

## **From Alert to Action: Lessons Learned on Early Warning and Early Response Mechanisms to Prevent Violence in Northeast Nigeria**

### **Summary**

Last year, over 2,000 civilians in Nigeria were targeted and killed by organized armed actors.<sup>1</sup> Early warning and early response (EWER) mechanisms seek to harness the shared intelligence between communities, security actors, and government to identify and address imminent threats to ensure civilian protection. Between 2015 and 2019, Search for Common Ground (Search) coordinated such a mechanism in Northeast Nigeria, where civilians are threatened by the Boko Haram insurgency and inter-communal conflicts. This brief uses this case study to show how EWER systems can be crucial to protecting civilians in conflict-affected areas.

**Key Findings:** When implemented correctly, EWER systems can amplify community members' agency to create proactive solutions to prevent violence. While increasingly sophisticated communication and data analytical technologies help detect and share early warning signs of violence, the reliance on these innovations should not negate the need for local people-to-people engagement to transform conflicts and support preventive actions. Search's EWER project was centered around strengthening pre-existing community institutions to prevent violence. In this system, local community leaders played critical roles: beyond solely collecting and sharing data with relevant authorities, they also led timely and effective responses to signs of violence. While this model was designed to address conditions specific to Northeast Nigeria, it nonetheless provides generalizable lessons and recommendations for how violence prevention and citizen protection can be operationalized elsewhere.

### **What Worked in Nigeria**

Since the Boko Haram insurgency began over a decade ago, tens of thousands of people have been killed in the Northeastern states of Adamawa and Borno.<sup>2</sup> In addition to high levels of civilian harm due to terrorist violence, the continued instability that has resulted has created numerous other challenges, including pervasive criminality, disputes between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities, and inter-communal conflicts which took on ethno-religious characteristics. This nexus of conflicts creates additional flashpoints for violence, further increasing threats to civilians.

Between July 2015 and July 2019, Search received support from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor to develop and facilitate an EWER system in 12 Local Government Areas (LGAs) across Adamawa and Borno states. The system was built around three levels of committees: a **state-level committee** for each of the two states, an **LGA-level committee** for each of the 12 targeted LGAs, and a **community-level committee** for each of the 55 chosen communities across

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<sup>1</sup> Non-state actors were responsible for over 98% of these attacks. Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre, and Joakim Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data." *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no.5 (2010): 651- 660

<sup>2</sup> "Boko Haram in Nigeria," Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations. Last modified March 12, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/boko-haram-nigeria>

the 12 LGAs.<sup>3</sup> Committees included a diverse range of stakeholders: traditional, religious, youth, and women leaders; security forces (police, military, and civilian militias); and representatives of other government bodies, such as the National Human Rights Commission. The purpose was to build on each participants' unique capabilities and relationships to respond to emerging security threats in a holistic manner. During committee meetings, members were responsible for identifying potential triggers of violence and proposing action plans to address them, including through using conflict transformation and threat identification skills taught at Search training sessions. Meetings also served as accountability checks to ensure that actions plans were implemented. Search's experience coordinating these mechanisms illuminated four important lessons on what makes EWER systems effective:

- 1. Early warning signs and proposed solutions were almost always identified locally or with significant local input.** Early warning signs within communities were typically identified and discussed first at the community-level committees. Because local residents understood their communities' specific needs, they were often the most suitable first responders to address issues related to violence. For instance, in October 2018, a farmer in the Muna community of Jere LGA reported to his community-level committee that two unfamiliar women wearing long gowns had been frequently passing through his farm, and that he suspected that they were Boko Haram operatives. The farmer's tip led to the women's arrest, after which it was discovered that they had indeed come from the Boko Haram stronghold of Sambisa and had hidden bombs under their gowns. In some cases, community-level committees might forward early warning information to the LGA's EWER committee if the issues were beyond the community-level committee's capacity to resolve, and the LGA-level committee sometimes then forwarded the problems to the state-level committee if state-level actions or legislations were needed. Thus, each level was linked vertically, enabling the perspectives of those directly affected by the problems in communities to inform the responses at the LGA and state level. This ensured that responses were nuanced and had the buy-in of many stakeholders.
- 2. EWER committees had the flexibility to address both short- and long-term causes of violent conflict, including through non-securitized responses.** The EWER project's definition for early warning signs was deliberately broad. Committee members were trained to identify acute signs of likely violence, such as an impending insurgent raid. Crucially, they were also trained to identify slow-burning trends that can cause social discord within a community and reduce its long-run resilience against opportunistic actors who advocate for the use of violence, such as arms trading, widespread unemployment, and food shortages among at-risk groups. Proactively finding solutions for such problems is a critical longer-term strategy for protecting civilians.

For instance, leading up to the February 2019 federal elections, groups of young unemployed men began meeting at set times and locations in Jiddari community. Concerned that the groups might engage in crime or electoral violence, the Jiddari committee members pooled their own funds and worked with business owners to create temporary jobs for the youth, thus taking the men off the streets at a critical juncture. One community leader commented that some youth even asked "me for more jobs, to be more involved so they can help [their families]." In Jambutu community in mid-2017, locals began blaming IDPs for clogging sewers with waste products and polluting the area. The LGA-level committee intervened by mediating between representatives from all parties of the disputes. The representatives eventually launched a joint community sanitation project to

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<sup>3</sup> In the project, these different levels of committees were called Peace Architecture Dialogues (PAD), Community Security Architecture Dialogues (CSAD), and Community Response Networks (CRN), respectively.

clear the drainage system and restructure it to reduce future blockages, averting what could have escalated into intercommunal violence. Both examples demonstrate that responses to potential violence can be effective long before the eleventh hour.

