Early Warning Conflict Prevention: A Necessity for Peaceful Coexistence

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Abstract
Conflict early warning is supposed to identify and trigger actions to reduce the onset, duration, intensity, and effects of multiple violent conflicts. The study appraised early warning conflict prevention (EWCP) as a panacea for peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. In addition, various empirical literature on the relationship between early warning conflict prevention and peacebuilding was extensively reviewed. The findings from the review showed that the government should develop an effective relationship between early warning and early response to the conflict before violent conflict gets out of hands. Several lives could have been saved if the Nigerian government had been proactive and responded timely to the violent conflict that engulfed Nigeria in recent times, such as the Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-harder crisis, kidnapping for ransom, and militancy. In addition, oil theft, political violence, and banditry, amongst others, would have been averted if the government, politicians, various security agencies civil society organizations had adopted a solid and effective early warning conflict prevention and response mechanism that could have persevered the deadly and unquantifiable loss of lives and property, loss of revenue to government caused by violent conflict in Nigeria.

Keywords: Early Warning, early response, conflict prevention, peaceful, coexistence.

Introduction
Even though conflict has been observed to be inevitable among individuals, groups of individuals, or members working within an organization and society that coexist. Given this fact, some measures, mechanisms, and approaches could be put in place to avert violent conflict and its deadly impact on the lives and property of the people living in a given society or country. First, conflict early warning is intended to identify and trigger action to reduce the onset, duration, intensity, and effects of multiple forms of political violence, from communal violence to outright war (Muggah, & Whitlock, 2022). Conflict early warning was conceived as a means of protecting and preserving life. The field has evolved significantly since its initial conceptualization, and early warning has been integrated into the policies of many organizations and countries worldwide. Keyserlingk & Kopfmuller (2006) opined that the concept of early warning conflict prevention (EWCP) was first developed during the Cold War in the field of national military intelligence to enhance the capacity to predict potential (ballistic) attacks. At the United Nations System level, an early warning was introduced to forecast natural disasters such as droughts and earthquakes, among others.

Conflict prevention is controlling and managing strained relationships early enough (timely and promptly) to avoid the threats of a conflict. This calls for effective, proper, and convenient use of early warning mechanisms or systems to contain and respond to early threats of violence, thereby saving the situation from escalating out of unmanageable proportion. This is premised on the notion that prevention is better than cure. However, the extant literature on conflict prevention has failed to agree on any acceptable definition of conflict prevention (Best, 2008; Carment & Schnabel, 2003; Munuera, 1994; Lund, 1994), while others have referred to conflict
prevention as ‘preventive diplomacy’ (Lund, 2002; Boutrous-Ghali, 1996). Lederach (1997) argued that peaceful coexistence is “more than post-accord reconstruction and is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable and peaceful coexistence.” Boutrous-Ghali (1992) contends that peacebuilding aims to identify and support structures that strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict.

Nigeria was observed to be relatively peaceful in the last two decades, as the incidence of violent crime was fairly minimal during this period. However, in recent times the level of insecurity that had ravaged the country ranged from Boko Haram insurgency, Fulani herders, armed banditry, kidnapping for ransom, militancy, oil theft, and political/electoral violence are bruising more fears to the life of the ordinary people. Akinsowon (2021), in his recent study conducted on the root causes of conflict, found that violent conflict is compounded by hunger, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental changes, amongst others. Regrettably, crime is at its peak in Nigeria as all the country’s geopolitical zones have been affected by one form of violent conflict (Akinsowon, 2021). It is no more novel; it is rather full-time business for many Nigerians. Troubles, gruesome murders, robberies, violence, rape, cultism, ritual killings, bribery, official corruption, obtaining goods/money by pretenses, high people are kidnapping and abductions, child stealing, religious and political violence associated with a bomb blasts, and use of other sophisticated offensive weapons to destroy lives and properties (Akinsowon, 2021). These endless inhuman attitudes are enough to say that Nigeria is a crime-injected nation. It is a shame, a grossly unpardonable, that our hands are handcuffed to these sorts of crimes where human beings are treated like wolves and reptiles killed without mercy (Akinsowon, 2021).

