
**EARLY WARNINGS SYSTEMS AND CONFLICT PREVENTION
IN EREI CLAN, BIASE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF CROSS
RIVER STATE
(2018-2025)**

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Abstract

This study examines the role of early warning communication systems in preventing the escalation of conflict in the Erei Clan in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State. The research aims to evaluate the challenges faced by existing early warning systems, the socio-political and economic factors contributing to the conflict, and the impact of early warning system negligence on the crisis. Using an ex post facto research design, data were collected from 399 respondents via interviews. The theory of dialogue (1996) and integrated management theory were critically examined in the course of this research. The theory provided substantive perspective to understanding conflict indices. Findings reveal that the delayed and poorly coordinated communication strategies, such as town hall meetings and public advocacy, failed to address tensions before violence erupted, primarily due to a lack of timely response and mistrust within the community. The study highlights that historical land disputes, socio-political marginalisation, and competition for resources fuelled the conflict, exacerbated by ineffective communication and governance systems. The research underscores the need for a proactive, community-driven early warning mechanism, enhanced coordination between local and state actors, and the reinforcement of traditional leadership roles in peacebuilding. It recommends creating inclusive, locally-focused early warning systems, aligning communication efforts, and minimizing political interference to foster trust and cooperation across affected communities.

Key words: Communication, Conflict Prevention, Erei Clan, Warning

Introduction

The conflict in Erei, much like similar communal conflicts across Nigeria, is not just about land; it is also driven by historical grievances, economic competition, and political marginalization. As Omeje (2004) states, land disputes are often “a proxy for deeper issues of power, identity, and economic control.” In the case of the Erei conflict, political leaders and community elders have failed to address underlying issues, allowing tensions to escalate over time. Early warning indicators, such as escalating political tension, land encroachment, and resource competition, have often gone unnoticed or unaddressed, leading to recurrent outbreaks of violence.

The local government's responses have largely been reactive, often only intervening after violence has erupted. This failure to proactively address early warning signals in the Erei communities points to a critical gap in the early warning framework at the local level. As Agboola (2020)

observes, “traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have been overshadowed by more violent responses, and the lack of timely intervention from authorities has allowed these disputes to escalate.”

Existing literature on early warning systems and communal conflict highlights the effectiveness of such systems at the global level, yet many of the approaches fall short when applied to Nigeria's complex ethnic and communal dynamics. Studies such as Omeje (2005) and Chigozie and Nnadi (2022) show that while the concept of EWS holds great promise, its implementation in Nigeria remains deeply problematic due to institutional weaknesses and coordination failures. Similarly, studies on communal conflicts in Nigeria, including the Niger Delta and Middle Belt, underline how ethnic and political tensions exacerbate violence but do not necessarily lead to early preventive actions.

The recurring nature of the conflict in Erei, alongside the lack of effective early intervention, points to systemic failures in the current early warning frameworks. The government of Cross River State and local authorities have largely responded reactively to the violence, often intervening only after significant damage has already occurred. This delayed response has contributed to the continuing cycle of violence, undermining efforts for long-term peace and development in the region. In addition to the government's shortcomings, local mechanisms of conflict resolution, such as traditional leadership and community dialogue, have proven ineffective in addressing the underlying causes of the conflict. In some cases, these mechanisms have been unable to adapt to the changing nature of the disputes, which have increasingly become politicized and militarized. The absence of a coordinated, proactive early warning system at both the state and local levels has perpetuated this cycle of violence.

The inability to act on early warning indicators is particularly concerning because it undermines the potential for peacebuilding in a region already vulnerable to ethnic and political tensions. Given the ethnically

diverse population of Cross River State and the history of land-related conflicts in the area, failure to address these early warning signals threatens not only the lives and livelihoods of local residents but also the broader goals of regional stability, security, and economic development.

Thus, the central problem that this study seeks to address is the inability of early warning systems to prevent the escalation of communal conflict in the Erei communities of Biase LGA. Despite the availability of early warning indicators and existing frameworks for conflict prevention, these systems have failed to generate timely, effective interventions, which has resulted in the prolongation of violence and the socio-economic degradation of the region. The study seeks to explore the reasons behind this failure, evaluate the effectiveness of current EWS mechanisms, and propose practical strategies for enhancing conflict prevention efforts in Biase LGA.

