



Strengthening Early Warning Systems Through Community Evidence

By Katie Smith



**Search for
Common Ground**



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The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) is a global network of museums, historic sites and grassroots initiatives dedicated to building a more just and peaceful future through engaging communities in remembering struggles for human rights and addressing their modern repercussions. Founded in 1999, the ICSC now includes more than 400 Sites of Conscience members in 65 countries. The ICSC supports these members through seven regional networks that encourage collaboration and international exchange of knowledge and best practices.

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Cover image:

Participants at an Intergenerational Storytelling Workshop Hosted by SitesofConscience in Conakry, Guinea

INTRODUCTION

This policy paper examines how local-level documentation strengthens early warning systems for atrocity prevention by generating timely, community-sourced evidence. It argues that grassroots efforts are not merely data points but essential sensors for risk detection. A community-based approach to integrating local insights into national strategies can enhance accountability and enable faster, coordinated preventive actions. The effectiveness of local intel to inform atrocity prevention systems hinges on three pillars: localized safe spaces, established trust, and responsive systems.

SUMMARY

Building on these three pillars, this summary outlines the critical pathways required to translate local threat documentation into an operational, national framework for proactive atrocity prevention. Community members are the primary experts on their own environments. They understand the nuances of risk, the flow of informal information, and the specific actors who hold the power to mitigate or escalate tension.

Local reporting and documentation fill the “information gap” often found in international mechanisms. When intel gathering and analysis are grounded at the grassroots level, it captures both the “slow-onset” indicators, such as changes in hate speech or localized displacement, long before they escalate into mass atrocities. Because atrocities happen to people and communities, this approach relies on the unique expertise and nimbleness of people on the ground to catch and defuse early triggers. It also ensures that if

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a threat escalates beyond what a community can handle, it creates a mechanism to request the full institutional, financial, and security power of the state to back them up.

Effective atrocity prevention relies on a community's trust in the safety of reporting channels and the responsiveness of the authorities who operate them. Even the most sophisticated early warning early response (EWER) systems cannot function without the community's confidence in the safety, credibility, and responsiveness of the reporting mechanisms. Trust cannot be parachuted into a system in times of crisis, it must be built slowly over time.

When people see that the system works for them, they are more likely to use it. Too often, in fragile and conflict-prone areas, authorities only react after violence starts or ignore local tips altogether. For instance, in Nasarawa, Nigeria, communities reported to local police that they recognized warning signs that they would be attacked and requested police presence.¹ The police ignored the request and the attack happened unhindered. When communities see their expertise and urgency dismissed, they will choose alternate ways to defend themselves.

Starting with building trust through action and results makes people report risks more often. Long-term success depends on a clear track record of response. When people see their reports lead to real safety improvements, they stay involved. This cycle helps these structures become self-reliant, where residents take the lead in identifying and stopping risks in their own neighborhoods.

Documentation is most credible and effective when it is integrated into the daily fabric of community life. This requires moving away from extractive data collection toward a model of partnership. When international and national bodies align with local monitors, the resulting evidence is not only more accurate but also carries the legitimacy required to trigger early action. Ultimately, stabilizing at-risk regions requires a shift in perspective: seeing local populations not just as victims to be protected, but as the first line of defense and the most vital source of intelligence in the prevention architecture.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE CONSORTIUM

The Transitional Justice (TJ) Consortium is a global network of civil society organizations, survivors, and advocates. We believe that addressing the past is essential to building a just and peaceful future. Through documentation, truth-telling, and memorialization, the Consortium supports communities in navigating the complexities of justice and accountability, ensuring that local voices remain at the center of global human rights efforts.

CASE STUDIES

SOUTH SUDAN

Pulse Checks for Protection: Rebuilding Trust and Localized Atrocity Prevention in South Sudan's PoC Sites

This case study is based on conflict updates, project monitoring and reporting, and ongoing data collection from Search for Common Ground's ongoing project in South Sudan, "Strengthening Local Accountability and Early Warning in South Sudan."

In South Sudan, Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites are designated sanctuaries within United Nations peacekeeping bases for displaced people fleeing the war and targeted violence. Despite their designation, PoC sites in Bentiu, Bor, and Juba have been rife with human rights abuses, including gang violence, clashes over humanitarian resources, and pervasive gender-based violence (GBV) linked to cross-clan relationships, early pregnancy, and elopement. While civilians were aware of existing structures to report violations, a profound trust deficit persisted because of what happened to complaints after they were received. Authorities lacked the capacity for sensitive response, and inadequate detention facilities further eroded confidence in the ability for justice to be administered. Communities identified this lack of accountability as a primary driver of future atrocities and fundamental concern for prevention.