In recent years, the quest for sustainable peace in Nigeria has taken on a new urgency, as instability and insecurity continue to negatively impact the lives of millions of Nigerians and hinder the country’s economic growth and development (McNamee & Muyangwa, 2021). More recently, from 2009 till date, there was an occurrence of violent conflicts ranging from Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-herder crisis, kidnapping for ransom, militancy, banditry, political/election violence, religious crisis, and communal crisis, amongst others which could have been averted if the Nigeria government, politicians, civil society organizations, traditional authorities, and the various security agencies had been proactive enough to gather relevant data, forecast, and analyzed these early warning signals to prevent the loss of lives and property that could have been avoided. Hence, this study appraises early warning conflict prevention as a necessity for peaceful coexistence in Nigeria

**Literature Review**

Everyone does not always share the desire to prevent collective violence: certain elites and armed groups may be determined to sustain and prolong armed conflict (Stedman 1997; Walter 2002; Greenhill & Major 2006). Yet the avoidance of mass fatalities, large-scale displacement, and devastating consequences for civilians is regarded as desirable by the international community on moral, legal, humanitarian, political, and economic grounds (Gates et al., 2016; UNU CPR 2017; Our World in Data 2021). While today widely accepted in principle, states’ commitment to conflict prevention in practice was intermittent in the twentieth century, especially during the Cold War (Lund 1996). However, since the 1990s, conflict prevention and, by extension, conflict early warning have acquired salient attention in international affairs (FEWER 1999).

Marwala & Lagazio (2011) argue that the preliminary step of conflict early warning is wholly intertwined with conflict prevention. An early warning has been held as a tool of conflict deterrence that aids in establishing the likely occurrence of violent conflicts and how to arbitrate and avert these conflicts. Early warning denotes a series of activities whose intentions are to accumulate, join together and evaluate records with the sole purpose of discovering and categorizing the preliminary indications of an upcoming predicament before the explosion. In practice, early warning entails three steps: information gathering (data collection), processing and analysis (detection), translation, and signaling (prognosis).
Scholars who have intensively studied early warning distinguish between two stages in the operationalization of this tool (Stedman, 1997; Walter, 2002; Greenhill & Major, 2006; McNamee & Muyangwa, 2021; Muggah & Whitlock, 2022). The first is gathering and evaluating information characteristic of an impending violent conflict. If the analysis reveals a looming conflict and that a timely response can make a change, the early warning process then assumes a subsequent phase: a warning is relayed to the political decision-makers who should take the necessary action to ensure the violence is prevented. The first stage involves collecting conflict early warning data; more notably, data collection enables tracking of an event or events and their effects, as well as how these events affect stakeholders. In a similar conception, Muggah & Whitlock (2022) emphasize that data collection is a vital element of an early warning system. However, they hold that the “reliability” and “validity” of the data gathered must be observed for any achievements to be met in executing early warning systems. The authors recommend that early warning systems must have the power to be systematic and investigative and must possess the institutional competence to process, calculate and make use of any incoming information. An appropriate early warning system ends up with an assessment that informs a political decision of taking or not taking action (Mwaûra & Schmeidl, 2002; Ho-Won Jeong, 2008; McNamee & Muyangwa, 2021).

Two significant elements are considered in early warning: root causes and proximate causes. Root causes include pervasive factors that form the foundation of a people and may create the pre-conditions for violence. According to Chinwokwu (2015), root causes are a deep-rooted state of affairs that have been passed on for generations, and their change is gradual. Root causes are entrenched in a people’s ways of life. Therefore, root causes are crucial for evaluating a country’s risk potential (Mwaûra & Schmeidl 2002). Proximate causes, on the other hand, are close to the actual conflict and can be the breeding site for armed conflicts. Proximate causes contribute to a climate favorable for violent conflict or advance its intensity, sometimes indicative of a deeper problem. These include an enlarged income difference, antagonism between ethnic groups, and uprisings. As such, proximate causes may transform with time and often follow a government’s capability/failure or readiness/reluctance to correct situations, for instance, a government’s failure to put up laws that enhance fairness in the political and economic spheres of an incredibly ethnically diverse society (Mwaûra & Schmeidl 2002).