Research Objectives

The Broad objective of this study is to examine early warning and conflict prevention in Erei, Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State-Nigeria. While the specific objectives includes:

1. Identify and analyze the challenges that constitute early warning systems, particularly in Erei crisis
2. Examine the historical, socio-political, and economic factors that have contributed to the emergence and escalation of the communal clashes in the Erei Clan.
3. Examine the influence of the negligence of the early warning systems in the Erei Crisis in Biase Local Government Area.
4. Investigate the relationship between Urugbam, Afono and half of Edu and Erei Communities before the crisis.

Research Questions

The study asks the following questions:

1. What are challenges faced by existing early warning systems,

- particularly in Erei crisis?
2. How have the historical, socio-political, and economic factors contributed to the emergence and escalation of the communal clashes in Erei Clan?
 3. Is there any influence of the negligence of the early warning systems in the Erei Crisis in Biase Local Government Area?
 4. Is there any relationship between Urugbam, Afono, and half of the Edu and Erei Communities before the crisis?

Review of Related Literature

Conflict/ Communication Indices

Rumours, misinformation, and inflammatory messaging constitute vital communication indices. In conflict-prone societies, rumours often travel faster than verified information and can trigger violent mobilization (Nyheim, 2009). The advent of social media and mobile communication has amplified the speed and reach of misinformation (ACLED, 2022). In Erei, community members reported that false information spread through radio and WhatsApp intensified mistrust among groups. The failure to counter misinformation with credible communication mechanisms represents a significant weakness in conflict prevention. Communication indices such as the volume of hate speech, proliferation of inflammatory rumours, and absence of trusted information channels are therefore essential to early warning analysis.

Conflict definitions have broader scope. For example the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK 2015) defines conflicts as: "... the clashing of interests (positional differences) on national values of some duration and magnitude between at least two parties (organized groups, states, groups of states, organizations) that are determined to pursue their interests and win their cases."(2). This definition testifies the fact that numbers of conflicts take place in weak or already collapsed states, which are

not capable to intervene in the conflict with their own troops.

Conflict is a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain desired values but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals (Coser, 2019 p.8). Conflict is also seen as the overlapping of two force fields. The forces in this field have both positive and negative valences. In other words, they have the capacity to unite, react or interact. conflicts are any situation in which incompatible goals, attitudes, emotions or behaviours lead to disagreement or opposition between two or more parties

Conflict and competition are two points of a continuum on which conflict represents aggravated competition. In order words conflict arises when disagreement emerging from competition cannot be resolved. It follows therefore that conflict management has to begin with and include management of supposedly simple competition. The point to note however is that conflict emanates from social relationships and conflicting groups must reside physically or psychologically in close proximity. That is why it can be argued that conflict is a helpful and useful element of society. What to be feared in any society

According to Anifowose et al (2015, p.3), they identified about four types of conflict that include;

1. Intrapersonal conflict, which is the kind of conflict that happens within a person or an individual. This includes conflict of choice of career, spouse, moral questions, etc.
2. Interpersonal conflict – this is the type of conflict that takes place between several people. It arises from individual differences that bother on personality, values, perceptions and attitudes.
3. Intra-group conflicts – this is the conflict that takes place between individuals within a group. Examples include members of the same political party, school, church and so on.
4. Inter-group conflict – this is the conflict that occurs between distinct

groups, cultures, nations or communities, organizations and so on. Interpersonal conflict is the most obvious of all because it arises out of differences in axiological perceptions.

Nigeria is a large multi-ethnic country where ethnic cleavages remain a critical problem and ethnic violence has erupted periodically. Within the past four decades, Nigeria has experienced dangerous scenes of incessant dysfunctional conflicts, which have occurred between communities, ethnic groups and religious groups.