To bridge this gap, Search for Common Ground and local partners implemented a multi-faceted strategy designed to bridge the gap between communities and authorities through trust-building and locally-driven evidence. The approach centered, in part, on training and equipping "embedded observers" who moved away from top-down, bulky frameworks in favor of quick "pulse checks" on community dynamics. Search trained individuals to identify and trends and triggers of violence, gave them a smart phone and a form to fill out and return weekly. Search also aggregated and analyzed this on a monthly basis that was shared with regional and national government actors and stakeholders within the international community.

The embedded observers also engaged in regular meetings with existing peace committees and community leaders to develop appropriate responses. These dialogues brought all the actors together, allowing embedded observers, peace committee members, and state authorities to tackle structural and complex challenges. For instance, in Bor, the Town Mayor and Commissioner joined the platform and were able to put by-laws in place to manage gang violence. In Bentiu, these dialogues led to measures that helped to reduce early and forced marriages. Based on the data collected by the observers, since the project's inception, the percentage of people who feel safe walking alone in their communities has risen from 60% to 92%, and the sense of empowerment among residents to effectively prevent atrocities has jumped from 70% to 91%.

CASE STUDIES

KENYA

Digital Early Warning, Physical Response: Integrating Social Media Listening into Kenya's Election Security Architecture

This case study is based on the conflict scans, reports, and evaluations of the Uchaguzi Bila Balaa project.²

In coastal Kenya, the convergence of deep-seated mistrust in government, highly securitized counterterrorism operations, and a surge in digital hate speech created a volatile environment as the 2022 elections approached. Traditional and national-level accountability mechanisms were insufficient to prevent violence, where law enforcement frequently criminalized young men based on their presence alone. Formal reporting could be dangerous. Seeking help from authorities could lead to immediate victimization or arrest.

Young people were central lynchpins for curbing potential election-related violence. The project gave them a safe way to voice frustrations and take action. Search for Common Ground worked to train youth mediators to spot rising tensions and step in before things escalated - online and offline. Through a collaboration with peace and tech organization, Build Up, these youth mediators partnered with "social media listeners" in each county who tracked misinformation and hate speech across social media platforms, like Facebook, TikTok, and private WhatsApp groups. Through a collaboration with Build Up, the teams monitored over 3,000 TikTok videos and 90,000 Facebook posts with targeted keyword scanning rooted in local context knowledge.

Together these mediators were able to flag content likely to incite conflict and respond through online reporting channels and through networks in the communities themselves to ensure that online rhetoric didn't spark offline violence. Trained mediators at the village level respond to the trends and triggers they can manage and refer any they cannot to government authorities. Those that are beyond their abilities to manage, like election violence or national hate speech trends, are funneled into "Referral Consultations" with national commissions, such as Kenya's National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) or the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). This ensures top-level authorities can enact solutions, change rules, or deploy resources preventatively based on real-time grassroots data. Through all efforts, conflict mitigation became highly effective, with monitors identifying and resolving almost 300 conflicts that top-down, public frameworks for violence prevention would have entirely missed.

CASE STUDIES

NIGERIA

Building a Prevention Pipeline from the Ground Up: Institutionalizing Multi-Level Security Architectures in Nigeria

This case study is based on conflict scans, reporting, and evaluation documents across Search for Common Ground's programs in Northern Nigeria between 2016 and 2026, including the Contributing to the Mitigation of Conflict over natural resources between farmer and herder communities in Adamawa state, Nigeria (COMITAS) and COMITAS II project.³

In Nigeria, multiple forms of violence overlap, intertwine, and reinforce one another. Across the northern states, localized disputes over access to land and water, crop destruction and cattle rustling escalate into deadly ethno-religious retaliatory attacks in the absence of accountability. Expanding and increasingly sophisticated banditry and criminal enterprises, fueled by impunity, proliferation of small arms, and high cattle prices also threaten the safety of Nigerians. At the community level, atrocities rarely erupt without warning and are often preceded by distinct flashpoints. Government and security actors have been unable to manage the threats and public trust in them remains fragile.

For well over a decade, Search for Common Ground has been building networks of conflict reporters, community response networks, and local government area (LGA) and state level dialogue platforms to identify and mitigate risks for violence. This pipeline transformed community-sourced information into wider policy action, recognizing that many drivers of violence in Nigeria, such as large-scale resource competition and climate-driven migration, originate at the state or national level yet manifest primarily as local intercommunal clashes.

