
DESIGNING A COMMUNITY-BASED DIGITAL EARLY WARNING AND PEACEBUILDING FRAMEWORK FOR MISINFORMATION- DRIVEN CONFLICT PREVENTION: A CASE STUDY OF LAFENWA, ABEOKUTA NORTH, OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of social media has changed the way communities receive, interpret and share information during periods of tension. While digital platforms can support early warning, communication and peacebuilding, they can also accelerate misinformation, fear and mistrust. This paper develops a community-based digital early warning and peacebuilding framework for Lafenwa, Abeokuta North, Ogun State, Nigeria, where recurrent violence and the rapid circulation of unverified information through WhatsApp and other social media platforms have contributed to community anxiety and tension. The study adopts a qualitative design-based case study approach based on analysis of a campaign concept card, an ethical stress-test and a digital peacebuilding practitioner brief developed for the Lafenwa intervention. The analysis identifies four core requirements for an effective intervention: verified information, community-based early warning, responsible digital communication, and integration of online and offline engagement. The study further identifies platform dependency, digital exclusion, privacy risks, misinformation, harmful content and possible weaponisation of digital communication as major risks. Based on these findings, a Community-Based Digital Early Warning and Peacebuilding Framework (CDEWPF) is proposed. The framework positions WhatsApp as a communication channel rather than the peacebuilding system itself and places community ownership, verification, inclusion, protection and early response at its centre. The paper argues that digital peacebuilding interventions in local communities should be socio-technical, conflict-sensitive and community-owned rather than technology-driven.

KEYWORDS: Digital Peacebuilding, Early Warning, Misinformation, WhatsApp, Conflict Prevention, Community Resilience

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has become an important part of how communities understand and respond to conflict. Mobile phones and social media platforms allow information to move rapidly across geographical and social boundaries. This creates opportunities for peacebuilding because communities can communicate concerns, circulate peace messages, document incidents and coordinate responses. At the same time, the same technologies can increase conflict when rumours, misinformation, inflammatory messages and unverified reports circulate faster than reliable information.

Recent scholarship increasingly recognises this dual character of digital technologies. Digital peacebuilding includes activities such as social media monitoring, crowdsourced early warning, digital dialogue and online peace advocacy, but digital technologies can also reproduce or intensify existing social and political tensions.

Nigeria provides an important context for examining this relationship. Research on social media and peacebuilding in Nigeria indicates that platforms can support communication, peace messaging and early identification of conflict indicators, while simultaneously creating risks associated with misinformation, hate speech, polarisation and digital exclusion.

The problem becomes particularly important at the community level, where residents often depend on informal communication networks during security incidents. In Lafenwa, Abeokuta North, Ogun State, the problem identified by the intervention is not limited to violence itself. The circulation of rumours and unverified messages through WhatsApp, Facebook and other platforms can generate fear and mistrust before facts are established. Residents may respond by closing businesses early, restricting movement and withdrawing from normal community activities.

The intervention developed for Lafenwa therefore approaches peacebuilding as both a communication and early-warning challenge. Its theory of change proposes that providing residents, youth groups, community leaders and other stakeholders with access to verified information and channels for reporting concerns can help shift community dynamics from fear, misinformation and mistrust towards responsible digital engagement, early response and peaceful coexistence.

The selected digital peacebuilding mode is **Early Warning and Documentation**. This was selected because the identified gap concerns timely, trusted and accurate information when tensions begin to rise.

1.1 Problem Statement

The central problem addressed in this study is the absence of a trusted, community-based mechanism for receiving, verifying and responding to information during periods of tension in Lafenwa. Rapid circulation of unverified information can transform uncertainty into fear and fear into community tension.

The challenge is therefore not simply technological. It is socio-technical: the effectiveness of a digital peacebuilding intervention depends on the relationship between technology, community structures, trust, information practices, power and conflict dynamics.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to develop a community-based digital early warning and peacebuilding framework for reducing misinformation-driven tension and strengthening peaceful communication in Lafenwa, Abeokuta North, Ogun State.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the information and communication challenges associated with conflict-related rumours in Lafenwa;
2. assess the suitability and risks of WhatsApp as a digital peacebuilding tool;
3. identify ethical, inclusion and conflict-sensitivity requirements for a community digital early-warning intervention;
4. develop a community-based digital early warning and peacebuilding framework; and
5. propose implementation and evaluation principles for the framework.