It is noteworthy that these conflicts are not confined to any specific geo-political region of the country. Examples of some documented conflicts in Nigeria in recent time include Yoruba-Hausa community in Shagamu, Ogun State; Eleme-Okrika in Rivers State; the intermittent clashes in Kano, Kano State; Zango-Kataf in Kaduna State; Tiv-Jukun in Wukari, Taraba State; Ogoni-Adoni in Rivers State; Chamba-Kuteh in Taraba State; Itsekiri-Ijaw/Urhobo in Delta State; Aguleri-Umuleri in Anambra State; Ijaw-Ilaje conflict in Ondo State; Basa-Egbura in Nasarawa State' Hausa/Fulani-Sawaya in Bauchi State; Fulani-Irigwe and Yelwa-Shendam, both in Plateau State; Hausa-Yoruba clashes in Idi-Araba in Lagos State and Ife-Modakeke in Osun State (Ubi, 2001; Imobighe, 2003; Omotayo, 2005). While the causes of the crisis are many and varied, these causes are struggle for land, political marginalization, religion and ethnicity. These causes have been identified in the literature as important element of inter-communal conflicts.

According to Bisong and Eremi (2018),

communal conflicts have become a consistent experience across different local government areas of Cross River State. Traditionally, Cross River State has witnessed communal conflicts of diverse proportions and fatalities in recent years. These conflicts have grown in occurrence and assumed dangerous and sophisticated dimensions. Consequently, conflicts in Cross River

State have become very intermittent, often destructive and occurring more frequently (p.56)

The conflicts in Cross River State communities reflect the incessant inter and intra communal clashes that have bedeviled Nigeria over a long period of time. Cross River State comprise of Eighteen Local Government Areas, namely; Abi, Akamkpa, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Bekwara, Biase, Boki, Calabar Municipal, Calabar South, Etung, Ikom, Obanliku, Obubra, Obudu, Odukpani, Ogoja, Yakurr and Yala. It is important to note that some of these local government areas share same cultural and linguistic affinities and common historical background.

The Erei crisis started in 4th December 2018 after a waged war against Urugbam communities which took them out of their ancestral home. The Erei clan comprises seventeen communities divided into two geographically by a river, with ten on the one side and the other seven on the other side. So, land struggle is one of the causes of the crisis. The communal crisis reportedly revolves around greed for an Oil Palm Plantation originally belonging to the Egor, Urugbam and Ekoli-Edda communities and was evenly benefited by the said communities until Egor community secretly sold the plantation to Sen. Ugor Orji of Ebur Uwana Edda of Ebonyi State. Abanwan one of the 17 Erei communities is alleged to have joined forces with the Egor community, and other Erei communities to attack Urugbam. It is stated that the Urugbam and Abanwan people are the primary actors in the crisis on whose part are the challenges of poor leadership, (shadow key players/beneficiaries in the crisis) and power tussles which has made it possible for the youths to disrespect the elders/leaders of Erei.

The current communal crisis experienced in Erei is the 2018 native battles involving Egor, Ipene, Abanwan and Urugbam; the 2019 battle of Ipene, Egor, Umolor and Urugbam; and the 2020 communal war engulfing Egor, Ibini, Afono, Edu and Urugbam. As at today, the Urugbam and Afono communities have returned to their ancestral land through the effort of the

military.

The conflict in Ebom and Ebijakara, represents an earlier conflict in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State which was first reported in a media article published in the Nigeria chronicle of 26th January 2006 which notes that the Governor of Cross River State, His Excellency, Senator Liyellmoke had set up a Judicial Commission of Inquiry to look into the hostilities between Ebom and Ebijakara communities in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State over a disputed parcel of land, with a mandate to investigate the conflict which according to the Governor, had claimed several lives and property. It was reported that the Governor blamed traditional rulers, village heads and the Local Government Chairman for the incessant communal conflicts in their domain. The report also had it that the conflict started when Ebijakara attacked Ebom community where over 195 Ebom houses were burnt down by Ebijakara people on the 11th-14th of January 2006, translating to 48 houses per day, at the time of the attack by Ebijakara on the 11th January 2006, according to the report most of the population left behind in Ebom village were the elderly, retired and children, so Ebijakara attacked, killed, maimed, looted and destroyed Ebom property unabated or unchallenged and that explains why over 220 houses were destroyed in such a short time. (*The Nation Newspaper* November 10, 2006, pg. 12).