For example, local conflict reporters systematically recorded the everyday flashpoints that trigger violence. In one state, "night grazing" and unsupervised youth herders managing cattle herds led to trampled crops and lost livelihoods that then sparked tit-for-tat revenge attacks in the absence of compensation and accountability. Local monitors provided the granular data to record the trend and then continually fed in real-time observations of escalating tensions and potential flashpoints. These "pulse checks" were shared with the LGA and state-level platforms to provide acute and structural interventions. Local traditional leaders were tapped to negotiate compensation for farmers and institute bans on night grazing and unsupervised youth herding.

By cultivating these platforms over years with leaders who command both deep communal trust and the functional capacity to mobilize government responses, this multi-level approach creates a two-way flow where local grievances inform broader institutional strategies and wider state responses are effectively grounded in community reality.⁴

KEY FINDINGS

The following findings are based on research from this paper and the included case studies. They show how real prevention relies on trust built over years with local partners, not rushed cooperation during an emergency. Simple, community-led reporting catches early warning signs that big, top-down systems often miss. Connecting local intelligence to state, national, or international systems requires a long-term commitment to build mechanisms that are grounded in local reality and demonstrate actual results.

- ➔ **Localized expertise is non-negotiable.** Community members possess an intimate understanding of local dynamics and can forge community trust that external monitors cannot replicate. They identify “micro-signals” of risk that precede formal violence.
- ➔ **Specialized spaces (online and offline) offer the safety needed to discuss sensitive topics.** Effective atrocity prevention relies on a reporting architecture embedded within the trusted, everyday spaces, such as tea rooms, social media groups, youth hangouts, cultural exhibitions, market meet-ups, radio call-in shows, and religious discussion groups, where residents naturally gather and feel secure. Identifying and using these safe spaces as methods for intel gathering allows all community members to share sensitive intelligence without fear of retaliation. An approach that focuses on trust first empowers residents as active participants in their own protection and fosters the intergroup confidence needed to de-escalate violence.
- ➔ **Trust cannot be parachuted into a crisis.** Successful documentation efforts are dependent on long-term partnerships and social capital built over multiple years. Social capital can function as a transferrable asset. When a community trusts the individual or institution’s integrity in one sector, that credibility can be bridged to new initiatives. Early Warning Early Response (EWER) systems or documentation efforts led by unknown entities often leads to silence or misinformation.

- ➔ **Nimble, locally-driven reporting methods offer more real time analysis in fragile and dynamic contexts.** Methods like the [Embedded Observer Approach](#) move away from top-down, bulky, and massive frameworks for assessment and allow for locally-driven, quick pulse checks on what is happening within communities in a way that better informs program interventions, who needs to be involved, and what is working versus what is not.
- ➔ **Prevention must precede crisis.** High-functioning early warning systems require years of structural development. We must extend the “prevention timeline,” building the infrastructure for reporting during periods of relative stability. Waiting for the onset of atrocities to implement mechanisms ensures they will be viewed with suspicion and fail to protect the vulnerable.

SET OF RECOMMENDATIONS

⋮ To move toward a more resilient atrocity prevention framework, stakeholders should adopt the following:

Practitioners and Civil Society

- ➔ **Center the cultivation of trusted relationships at the heart of risk identification and mitigation.** These systems must be built on a foundation of deep-rooted trust, ensuring they remain as nimble and dynamic as the communities they serve. Bolstering local networks with national or international support creates a responsive framework capable of identifying and mitigating risks in real time.
- ➔ **Design context-specific reporting tracks.** Security strategies must recognize that a “one-size-fits-all” reporting tool is ineffective. Strategies should include specific protocols to ensure all community members are able to report risks in spaces where they already feel safe.
- ➔ **Support multi-level mechanisms that integrate grassroots evidence into high-level decision making.** Create or support formal, multi-level platforms where community-sourced evidence informs policy and response considerations at state and national levels.

Donors and Diplomats

- ➔ **Build trust and capacity when things are “stable.”** Effective atrocity prevention and EWER networks rely fundamentally on community trust, a currency that cannot be minted during a crisis. Speed is essential in times of crisis, but systems to generate timely and credible risk identification and mitigation take years to build. Investment should be directed toward building documentation capacity during “quiet” periods, allowing for the organic growth of trust and reporting protocols.
- ➔ **Invest in agile, real-time reporting methods.** In highly dynamic and fragile contexts, support data collection methods that reduce the burden on grassroots communities and give a more accurate depiction of risks in real time. Support methods such as the Embedded Observer Approach that empower community members to lead the identification and mitigation of local threats, supported by multi-level framework capable of mobilizing coordinated interventions.
- ➔ **Ensure that real time updates and practitioner experience are informing programming decisions.** Build in flexibility to programs and mandate moments of meaningful reflection, creating incentives and safety for implementers to share in a transparent manner lessons learned and best practices.
- ➔ **Engage more, not less in crisis moments.** Ensure that humanitarian and nonhumanitarian support continues to support the people at risk of violence in crisis moments. Ensure local organizations are able to access resources and support to continue critical functions of early warning and protection in moments of crisis.