1.4 Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. What communication and information challenges contribute to fear and mistrust during periods of tension in Lafenwa?
2. How suitable is WhatsApp for supporting community-based digital early warning and peacebuilding?
3. What risks must be addressed when using digital platforms for community conflict prevention?
4. What elements should constitute a community-based digital early warning and peacebuilding framework?

5. How can online and offline mechanisms be integrated to promote inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Peacebuilding

Digital peacebuilding refers broadly to the use of digital technologies and practices to support conflict prevention, mitigation, dialogue, peacebuilding and social cohesion. Contemporary scholarship cautions against viewing technology as an independent solution to conflict. Instead, digital technologies are embedded within existing political, social and institutional relationships.

Hirblinger's recent work similarly argues for a socio-technical understanding of digital peacebuilding rather than concentrating exclusively on individual technologies. The approach recognises digital tools as part of broader social and political systems.

This perspective is important for the Lafenwa intervention because WhatsApp is not itself the peacebuilding mechanism. It is a communication channel operating within relationships between residents, community leaders and other stakeholders.

2.2 Social Media, Misinformation and Conflict

Social media can accelerate the spread of information during conflict. However, speed does not necessarily correspond to accuracy. False or misleading information can create perceptions of danger before reliable information becomes available.

Research and practitioner literature have identified misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and divisive narratives as significant digital conflict risks in Nigeria. Mercy Corps' work on Nigeria's digital peacebuilding ecosystem emphasises that online threats interact with offline conflict drivers and require multi-stakeholder responses.

A recent study specifically examining WhatsApp and conflict resolution in Nigeria concludes that the platform can contribute to peace journalism and reconciliation, but that its usefulness depends on understanding both its advantages and constraints.

2.3 Digital Early Warning

Early warning seeks to identify indicators of potential conflict and facilitate action before violence escalates. Digital technologies can strengthen this process by enabling faster information collection, communication and dissemination.

Research on WhatsApp-based early warning systems has demonstrated the potential for public participation in conflict-prevention information systems. Social media can also

provide information about grievances and emerging tensions that may contribute to conflict prevention when responsibly interpreted.

However, early warning should not be equated with collecting large quantities of digital data. Critical-reflexive scholarship warns that technology-driven approaches can marginalise community voices when data collection and automated systems become more important than participatory engagement.

2.4 Local Ownership and Inclusion

Effective peacebuilding requires attention to local ownership. Digital interventions can unintentionally privilege people who possess smartphones, internet access, digital literacy and social influence.

The Lafenwa intervention explicitly recognises this limitation. Although WhatsApp is widely used among the target audience, elderly people, poorer households and residents without smartphones may be excluded. The proposed response is to combine digital communication with physical community engagement and trusted local networks.

This approach is consistent with emerging African digital peacebuilding research emphasising localisation and the integration of digital practices with community structures.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a **qualitative design-based case study approach**. It was designed to analyse an intervention concept and develop a practical framework rather than to measure the statistical prevalence of misinformation in the Lafenwa population.

The case study is Lafenwa, Abeokuta North, Ogun State, Nigeria.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis was based primarily on two project documents developed for the intervention: Campaign Concept Card and Stress-Test; and