It was a reprisal attack by Ebom community that led to full scale war between the two communities which resulted in wanton destruction of lives and property and which eventually led to the displacement of Ebijakara people from their ancestral homes to neighboring communities up till now.

In a press interview with the Executive Chairman of Abi Local Government Area, Hon. EkoAtu covering a wide range of issues including the unresolved conflict between the people of Ebom and Ebijakara, the chairperson observed that apart from inaugurating the Boundary Disputes and Conflicts Resolution Committee and holding monthly security meetings with

Heads of Security Agencies in Abi LGA, we have been talking to Ebom and Ebijakara community. It is expected that by next week we are going to arrange another meeting of youths. We want to come up with a report to His Excellency. This is the situation on ground concerning Ebom and Ebijakara people. On how to resettle Ebom/Ebijakara people for now in terms of general state of security in Abi LGA, we are okay because all decisions were collectively reached. (Daily Champion, 5th February, 2006 pg.6).

The above reports are collaborated by a Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Hostilities between Ebom and Ebijakara Communities in Abi Local Government Area (2006), Views of Cross River State Government Draft Report, Official Documents, No 1 of 2007. This is also collaborated by Okoi and Tabi (2018) in their study on Communal Boundary Conflicts in Nigeria: An Assessment of the 2006 Ebom-Ebijakara boundary conflict in Cross River State. The study was primarily focused on communal boundary conflicts, specifically, the 2006 Ebom-Ebijakara boundary conflict on the people of Abi Local Government Area.

The objective of their study was to highlight the impact of internal boundary conflicts on the two communities in Abi local government Area and Cross River State. They observe that prior to the outbreak of the 2006 inter-communal boundary conflict between Ebom and Ebijakara communities in Abi local government area of Cross River, there has been earlier boundary conflict which occurred between the two communities, which dates back to 1911 and which later led to the supreme court judgments of 1962 and 1964. They further posit that the people began again to experience deep seated animosity, mutual suspicion and hatred occasioned by the same land ownership tussle which of course culminated in renew communal conflict of 2006.

In what Ubi (2021) described as theoretical explanation of the Ugep-Idomi 1992 Conflict, Ugep and Idomi went to war in February 1992. These are two neighbouring communities of the same ethnicity located in South

South Nigeria and specifically in the central Cross River geopolitical zone called Yakurr Local Government Area of the Cross-River State. According to him, In February 1992, Idomi kidnapped three Ugep citizens: OblaEbri (m) aged 73 years from Utom-Ijiman-Ugep and OnunEbali (m) aged 73 years, from Kebong-Ijiman-Ugep.

The reasons for the kidnapping remain much debated. Idomi denies the charge but the kidnapped persons have not been seen till date and it is now known that they were brutally killed by Idomi warriors. Idomi, however, sees the 1992 conflict between them and Ugep to have resulted from boundary dispute whereas Ugep derives the conflict from the kidnapping incident. As a matter of fact, Idomi had from the 1990s complained that her boundary with Ugep at a stream point called Ntankapom on the Ugep-Idomi road was too close to Idomi to call and for her comfort.

Ubi (2021) posits that the Ugep/Idomi conflict can be classified along the lines suggested by Edward Azar as a local socio-economic conflict (Azar, 1990, p.16-19) That war has been characterized by large scale human suffering and atrocity, threats to human rights, threats to stability, massive destruction of property and human lives, a prolonged nature of tension (1992-1997) causing disaffection and discord. Besides the conflict had structural economic and resource dimensions.

Ubi (2021) asserts that there are competing theoretical paradigms in conflict analysis, few of which are generic. The Ugep/Idomi 1992 conflict according to him has to be explained in terms of Robert Ardrey's "territorial imperative". Ardrey has traced the animal origins of property, nations and territoriality. A territory is defined as an area of space which an animal or groups of animals defend as an exclusive preserve. It is within such territory that the basic needs and interests of such animals are gratified, among which are security of space, food, identity and prestige etc. They will, therefore, defend such an area at all cost and strive to keep out those who will undermine their interest and needs. All animals, including man, have a sense

of territoriality, and would patrol and defend their land in order to secure these areas that have been defined as their territory. Nation states, ethnic communities and individuals display these animal traits by evolutionary inheritance, as do animals.