National Government

- ➔ **Replicate structures that are working and establish clear, layered escalation protocols.** Absorb and support functioning systems of early warning and response that is backed by a national buy-in to manage a reliable structural pipeline where verified local data automatically triggers responses at different levels of government.

COMMUNITY EVIDENCE SAVES LIVES

LOCAL DOCUMENTATION STRENGTHENS EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS AND PREVENTS ATROCITIES:

Built on Three Pillars



LOCALIZED SAFE SPACES

People share sensitive information in trusted places – online and offline – where they feel safe and heard.



ESTABLISHED TRUST

Long-term relationships and track record of responsiveness build confidence to report risks early.



RESPONSIVE SYSTEMS

Information leads to a timely, appropriate action and accountability at every level.

THE PREVENTION PIPELINE:

From Community to Action



COMMUNITY INTELLIGENCE

Community members observe, document, and report early signs of risk ("micro-signals").



LOCAL ANALYSIS & VERIFICATION

Trusted local monitors analyze and verify information through quick, ongoing "pulse checks."



MULTI-LEVEL ESCALATION

Verified information is shared through clear channels to the right authorities at every level.



COORDINATED RESPONSES

Authorities and communities act together – addressing risks before violence escalates.



SAFER COMMUNITIES

Risks are mitigated, trust is strengthened, and communities are empowered to prevent atrocities.

When This System Works:



WARNINGS ARE EARLIER.



RESPONSES ARE FASTER AND BETTER TARGETED.



COMMUNITIES AND AUTHORITIES BUILD STRONGER TRUST.



ATROCITIES ARE PREVENTED AND LIVES ARE SAVED.



Communities are not just sources of data – they are the first line of defense.



Invest in people.
Trust local evidence.
Prevent atrocities.

Evidence from the ground. Action at every level.
Prevention that saves lives.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

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2. Dyrstad, Karin and Solveig Hillesund, "Explaining Support for Political Violence: Grievance and Perceived Opportunity," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 9 (2020): 1724–53,
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002720909886>.
3. "Final Evaluation: Engaging youth and community leaders to prevent mass atrocities in the Central African Republic," Search for Common Ground, March 2018, https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final_Evaluation-Engaging_youth_and_community_leaders_to_prevent_mass_atrocities_in_CAR-March_2018.pdf.
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7. Search for Common Ground. Polarization, Social Cohesion, and Atrocities: Approaches for a Safer World. Washington, DC: Search for Common Ground, 2023. https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Polarization-Social-Cohesion-Atrocities_FINAL.pdf.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Search for Common Ground. *Criminality and Reprisal Attacks in Nigeria's Middle Belt*. Washington, DC: Search for Common Ground, 2017. https://documents.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Criminality-Reprisal-Attack_FINAL.pdf.
- 2 Bodhi Global Analysis. *Final Evaluation Report: Uchaguzi Bila Balaa*. Washington, DC: Connexus, 2023. <https://cnxus.org/resource/final-evaluation-reportuchaguzi-bila-balaa/>.
- 3 Internal Search for Common Ground reports and conflict scans; Search for Common Ground. *COMITAS Adamawa Final Conflict Assessment*. Washington, DC: Search for Common Ground, 2022. <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Final-SFCG-COMITAS-Adamawa-Final-Conflict-Assessment-2022.pdf>.
- 4 The Early Warning Early Response system in Nigeria links civil society, government, and security forces to use each group's unique position and skills to identify and respond to emerging security threats. In each community, Community Response Networks (CRNs) meet regularly to identify security threats and agree on appropriate responses. This might include asking a citizens' group to act or to refer a case to the civilian or military authorities (Police, neighborhood watch groups, military, the Drug Enforcement Agency, etc.). The community then holds regular "Community Security Architecture Dialogues" and "Peace Architecture Dialogues" at the Local Government Area and state level respectively, which include government actors, aimed at providing layers of information sharing and accountability for response or non-response.

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is the only global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives that connects past struggles to today's movements for human rights.

We turn memory into action.



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