The second stage involves the analysis of data coming from crisis areas. For this reason, multifaceted investigation structures are compulsory for scrutinizing conflicts involving various actors and problems. With divergent difficulties, every conflict is prone to have different chronological progressions and results. An understanding of the state of a conflict arises from exploring the background and changes in relationships between opponents. Classifying the actors in a conflict is a fundamental move preceding the comprehension of their opinions, interests, and abilities and the extent of outside support. The progression of interactions among actors and their social environment can be scrutinized in terms of temporary and enduring changes. A chronological order of events is to be made based on how the significant actors perceive the implication of every happening, particularly in a protracted social conflict (Ho-Won Jeong 2008).

Mwaûra & Schmeidl (2002) argue that information must live up to some principles; these principles, they claim, include: the data must be well timed, precise, convincing, consistent, and provable. The two authors warn that standardization is highly desirable but challenging to achieve. Nonetheless, employing a set of “family indicators” serves to simplify the task. Like-minded organizations are vital in supporting the collection and authentication of early warning information. This allows consumers of the data to judge source reliability and the authority of the analysis. Most important to remember is that information (though refined) is not an early warning. Mwaûra & Schmeidl (2002) maintain that information devoid of analysis is, as the famous adage goes, “like an orange without sunshine.” Analysis helps to fit information into a context that further enables the prediction of violent conflict. Finally, it promotes devising case scenarios and response choices that make early warning whole.

Theoretical Review

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Various theoretical perspectives could be used in explaining conflict and peacebuilding in the Nigerian context. One conceptual, theoretical framework that provides insight into the Nigerian case study is the human needs theory articulated by John Burton in the study of social conflict. Burton (1990) explains that when analyzing conflicts, one must distinguish between interests, values, and needs. In resolving conflicts, it should be understood that only interests are negotiable in the short term. At the same time, matters can only change over the long run in an atmosphere of security and nondiscrimination, and needs cannot be negotiated away under any circumstances (Burton 1990). Scholars like Carroll, Rosati, and Coate (1988) also argued that when you look at the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, both needs (identity, security, freedom) and interests (Allocation of resources, international boundaries) are involved and that even if the needs of both parties are met; the conflict will probably not be resolved. For them, resolution can only come about when both needs and interests are dealt with. However, Carroll (1988) contends that all human beings have basic needs which they seek to fulfill, and failure caused by other individuals or groups to meet these needs could lead to conflict (cited in Faleti, 2006). “So, whether the need is in solving group interest or basic needs of life, failure to address such exigencies causes conflict to emerge” (Chinwokwu 2013c).

For Burton (1990), the implications of these formulations are far-reaching. For example, it suggests that there are limits to the extent to which the human person, acting separately or within a wider ethnic or national community, can be marginalized or manipulated and that there are human developmental needs that must be satisfied and catered for by institutions if these institutions are to be stable, and if societies are to be significantly free of conflicts. To help some of their needs, he said humans require some control over their environments. If these are not met, the institutions lose support and legitimacy and confront increasing opposition. As a result, the government or political authorities, irrespective of the political structure in place, tend to react with oppression and coercion to gain the support of the ruled. This theory of needs by Burton is very relevant to the Nigerian situation, especially as it is being espoused by various militancy in the country to achieve their aims. For instance, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) used the conflict to bargain for amnesty for the group. The same gain plan is being played out by Boko Haram, whereby the government has initiated a committee to consider granting amnesty to them. But the issue is, what is the basis of conflict and insecurity in the country? The above-reviewed theory pointed at one reason or another as the basis of conflict and insecurity in Nigeria. Still, it failed to expose the veil behind the conflict – the inner struggle between the rich and the poor, the owners of production and the workers/laborers, the employer the employee, and so many other socio-economic relationships in the society. In other words, the economy plays a vital role in determining the political or social relations in society.

Marx’s conflict theory sees the economy as the infrastructure on which the superstructure of society is based. According to Marx, the struggle for survival or domination of one group over the other is historical. This is true because of a society’s scarce resources, which triggers a conflict between individuals in their struggle to have it all. This struggle for scarce resources often leads to competition, resulting in social insecurity. In other words, conflict and insecurity in Nigeria are related to the economic struggle between the haves and the have-nots. We must emphasize that this is typically the case with the Niger Delta Militants, the Boko Haram insurgency, and, more particularly, with conflicts associated with the ethnic-communal crisis in Nigeria.