According to Ardrey: If we defend the title to our land or the sovereignty of our country, we do it for reasons no different, no less innate, no less ineradicable, than do lower animals. Ubi (2021) posit further that that Conflict erupts when the claim of one party to land and territory become incompatible with the claim or desire of other to satisfy their own basic interests and needs within the same physical territory. This report to a large extent, accounts for the inter-communal conflict between Ugep and Idomi in 1992, from which this study intend to evaluate the role of communication and its eventual resolution.

The Inter-communal conflict between Iyamtet and Ababene also represents one of the oldest communal conflicts in Cross River State. Iyamtet and Ababene communities are in Obubra Local Government of Cross River State, which has been in a fratricidal conflict over time in history. These communities have experienced complex conflicts, and occasional violence that mostly consumed lives and property. In relation to this, there have been questions of community claims of rights over a parcel of land called “good-bye”. Recently, the conflicts became fratricidal, where many lives were lost and property worth over 500 million Naira was destroyed and leaving about 75,000 inhabitants homeless.

According to Owa et al (2020) the conflicts between Iyamtet and Ababene have been there from time, when Obubra was created in 1902. This conforms with the position of Kazah-Toure (1999), who asserts that “since after Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, the various points of inter-ethnic conflicts are yet to be resolved. The same political and socio-economic structures that existed during the colonial era still persisted thereafter. Therefore, the mechanisms and institutions that generated

conflicts remained the same, which means that ethnic conflicts remain a history of the inhabitants.” Therefore, the case of Iyमितet and Ababene is like that of a struggle by the various ethnic groups for the possession of land boundaries that have been imposed on them by the British colonialists.

The dispute between Iyमितet and Ababene people goes beyond the conflict over the relocation of the former College of Agriculture, rather, it is due to the protracted misunderstanding between the two communities over land ownership

at their “goodbye” axis. While the Iyमितet people claim that the land on which the Ababene cultivate farms is their own and that the Ababene people were only settlers, the Ababene people claim otherwise. Hence, the conflict entails consequences that have caused underdevelopment of the local government and the negative impacts on the two communities.

Even though there was a reported case of a return of hostilities between the two communities which resulted in the renewed clashes that almost led to the total annihilation of the Ababene community, The Sun Newspaper report that the 80 years age-long land dispute between Ababene in Adun and Iyमितet in Okum, Obubra local government areas of Cross River State have been resolved, with the recent peace accord signed by the two communities. The peace accord is coming almost 80 years after Ababene and Iyमितet engaged themselves in a fratricidal war, over the ownership of land located between the two neighbouring communities. The dispute had been on since 1931. Disturbed by these killings and wanton destruction of crops, houses, and public institutions on both sides for over a year, the leaders of Ababene and Iyमितet, on Friday, July 14, 2019, met at Obubra town with a view to ending the incessant communal war. They started with a peace rally and later initiated the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for enduring peace.

In the literature, communal conflict have been argued to derive from a number of factors. In the first instance, arguments have ascribed communal

conflict to the dynamics of indigene and settler conflicts. Udo (1999) has posited that Nigeria is largely a tribal society in which various ethnic groups lay claims to territories to the exclusion of other groups. For emphasis, the contestation arising from the indigene-settler problematic stems from the conception, definition and perception of who is an indigene and who is not or who is a settler and what right does one have which the other should not have. The batch of identity also structures indigene-settler relations. Osaghae and Suberu (2015:27) define identity as “any group attributes that provides recognition, definitions, reference affinity, coherence and meaning for individual members of the group acting individually or collectively”. These values shape the attitude and behaviour of settler communities. According to Egwu and Best, et al. (2021), the settlers import their culture and tradition into their new-community to the discomfort of the host communities.