- 3. Committee meetings helped build trust and cooperation between the different stakeholders involved.** Meetings provided members with the initial time and space to develop cooperative relationships with stakeholders with whom they rarely interacted. Additionally, government institutions such as the police and the drug enforcement agency often used these committees to solicit honest feedback from community members. Subsequently, committee members gradually became more comfortable calling on each other to help resolve problems *whenever* they emerged. While committees only met monthly or semi-monthly, individual members often took the initiative to identify and resolve problems outside regular meetings. For instance, through working as part of EWER committees, one local militia, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), was able to reform its practices to reduce corruption and excess violence. One CJTF sector secretary who has been a member since the group's inception explains that the CJTF was initially uncoordinated, resulting in habitual human rights violations. Because of his engagement with other community organizations in EWER committees, he has been able to improve his sector's internal culture so that senior leaders and rank-and-file are more sensitive to human rights. This in turn helped make the CJTF a trusted source of security in several communities.<sup>4</sup> While the use of non-state armed actors for violence prevention is not without risks, the EWER network created one of the few accountability mechanisms for the CJTF's actions and ensured some oversight from communities and government actors.
- 4. Initiatives to improve relationships between security actors and civilians were critical to violence prevention.** Despite aiming to proactively address the core drivers of violent conflict, committee members nonetheless faced several cases in which they identified an imminent risk of violence from groups such as Boko Haram. Committee members often addressed such cases by elevating this warning information to state or civilian security forces who could then respond through measures such as arresting suspects when sufficient evidence was available or engaging the army, who might launch an offensive operation against an insurgent hideout.

Crucially, the EWER system held security actors accountable to community members and government actors in new and more consistent ways. In Jere LGA, where the police had been collecting illegal bribes from local vendors, community leaders informed their police counterparts in community-level committees about the issue as it undermined the trust between police and community that is necessary for effective violence prevention. The police division chief subsequently penalized all personnel caught collecting bribes, significantly reducing the practice. Similarly, an LGA-level committee member who is also a lawyer with Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission recounts that the LGA-level and state-level committee meetings were valuable opportunities to present military commanders with evidence that their troops had committed human rights abuses in Borno state.<sup>5</sup> Commanders then investigated and sanctioned their personnel as appropriate. Communities' ability to hold these forces accountable via the committees was critical to building the trust needed for collective security: among people who

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Civilian Joint Task Force leader, September 2019

<sup>5</sup> Interview with National Human Rights Commission official, September 2019

faced threats from insurgents, the percentage of those who chose to report warning signs to authorities nearly tripled, from 15% to 42%, over the course of 2017 to 2019.<sup>6</sup>

### **Recommendations for Future EWER Initiatives**

The evaluation of Search’s EWER project in Nigeria found that civilians in target communities felt that the EWER committees helped improve citizen security and social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> Based on the lessons learned from this project, Search provides three recommendations for implementers designing EWER systems to prevent violence against civilians:

- 1. Integrate a diverse range of stakeholders and approaches to violence prevention, at both local and state levels.** By being as representative as possible and including all important institutions, groups, sectors, and levels of administration, EWER systems will be more equipped to tackle early warning signs of violence holistically. Rather than relying solely on securitized responses, systems that link citizens with government and security actors will be able to use other tools, such as religious engagement and mediation. Having systems in place at the local and state levels will ensure that information tracks day-to-day, local-level risks as well as those at a higher strategic level and enables multiple types of response.
- 2. Leverage existing institutions and networks by promoting synergies and coordination between them.** Even in fragile or conflict-affected contexts, there are likely to be individuals, groups, and institutions who are already promoting and building peace. Rather than overly relying on technological innovations or creating wholly new structures, where possible EWER systems should prioritize empowering and developing collaboration between existing institutions. In the Northeast Nigeria context, traditional leaders were already highly trusted by their communities; by leveraging this preexisting relationship, the EWER system was able to obtain the buy-in of community members and was able to improve relationships between communities and more formal government institutions. This strategy ensures that violence prevention becomes organically integrated into people’s and communities’ daily lives.
- 3. Ensure that security actors are held accountable to the communities they serve.** EWER systems will have limited efficacy if participants do not feel mutually accountable to producing results, ensuring transparency, and upholding human rights. This is especially true when there is a lack of trust between communities and security actors. When the use of force is necessary, it is crucial that force be applied in a manner that is sensitive to the needs and demands of local communities. Security sector accountability to citizens can be achieved through a number of initiatives, including civilian complaint mechanisms, community advisory boards on early responses to violence, joint planning of programs with community leaders, and more extensive security sector reforms that create additional accountability measures.

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<sup>6</sup> Horacio R. Trujillo, *Early Warning / Early Response Mechanisms in Northern Nigeria: Final Evaluation Report, October 2019*, (Washington D.C.: Search for Common Ground, 2019), 28.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Garuba and Chinendu Monye, *Baseline Evaluation of Early Warning/Early Response Mechanisms in Northern Nigeria – Phase III*, (Washington D.C.: Search for Common Ground, 2017), 28.