conflict escalation (Burton, 1990). Its relevance to this study lies in explaining how early warning signals in Benue State often reflect unmet needs among farming and herding communities, and how conflict management strategies must respond to these needs to be effective.

2.4.3 Decision-Making Theory

Decision-Making Theory, associated with Herbert Simon (United States, 1957), assumes that decision-makers operate under conditions of bounded rationality, meaning their choices are constrained by limited information, time, and political pressures. The theory explains why warnings do not always lead to action, even when information is available (Simon, 1957). This theory is relevant to the study because it helps explain delays or inaction by authorities in Benue State despite early warning signals, highlighting the gap between information and response.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a survey-based mixed-methods approach to examine the role of early warning systems in conflict management in Benue State, Nigeria. The research design combines quantitative and qualitative methods in order to generate both measurable evidence and in-depth understanding of how early warning information is generated, communicated, and utilised in managing communal conflicts. The mixed-methods approach is appropriate because it allows the study to capture stakeholders' perceptions, institutional practices, and lived experiences relating to early warning systems and security responses across conflict-prone communities in the state.

4. DISCUSSION OF FIDINGS

A broad consensus in the literature is that early warning systems are essential tools for conflict management, but their effectiveness depends largely on the strength of the link between warning and response. Scholars working across Africa and globally consistently assert that early warning mechanisms are generally well designed in terms of structure and data collection, yet weak in practice due to failures in response (Souaré & Handy, 2013; Eze & Frimpong, 2020; Engel, 2018). This position is strongly corroborated by studies showing that local actors and community monitors are often the first to detect early signs of violence, particularly in agrarian conflicts such as those prevalent in Benue State (Ijoyah, 2020; Arulogun, 2023). However, as Lund's Conflict Early Warning–Early Response (CEWER) Theory argues, warning without response has limited value. The empirical evidence affirms Lund's assertion that early warning systems only contribute to conflict management when alerts are tied to clearly defined and timely response mechanisms. In Benue State, the recurring pattern of violence despite available warning signals suggests that the warning–response nexus remains weak, confirming CEWER's core proposition.

Another dominant view in the literature is that early warning systems are more effective when they capture local realities and reflect the underlying human conditions that generate conflict. Studies from Benue State and similar contexts reveal that early warning signals often emerge from unmet human needs, including insecurity, livelihood pressure, and identity-based fears among farming and herding communities (Ijoyah, 2020; Wagobera, 2020). This aligns closely with Burton's Human Needs Theory, which holds that conflict escalation is inevitable when fundamental needs are threatened or ignored. Empirical findings show that early warning indicators in Benue frequently reflect these unmet needs, such as rising tensions over land access or perceptions of exclusion, yet responses tend to focus narrowly on security deployment rather

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than addressing root causes (Arulogun, 2023). Scholars such as Ackermann (2020) and Wulf and Debiel (2010) support this view by asserting that preventive action must go beyond containment to include social and economic interventions. The evidence therefore establishes that early warning systems in Benue State can only contribute meaningfully to conflict management when responses address the human needs underlying the warnings, rather than merely reacting to violence after it erupts.

A further shared assertion in the literature is that institutional and political decision-making significantly shapes whether early warning information leads to action. Across Nigeria and other conflict-affected regions, studies repeatedly show that authorities often possess timely warning information but delay or avoid response due to political risk, bureaucratic fragmentation, or uncertainty (Souaré & Handy, 2013; Engel, 2018; Muggah & Whitlock, 2022). This pattern is clearly evident in Benue State, where community-level alerts frequently fail to move upward through administrative channels or result in late intervention (Ijoyah, 2020; Ogundiran et al., 2025). These findings strongly affirm Simon's Decision-Making Theory, particularly the concept of bounded rationality, which explains how decision-makers operate under constraints of limited time, competing interests, and political pressure. The persistence of violence despite repeated warnings in Benue State supports Simon's argument that the presence of information does not guarantee rational or timely action. Instead, early warning systems are filtered through institutional and political considerations that often undermine preventive response.

Finally, the literature agrees that repeated failure to act on early warnings undermines the credibility and effectiveness of early warning systems themselves. Studies from Benue State and comparable contexts demonstrate that when communities issue warnings that are consistently ignored, trust in the system declines, and local actors become less willing to share information in the future (Backer & Billing, 2021; Omer et al., 2026). This finding is reinforced by Rochana et al. (2024), who show that rapid information circulation through digital platforms can either support early response or generate panic when warnings are not followed by visible action. Collectively, these studies establish that early warning systems must be understood as action-oriented governance tools rather than technical information systems. In line with CEWER Theory, Human Needs Theory, and Decision-Making Theory, the evidence from Benue State shows that early warning contributes to conflict management only when it is embedded within responsive institutions, informed by local needs, and supported by decisive leadership. Where these conditions are absent, early warning systems risk becoming symbolic rather than preventive, explaining their limited impact on recurring communal conflicts in the state.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of early warning systems in conflict management in Benue State and found that while early warning structures and community-level signals exist, their effectiveness is significantly undermined by weak coordination, delayed response, and institutional bottlenecks. The findings show that early warning systems are more effective at identifying emerging conflict risks than at preventing or reducing violence, largely because warning information does not consistently translate into timely and decisive action. Community actors often detect tensions early, yet responses from responsible authorities are frequently slow, fragmented, or reactive. Consequently, conflict escalation in Benue State is less a failure of information availability than a failure of governance, response capacity, and accountability. Strengthening the linkage between early warning and early response, particularly at the state level and community levels, is therefore essential for improving conflict management and sustainable peace in the state.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

a. Benue State Government, through the Office of the Governor and the Benue State Peace and

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Security Council, should institutionalise a clear Early Warning–Early Response (EWER) framework that defines response thresholds, assigns responsibilities in advance, and mandates action once early warning alerts are issued.

b. Benue State Emergency Management Agency (BSEMA), in collaboration with the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), should strengthen coordination mechanisms among security agencies, emergency responders, and local authorities to ensure rapid mobilisation and deployment of resources following early warning alerts.
c. Nigeria Police Force and Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) should establish dedicated early response units at the Local Government Area level to act promptly on early warning information, particularly in conflict-prone communities such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Gwer West.
d. The Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation, in partnership with BSEMA and local governments, should support community-based early warning committees with training, logistics, and communication tools to enhance grassroots monitoring and immediate local response.
e. Benue State Ministry of Environment and related agencies should integrate conflict-sensitive environmental monitoring, especially around land use, grazing routes, and resource pressure into existing early warning systems to address key structural drivers of conflict.
f. Civil society and peacebuilding organisations, working with the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), should intensify capacity-building programmes on conflict prevention, dialogue, and trust-building to complement formal early warning mechanisms and improve community confidence in response systems.
g. Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), in collaboration with Benue State Government, should mainstream early warning systems into routine governance and security planning processes, ensuring political ownership, accountability for inaction, and sustained funding for early response initiatives at the sub-national level.

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