 STRESS-TEST TABLE PeaceHub Lafenwa: Using Digital Tools for Early Warning and Peaceful Communication  Our community. Our information. Our peace.			
STRESS-TEST QUESTION	YOUR HONEST RESPONSE	IDENTIFIED RISK TO YOUR CAMPAIGN	SPECIFIC MITIGATION YOU WILL APPLY
 Q1: Does this intervention prioritise community safety over digital reach?	YES	Pressure to share information quickly to reach more people may lead to sharing unverified information, putting people at risk.	- Accuracy and verification before sharing. - Goal is safety, trust and early response, not likes, shares or numbers.
 Q2: Have I genuinely considered whose narrative I am centring and whose I am marginalising?	PARTIALLY	Voices of elderly people, women, vulnerable groups and those without digital access may be left out. Focus may be on young and active social media users only.	- Engage women, elderly and vulnerable groups through leaders and meetings. - Use offline channels to include those without digital access.
 Q3: Does the power dynamic serve the community or serve my organisation?	YES	Project may unintentionally focus on organisational visibility instead of real community needs.	- Community at the centre of decisions. - Success measured by improved trust, peace and early response, not visibility.
 Q4: Am I prepared for this campaign to be captured, distorted, or weaponised by bad actors?	PARTIALLY	Bad actors may misuse messages, screenshots or information to create fear, target individuals or mislead residents.	- Clear communication rules and moderation. - Do not share sensitive personal details. - Train admins to respond quickly to harmful content.
 Q5: If a synthetic media version of my content were created and circulated, what damage could it do?	PARTIALLY	Fake videos, images or messages using the campaign identity can mislead residents, damage trust and increase fear or tension.	- Educate participants about synthetic media and misinformation. - Use official channels for all updates. - Encourage residents to verify before accepting or sharing information.
 REVIEW AND ADJUSTMENT TO CAMPAIGN CONCEPT CARD: The stress-test shows the need to strengthen inclusion of elderly people, women and vulnerable residents and to protect participants from risks online. The Campaign Concept Card has been adjusted to include stronger offline engagement, community ownership and clearer protection measures.			

1. Digital Peacebuilding Practitioner Brief.

The documents contain the community problem definition, target audience, theory of change, proposed digital tool, risk assessment, ethical stress-test, digital peacebuilding mode selection and mitigation strategies.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The documents were analysed thematically around five dimensions:

- Conflict and communication dynamics;
- Digital tool suitability;
- Misinformation and information verification;
- Ethical and participant risks; and
- Community ownership and inclusion.

The findings were then synthesised into a proposed framework.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Because the study does not report interviews, surveys or experimental intervention with human participants, it does not claim primary human-subject findings. The manuscript

therefore distinguishes between **document-derived findings**, **conceptual interpretation** and **proposed intervention components**.

Particular attention was given to privacy, protection of vulnerable participants, digital exclusion, misinformation, harmful content and possible weaponisation of campaign material. These concerns were explicitly identified in the project's ethical stress-test.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

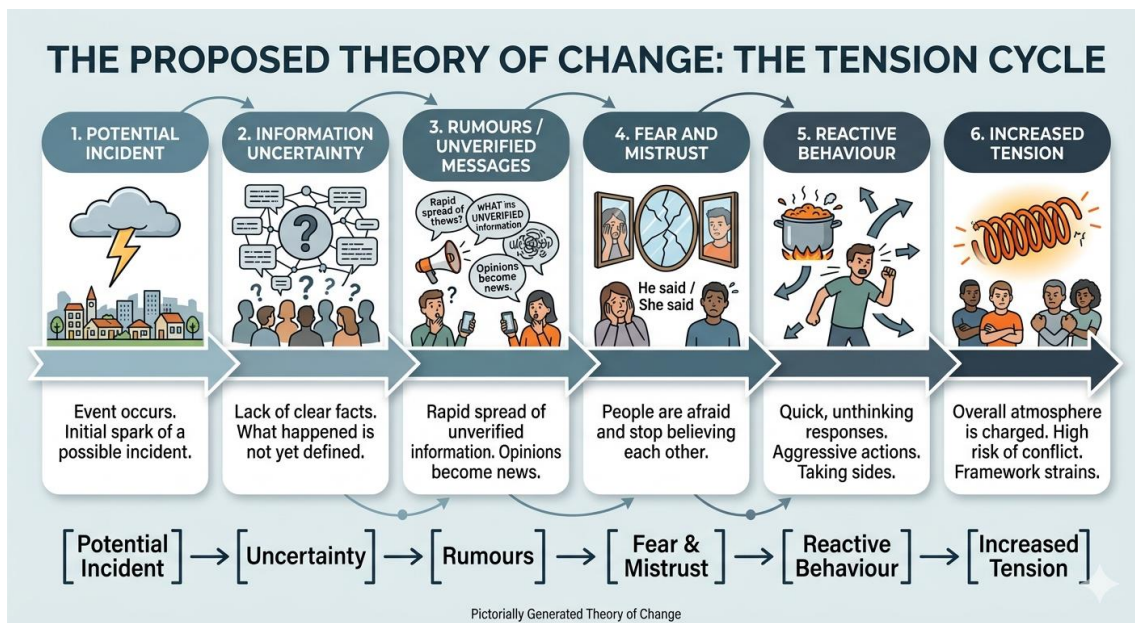
4.1 Finding One: The Information Problem is a Peacebuilding Problem