**Conflict Management and the Nigerian State: Retrospective Review**

Conflict management is “the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through several measures and by working with and through the parties involved. It covers the entire area of handling conflicts positively at different stages, including those efforts made to prevent conflict by being proactive. It encompasses conflict limitation, containment, and litigation” (Best, 2007). According to Okolie (2009), “the fundamental processes involved in conflict management include grassroots community-based activities, good governance, communication, collaboration, negotiation, conciliation, mediation, arbitration, adjudication, and crisis management which at times could involve the use of law enforcement agencies to maintain the peace” (cited in Nnamani & Okpara, 2010).

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The Nigerian nation has witnessed various conflict situations since its birth as an independent state in 1960. Many conflict situations have threatened the nation’s foundation, yet providence has kept the country united and strong. There are many instances of troubled waters that the Nigerian state has carefully ferried across to the shore without its boat capsizing. According to Chinwokwu (2012c), “insecurity and social vices resulting from political and religious tensions among rivalry ethnic groups dominated the geographical landscape of the country culminating to the present state of terrorism and acts of violence being experienced.”

Awoniyi (2013) noted that “the phenomenon of conflict and its attendant effects with our day-to-day struggles over inter-locking agitations on issues like primordial ties, national resources distribution, power sharing, ethnic tolerance, social justice, and welfare should be critically examined” to fashion a road map for peaceful coexistence and harmony in Nigeria. We may thus inquire, “how has Nigeria managed its conflicts all these years to ensure the spinal cord of the Nigerian state is not broken or damaged beyond repairs.” The Nigerian state has increasingly managed conflict through military engagements, economic blockades, and blackmail. These were the conflict management strategies deployed during the Nigerian – Biafran War of 1967-1970, in addition to the total war of annihilation carried out against the Igbo nation. This war of attrition has been ongoing against the Igbo nation despite the declaration of “no victory, no vanquished” by the Nigerian state.

In ethnic and religious pluralism, Kwaja (2009) observed that the Nigerian state had managed the situation in the following ways: a. In the design and report of the population census, questions of religious or ethnic identity were downplayed, the promotion of inter-faith cooperation through the setting up of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which consists of clergies from both Christian and Muslim leaders. Currently, NIREC is co-chaired by Arch-Bishop John Onaiyekan and the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa’ad Abubakar III. The establishment of the Federal Character Commission (FCC) in the Nigerian constitution to ensure inclusivity of all the states of the federation in appointments, admission, and promotion, among others; d. The application of the principle of the North-South power-sharing arrangement. For instance, if the President comes from the North, the Vice President would no doubt come from the South and vice versa; and emphasis on the non-registration of political parties with ethnic or religious colorations so as not to heighten ethnic or religious apathy in the electoral process. Despite these, Nigerian leaders from the North have blatantly jettisoned the federal character principle and appointed Northerners to almost every office with impunity to the ratio of in favor of the North. The Nigerian state has also engaged in managing ethno-communal conflicts through military might and destruction of communities, acquisition of disputed areas, boundary adjustment, and treaties.

Early warning and Early Response Mechanism in Nigeria

The African Union (AU) established the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) to address a multitude of existing and emerging security challenges facing the continent. Essentially, the APSA is premised on preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts in Africa through the African Union’s established institutions, the Peace and Security Council, African Standby Force, Panel of the Wise, African Peace Fund, and Continental Early Warning System. Given the weaknesses in conflict and early response mechanisms in states, which have partly contributed to the continent’s susceptibility to conflicts, the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) of the APSA was designed to enhance anticipation, preparedness, and early response to conflicts across Africa (Eze and Frimpong 2021). Civil society organizations (CSOs) are recognized as strategic partners in strengthening the operationalization of the continental early warning systems at the regional and continental levels by providing early warning analysis and sharing information relevant to mitigating potential threats to peace and security. It is against this background that the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), through its strategic partnership with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the AU since 2002 and 2015, respectively, has been a critical partner in developing and operationalizing conflict early warning systems to support peace and security at the national, regional, and continental levels (Eze and Frimpong, 2021). Through the partnership, WANEP has contributed to the operationalization of ECOWARN, the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (WARN), which covers all ECOWAS member states. The
WARN works to enhance human security in West Africa by monitoring and reporting socio-political situations that could degenerate into violent and destructive conflicts and informing policymakers on options for response.