Nnoli (2023) has posited that ethnic conflicts derive from the constriction between indigenship and citizenship in the 1979 and subsequent constitutions evident in such institutional requirements as, place of birth, quota, state of origin, catchment area, among others. The problem is compounded by the inability of the Settler or migrant communities to fully integrate themselves with the host indigene/native communities through acculturalisation. Rather what obtains is retribalization and marginal personality (Osaghae, Mclemore 2019,).

Several studies reveal that a reasonable number of communal conflicts in Africa and Nigerian communities are traceable to land scarcity, territorial disputes and competition for the use of land resources. Dunmoye (2003) in a survey of conflicts in the Middle Belt zone of Nigeria traced the cause of communal conflict to land scarcity and boundary disputes, due to population pressure, alienation and concentration. However, the argument that land scarcity results into dispute flies in the face of other documented findings about the socio-economic and cultural values of land and territory as economic resources. Moreover, conflicts over land are antithetical to equity,

justice in distribution, allocation and use of land-based resources. The Akaeze and Osso Edda Oguzaraonweya conflicts of 2003, in Ebonyi State, Aguleri-Umuleri conflict in Anambra state and the Tiv- Jukun communal conflicts Taraba state are plausible example (Ebonyi State Government White Paper, 2005; Best, 1998).

Tradition and culture have also been discovered as major conflict triggers, and transformers. This has to do with the sociology of settlement and settlement pattern and cultural diffusion in many ethnic groups in Nigeria. In the study of the Tiv-Jukun conflict, Best, et. al, (2001:825-117) revealed that the Tiv as the largest ethnic group in the Middle Belt Region were able to gain strong foothold in many communities in the zone because their language and culture permeated other culture thereby altering the sociology of those communities. Echiagu (1999) posits that the settlement pattern of the Ezzas and their war-like behaviour led to the invasion of lands of neighbouring sub-ethnic groups.

Even so, and has been argued by several authors (such as Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Bassey & Oshita, 2007; Okoli&Onah,2002; Otite, 2001). Ofuebe, 2000; and Nnoli, 1980), the contradictions and contestations which are hallmarks of the Nigerian political system-pluralism, cultural diversity, ethnicity, quota system, and federal character principle (the national question) are in themselves conflictual. Moreover, conflicts inexorably arise over the dispensation, distribution and sharing of resources, particularly, the competition over access to these scarce resources etc (Otite, 2001, Best et. al, 2001; Bassey & Imobighe, 2007). Arguably, conflict is not so much about the scarcity of political resources than it is about perception of injustice, inequities – marginalization (Ofuebe, 1999, Oche, 2008).

The Theory of Dialogue (1996)

The Theory of Dialogue, articulated by David Bohm, emphasizes the transformative potential of communication in fostering understanding and harmony among individuals and communities. Bohm (1996), a distinguished

physicist and philosopher, drew upon insights from quantum physics to propose a model of dialogue that transcends the limitations of fragmented communication. This theory advocates for a collaborative and open-ended approach, allowing participants to suspend their assumptions and prejudices, thereby creating a shared space for exploring ideas and engaging in genuine exchanges.

Central to Bohm's theory is the concept of suspension, where participants temporarily set aside personal biases and judgments. This process enables individuals to examine their thoughts and emotions free from ego-driven reactions, fostering a deeper understanding of both themselves and others. In this state of suspension, participants can recognize the interconnectedness of ideas and discern the underlying patterns that shape their perspectives. Bohm posits that dialogue transcends mere conversation; it is a collective exploration of meaning that encourages active listening, empathy, and curiosity, allowing diverse perspectives to be expressed respectfully.

Through dialogue, participants engage in shared inquiry, uncovering deeper layers of understanding derived from the group's collective wisdom. Bohm argues that this collaborative approach cultivates a sense of community and empowers individuals to transcend limited viewpoints, thereby opening avenues for transformative change.

Bohm's insights are particularly relevant in contemporary society, where communication is often fragmented due to fixed beliefs and cultural conditioning. His theory provides a pathway to overcome these barriers by promoting deep listening, suspending assumptions, and nurturing empathy. By adopting dialogue as a fundamental mode of communication, individuals can bridge divides and contribute to a more harmonious and inclusive society.