The analysis indicates that the core problem is not violence alone. The circulation of unverified information can amplify fear, mistrust and uncertainty. The project therefore identifies information quality and communication as part of the conflict dynamic.

This is significant because conventional community security interventions may focus primarily on the physical incident. The Lafenwa approach instead identifies the information environment surrounding an incident as an intervention point.

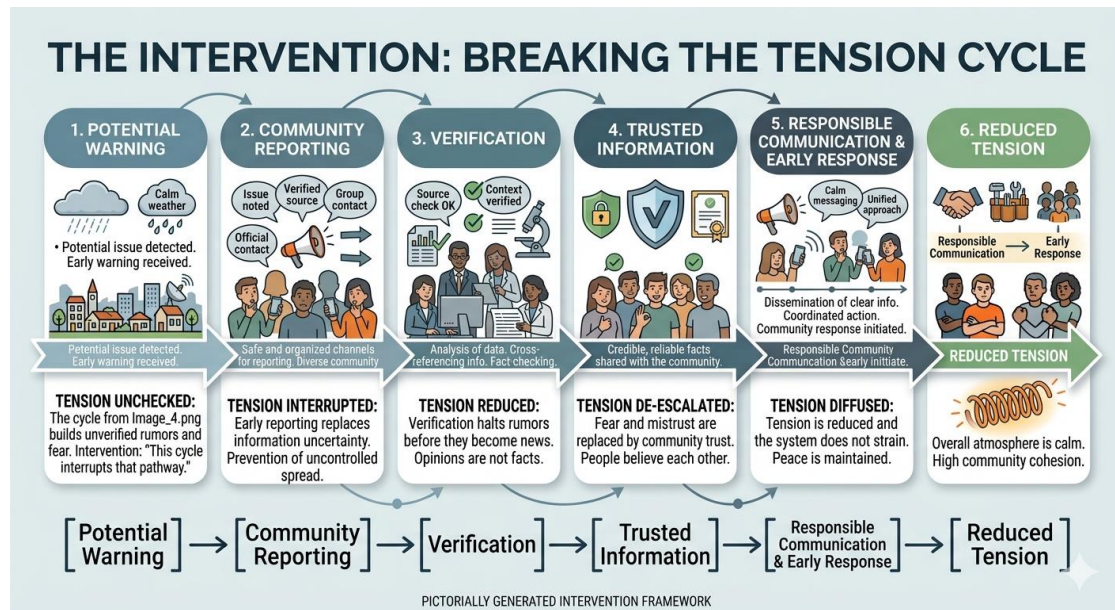
The proposed theory of change is consequently:

Potential incident → information uncertainty → rumours/unverified messages → fear and mistrust → reactive behaviour → increased tension



The intervention seeks to interrupt this cycle:

Potential warning → community reporting → verification → trusted information → responsible communication → early response → reduced tension.



4.2 Finding Two: WhatsApp is Appropriate but Not Sufficient

The assessment found that WhatsApp has strong practical advantages. It is already familiar to many residents and does not require the introduction of a completely new communication technology.

However, the evaluation also identified important limitations.

Dimension	Assessment	Implication
Access and equity	Pass with limitations	Maintain offline channels
Power and control	Fail with safeguard	Avoid platform dependency
Conflict sensitivity	Fail with safeguard	Establish verification and moderation
Fit for purpose	Pass	Use for communication and early warning
Sustainability	Pass with contingency plan	Build community ownership
Participant risk	Fail with safeguard	Protect identity and sensitive information

The original tool evaluation reached essentially this conclusion: WhatsApp is useful because it already exists in the community, but the intervention must not depend entirely on it.