In Nigeria, on Dec 19, 2018, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD) launched its Early Warning and Early Response Situation Room in Jos, Plateau State. This mechanism involved using the Nigerian Army, Department of State Service, Nigerian police, traditional authorities, community monitors, and non-governmental organizations to be actively involved in the early warning signals before the escalation of violent conflict. Humanitarian Dialogue (2018) observed that “Early warning and early response systems remain one of the reliable safeguards against the outbreak of violent conflict in the world today, and it is for this reason that intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations, the African Union, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission have committed enormous financial and human resources into establishing mechanisms for the early detection of conflicts, the analysis of conflict trends, as well as the creation of mechanisms for preventing and responding to the outbreak of conflicts.”

Furthermore, in search for Common Ground and Community Action for Popular Participation, received funding from the US Institute for Peace to conduct a pilot project to test the use of an SMS-based conflict early warning system in the Jos region of Nigeria (Stine, 2013). The validity of each alert was verified, and key stakeholders (security, government, and NGO partners) were notified of the incident via SMS (it was urgent) or in a daily email report (Stine, 2013). The security sector stakeholders and NGO partners met every other month to analyze the messages received (Stine, 2013). An evaluation found some issues with training as some focal points initially were not reporting incidents that had occurred in their area (Stine, 2013).

**Importance of Conflict Early Warning and Response**

Conflict prevention is always less costly than dealing with a crisis regarding human life, destruction, and instability in neighboring countries. As warfare is mutating, with new security pressures and increasingly sophisticated technologies, Conflict Early Warning and Response will need to adapt to stay appropriate and address contemporary security challenges in Nigeria (Akinsowon, 2021). Early warning can be an effective instrument if sturdily linked to respondents. However, the relationship between early warning and the early response has not always been effective. Thus, strengthening this link to provide better answers to violent conflicts necessitates: Encouraging stronger relations among warner and respondents and exchanges to discuss strategies for response, Judicious and quick responses to conflict, warning, Monitoring the effect of answers to conflicts to inform policymaking and strategies A better understanding of the value-added of CEWRS among institutions, the propinquity, and worth of the interface between early warning and response mechanisms (McNamee, & Muyangwa, 2021) and designing evidence-based response instruments to respond to warnings satisfactorily. The design of nuanced response actions to consider changes in warfare's conduct. Early warning and early response systems are vital paraphernalia for conflict prevention and initiating timely responses to keep civilians safe. Therefore, organizations using early warning and early response systems across their programming are essential to building peaceful, inclusive communities. Conflict prevention is probable, but only if civil society, religious organizations, and policymakers are sensitive to early conflict indicators and synchronize an integrated response. Early warning and response systems form critical mechanisms intended to stop violence before it starts and minimize the effect of conflict on civilians.

**Findings**

The study found that there is an ineffective early response mechanism for early warning conflict prevention in Nigeria as governments cannot respond adequately to early warning signals before they become uncontrollable. Hence, the study suggests a strong synergy between early warning and early response to conflict.

**Recommendations**
The study recommends an effective relationship between early warning and early response to the conflict before it gets out of hand. Also, there should be a synergy between the traditional rulers, villagers, government, civil society organizations, and its various security architecture to work together to gather, forecast, analyze and interpret conflict data that could have led to the loss of lives of many Nigerians, properties, loss of economic livelihood as results of lack of synergies between early warning, early response to conflict resolution and management within the context of Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the Nigerian government at all levels needs to increase awareness of early warning conflict prevention and response. The government must also endeavor to gather adequate data, analyze and forecast possible conflict flash points and educate the respondents on the need to give timely, genuine information that could adequately assist government and security agencies in responding to early warning signals. Most of the violent conflicts that engulfed Nigeria in recent times, such as the Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-harder crisis, kidnapping for money, militancy, oil theft, banditry, and political/election crisis, amongst others, would have been averted if the government, politicians, traditional rulers, non-governmental organizations, and various security agencies such as the Department of State Service (DSS), Nigerian police force, Nigerian security, and civil defense corps, the Nigerian military, had adopted a strong, and effective early warning conflict prevention and response mechanism that could have persevered the deadly and unquantifiable loss of lives and property caused by these violent conflict in Nigeria.

References