In the context of this study, the Theory of Dialogue articulated by David Bohm provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding and addressing communication dynamics within the Erei conflict. The primary

hypothesis guiding this work revolves around the effectiveness of early warning systems, socio-political factors, and community relationships in the escalation of the Erei crisis. A key aspect of these dynamics is how communication breakdowns contribute to the inability to prevent or de-escalate conflict. The Theory of Dialogue offers an innovative perspective on communication in conflict contexts. It proposes that by fostering a space for open, non-judgmental dialogue, individuals can transcend entrenched positions and engage in a more empathetic, collaborative process of understanding. This is crucial in the Erei conflict, where inter-community relationships and ethnic rivalries are central drivers of violence. Bohm's emphasis on suspending assumptions and biases aligns well with the idea that prejudices and misunderstandings often fuel conflict escalation. By encouraging active listening and mutual respect, the theory can inform strategies for improving communication between the Urugbam, Afono, Half Edu, and Erei communities. As such, the theory serves as an essential tool in exploring how dialogue-based communication can help mitigate the historical grievances and land disputes that have exacerbated tensions in the region.

In relation to the issue of the negligence of early warning systems (Hypothesis 3), Bohm's theory is particularly relevant. Early warning systems are only effective when communication channels are open, collaborative, and responsive. If community members or authorities fail to engage in genuine dialogue whether due to institutional failures, mistrust, or cultural barriers early warnings about potential conflict may be disregarded or misunderstood. Bohm's model of shared inquiry can help enhance the communication processes necessary for timely responses to conflict indicators. Therefore, by applying Bohm's theory to the study, the research can evaluate how communication gaps in the Erei conflict (such as failure to listen, understand, or respond to concerns) might have contributed to the escalation of violence.

Moreover, the emphasis on dialogue-based communication underscores the study's focus on community-based conflict resolution strategies. It highlights the potential for collaborative, dialogue-driven efforts to prevent future clashes in the Erei area by fostering understanding among different groups. The theory, therefore, aligns with the study's overarching goal of enhancing communication strategies for effective conflict management and prevention. Nonetheless, while Bohm's Theory of Dialogue provides a valuable framework for understanding the role of communication in conflict resolution, it also has certain limitations that inform the adoption of a second theory. The Theory of Dialogue, although powerful in its emphasis on transformative communication, operates on the assumption that participants are willing and able to engage in open, reflective dialogue. In practice, however, structural inequalities, political manipulation, deep-rooted mistrust, and historical grievances often prevent genuine dialogue from occurring. In the Erei conflict, these factors could inhibit the successful application of Bohm's theory, especially if the communities involved are not ready or not empowered to engage in the kind of reflective suspension that Bohm advocates.

For example, ethnic tensions and political marginalization may make it difficult for certain groups to genuinely suspend their assumptions or trust others in a dialogue process. The theory's emphasis on individual transformation may also be less effective in situations where the conflict is driven by systemic issues that go beyond interpersonal communication, such as resource scarcity, land disputes, or political manipulation by elites. Additionally, Bohm's theory assumes that all participants in dialogue will have the same opportunity to engage in the communication process. In the context of the Erei conflict, power dynamics between communities, as well as between local leaders and the general populace, might prevent equal participation, thereby limiting the theory's applicability.

Furthermore, Bohm's theory focuses heavily on the individual level of transformation, but in the context of communal conflicts, systemic factors often overshadow individual attempts at dialogue. For instance, institutional neglect of early warning systems or local political elites who manipulate ethnic divisions may not be easily swayed by the dialogue process, requiring additional frameworks to address the structural and institutional elements of the conflict.

Research Design

In this study, survey research design was adopted to investigate the negligence of early warning systems as a contributing factor to the Erei communal conflict in Biase Local Government Area. The design was particularly useful because it allowed for the examination of events that had already occurred, without manipulating or controlling the variables involved. This design was chosen because the study aimed to explore the relationship between the negligence of early warning systems and the escalation of conflict, focusing on Erei as a case study. The researcher administered interview questions to elders, youth leaders and women leaders in the 10 communities in Erei, in each community, two persons were interviewed. The researcher had a total 20 participants that provided information to the research questions.