This finding is consistent with broader research that cautions against technological solutionism in digital peacebuilding.

4.3 Finding Three: Verification Must Come Before Amplification

The campaign's core message is:

“Verify before you share, because responsible information sharing helps keep Lafenwa peaceful.”

This message captures an important operational principle. In a conflict-sensitive environment, the value of information is not determined only by how quickly it spreads. Accuracy, context and potential consequences must also be considered.

The intervention therefore proposes selected community members who can support information verification and communication.

This principle also aligns with practical guidance on misinformation in WhatsApp environments, where users are encouraged to verify information before forwarding it.

4.4 Finding Four: Digital Inclusion Requires Offline Peacebuilding

The stress-test identified a significant risk of privileging young and digitally active residents while marginalising elderly people, women, vulnerable groups and residents without digital access.

The intervention therefore moves beyond a WhatsApp-only approach.

The proposed model combines:

Digital channels

- WhatsApp;
- Facebook;
- verified community messages;
- digital reporting.

with:

Offline channels

- community meetings;
- community leaders;
- youth representatives;
- women representatives;
- local associations;
- trusted community networks.

This is one of the strongest features of the proposed intervention because it transforms WhatsApp from the centre of the intervention into one component of a wider community peacebuilding system.

4.5 Finding Five: Community Ownership is a Safeguard Against Power Imbalance

The stress-test asks whether the intervention serves the community or the organisation. The response places community needs above organisational visibility and proposes that residents and local leaders participate in shaping how the platform works.

This is particularly important because digital peacebuilding can reproduce existing power inequalities if technology is introduced without meaningful local participation.

The framework therefore proposes that decisions about:

- what constitutes an early warning;
- who verifies information;
- what information may be shared;
- how sensitive reports are handled; and
- how success is measured

should involve appropriate community stakeholders.

5. PROPOSED COMMUNITY-BASED DIGITAL EARLY WARNING AND PEACEBUILDING FRAMEWORK

Based on the analysis, this study proposes the **Community-Based Digital Early Warning and Peacebuilding Framework (CDEWPF)**.

The framework consists of six interconnected components.

Component 1: Community Listening

The process begins with community knowledge rather than technology.

Residents, youth groups, women representatives, traders, community leaders and other stakeholders identify recurring concerns, information gaps and possible warning indicators.

Component 2: Responsible Reporting

Residents are provided with safe channels for reporting concerns.

Reports should distinguish between:

- observed incidents;
- personal concerns;
- rumours;
- verified information; and
- information requiring further investigation.

Component 3: Verification

Information should not automatically be broadcast.

A designated community verification mechanism assesses the credibility and potential consequences of information before wider dissemination.

Component 4: Trusted Communication

Verified information is communicated through appropriate digital and offline channels.

The emphasis is on:

accuracy → clarity → safety → peaceful communication.

Component 5: Early Response

Relevant community stakeholders respond to credible warning signs before they escalate.

The digital system therefore does not merely collect information. It creates a pathway from:

warning → verification → communication → response.

Component 6: Learning and Accountability

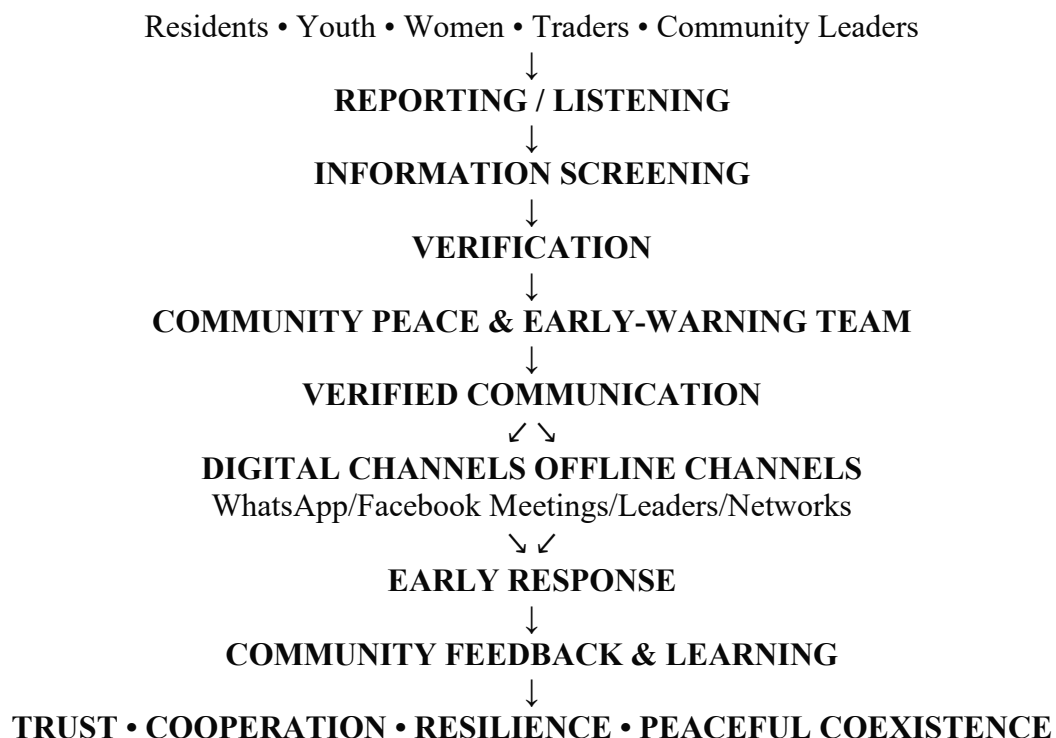
The system should periodically review:

- what warnings were received;
- how they were verified;
- what actions followed;
- whether misinformation was reduced;
- whether vulnerable groups were included; and
- whether unintended harm occurred.

This creates an adaptive peacebuilding cycle.

5.1 The Proposed Framework

COMMUNITY LEVEL



6. ETHICAL AND CONFLICT-SENSITIVITY REQUIREMENTS

The stress-test identified five major ethical questions that should be incorporated into implementation.

6.1 Safety Before Reach

The intervention should never prioritise followers, views or message circulation over community safety. The project explicitly identifies the danger that pressure for digital reach can increase the spread of unverified information.

6.2 Inclusion

The intervention must actively include people who are not digitally active.

6.3 Privacy

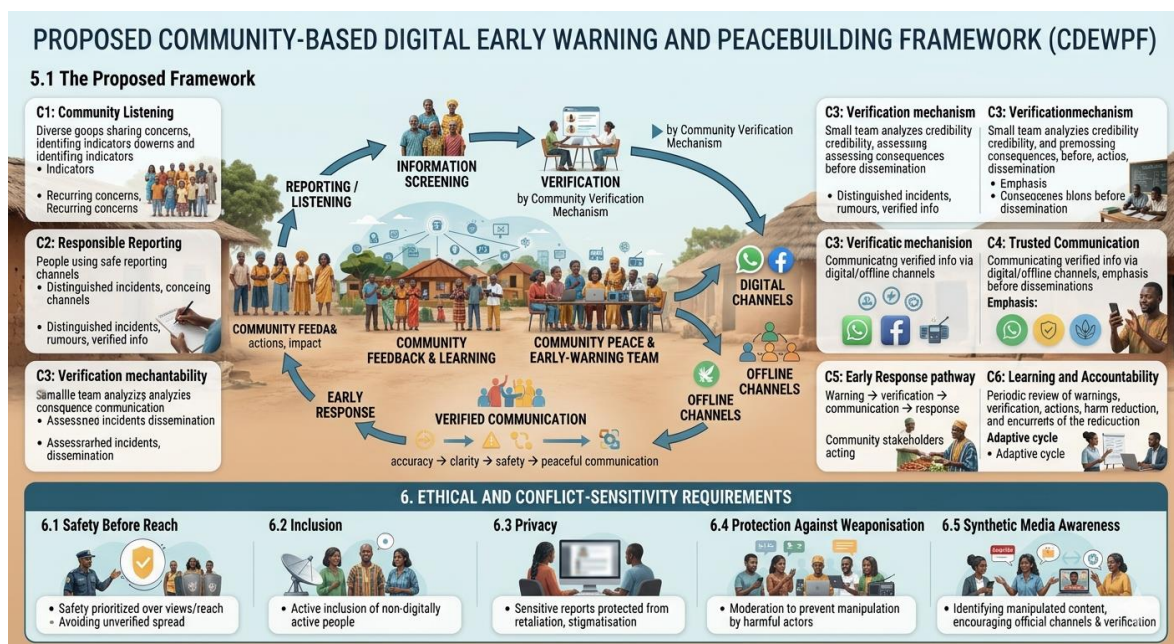
Sensitive reports should not expose individuals to retaliation, stigmatisation or other harm.

6.4 Protection Against Weaponisation

Messages, screenshots and other campaign materials could be manipulated or used by harmful actors. Administrators should therefore moderate communication and avoid exposing sensitive personal information.

6.5 Synthetic Media Awareness

The emergence of manipulated images, videos and messages creates another challenge. The campaign therefore proposes awareness about misinformation and synthetic media and encourages residents to use official communication channels and verify information.



7. PROPOSED IMPLEMENTATION MODEL

The framework can be implemented in five phases.

Phase 1: Community Preparation

- stakeholder mapping;

- community consultations;
- identification of trusted actors;
- identification of early-warning indicators;
- development of communication protocols.

Phase 2: Capacity Building

Training should cover:

- misinformation recognition;
- information verification;
- conflict-sensitive communication;
- privacy;
- digital safety;
- responsible WhatsApp administration;
- referral and escalation procedures.

Phase 3: Pilot Implementation

A controlled pilot should begin with a limited number of trusted community groups.

The pilot should test whether residents can:

1. report concerns;
2. distinguish rumours from verified information;
3. receive trusted updates;
4. communicate without escalating tensions; and
5. connect digital warnings with offline response.

Phase 4: Community Expansion

Following pilot learning, the mechanism can be extended to additional community associations, youth groups, women groups and other stakeholders.

Phase 5: Monitoring and Evaluation

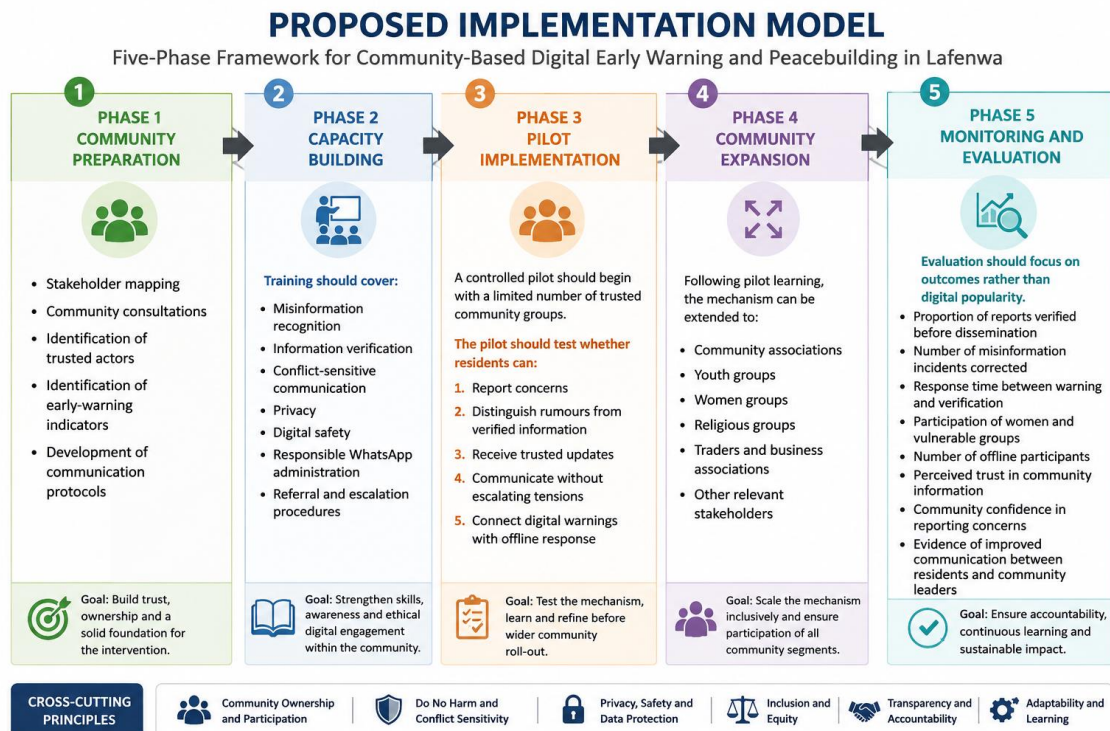
Evaluation should focus on outcomes rather than digital popularity.

Suggested indicators include:

- proportion of reports verified before dissemination;
- number of misinformation incidents corrected;
- response time between warning and verification;
- participation of women and vulnerable groups;
- number of offline participants;
- perceived trust in community information;
- community confidence in reporting concerns; and

- evidence of improved communication between residents and community leaders.

Model shown as:



8. DISCUSSION

The central contribution of this study is the proposition that **digital early warning should be understood as a community peacebuilding process rather than a technology project.**

This distinction matters. A WhatsApp group can be created within minutes, but trust cannot. A digital platform can distribute information rapidly, but it cannot independently determine whether that information is accurate, socially responsible or conflict-sensitive.

The Lafenwa case demonstrates why digital peacebuilding must connect technology with local relationships. The project's stress-test already recognises that community ownership, inclusion and offline engagement are necessary safeguards.

This approach is consistent with research showing that digital peacebuilding in Africa requires attention to local contexts, institutional capacity and multiple actors rather than reliance on a single technology.

The framework also contributes to the emerging debate around the weaponisation of social media. Mercy Corps' Nigeria-focused work demonstrates the importance of collaborative, multi-stakeholder approaches involving civil society, journalists, fact-checkers, technology actors and other stakeholders.

For Lafenwa, however, the intervention should remain proportionate to the local context. It does not need to become a sophisticated surveillance system. The primary objective is to create a trusted pathway through which residents can report concerns, information can be checked, and peaceful responses can be supported.

9. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The study contributes to digital peacebuilding scholarship by integrating three perspectives:

9.1 Early Warning Perspective

Conflict indicators can be identified and communicated before escalation.

9.2 Conflict-Sensitive Digital Practice

Digital tools should be assessed according to their potential to either reduce or intensify conflict.

9.3 Community Ownership Perspective

Technology should strengthen existing community relationships rather than replace them.

The resulting proposition is:

Digital technology contributes to community peacebuilding most effectively when it strengthens trusted local relationships, improves the quality of information, supports early response and remains accountable to the community.

This proposition can be tested empirically in future research.

10. CONCLUSION

This study developed a Community-Based Digital Early Warning and Peacebuilding Framework for Lafenwa, Abeokuta North, Ogun State. The analysis demonstrates that the central challenge is not simply the existence of violence but the interaction between insecurity, misinformation, fear, mistrust and weak access to trusted information.

WhatsApp offers a practical communication channel because it is already familiar to many residents. However, it should not become the intervention itself. The assessment identified platform dependency, digital exclusion, misinformation, privacy concerns and possible weaponisation as significant risks.

The proposed framework therefore combines community listening, responsible reporting, verification, trusted communication, early response and continuous learning. It also deliberately combines digital and offline engagement.

The study concludes that sustainable digital peacebuilding requires a shift from **technology-centred intervention to community-centred socio-technical peacebuilding**. For Lafenwa,

the goal should not be to create the largest digital audience but to create a more trusted information environment in which residents can communicate responsibly, identify concerns early and respond peacefully.

The framework provides a basis for future empirical research. A subsequent field study should test the framework through baseline and post-intervention measurements involving residents, youth groups, women representatives, community leaders and other relevant stakeholders.

11. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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