Result of the In-depth Interviews

This section analyses the information gotten from the interview section with major stakeholders whose opinions were considered very critical to the study.

What are the most common causes of inter-communal conflicts in your community, and how have they affected relationships between community members?

Responding to the above question, one interviewee attributed the real cause of the conflict in their community with their neighbours to a disputed land ownership, he said a member of their community released a parcel of land to an individual from the neighbouring community without the notice and approval of the other communities' elders who jointly farm on the said parcel of land. According to him, the ensuing crisis broke out into a full-scale inter-communal war that resulted in the loss of many lives and property. He stated that currently, with the efforts of government, security personnel and community leaders, a peace movement has started brokered which led to a successful resolution of the conflict and a return of peace in our community, "Today, we interact with our neighbours freely", he said.

On how community leaders and stakeholders communicate with each other during early stages of the conflicts?

In the communities of Erei, Egbor, Urugbam, and Abanwan, stakeholder communication during the early stages of the land conflict largely relied on organized town hall meetings. These gatherings were designed to foster dialogue among various interest groups, including traditional rulers, age-grade unions, women's associations, youth representatives, and religious leaders. Such inclusive forums aimed to create a space where community leaders and stakeholders could come together to address tensions and explore peaceful resolutions. However, despite these well-intentioned efforts, the process began to unravel due to deeply rooted personal and communal interests. In particular, the community of Egbor resisted any form of cooperation or submission to Urugbam's position in the land dispute, which significantly strained the progress of early dialogue.

Complicating matters further, Abanwan and some other communities initially uninvolved in the dispute were not part of the early discussions surrounding the contested farmland. Over time, however, they aligned themselves with Egbor and Erei, and together they escalated the situation,

culminating in the destruction of properties belonging to the Urugbam community. What stood out too many, especially residents of Ibini, was the unexpected shift in Abanwan's stance. Historically, there had been no land-related issues between Abanwan and Urugbam, yet during the conflict, Abanwan began laying claim to land that had always been under Urugbam's control. This sudden claim was both surprising and provocative, particularly as it continued despite multiple meetings and repeated warnings. These developments exposed a critical flaw in the early communication efforts not in the structure or availability of dialogue platforms, but in the lack of genuine commitment from some parties to pursue peace over territorial gain. Thus, while the framework for early conflict resolution existed, the unwillingness of certain stakeholders to act in good faith ultimately undermined its success.

Have you experienced any successful conflict resolution initiatives or programme in your community during the early warning process of the conflict? If so, what made them unsuccessful?

One of the interviewees from the Urugbam community shared a sober reflection on the failure of conflict resolution initiatives during the early warning stages of the land dispute. According to him, there were no truly successful interventions that could have prevented the escalation. He attributed much of this failure to the ignorance and disregard for the ancestral powers and traditional institutions that had long governed the moral and spiritual fabric of the land. In his view, some individuals mistakenly believed that simply living in the community for a long time gave them the authority to undermine these deeply rooted values. While he acknowledged that, in the past, dialogue had been a dependable means of resolving disputes within the community, the recent conflict defied this pattern.

The interviewee explained that even though the government made attempts to intervene such as arresting individuals from certain Erei communities who were believed to have participated in or incited violence these measures were not enough to stop the conflict from erupting. The

presence of external enforcement, rather than fostering peace, seemed to be a reactionary step that failed to address the core issues driving the tensions. The war still occurred despite these arrests, which further underscores the limited impact of formal government intervention when not paired with sincere community engagement and cultural respect. The breakdown of traditional mechanisms and the lack of unified, early preventive measures contributed to the eventual violence, revealing a gap in both community cohesion and institutional responsiveness during the critical early warning period.

In what way do you think strategic communication channel could be improved in your community to better address inter-communal conflicts and what specific strategies or approaches would you recommend?

The interviewee said sensitisation and advocacy programmes should be carried out on a regular basis to sustain the existing peace among the communities. Also, a joint peace committee should be set up among the community members to complement Cross River State government's effort geared towards restoring enduring peace in the communities.

Can you recall a specific instance where communication channels helped in resolving an inter-communal conflict in your community? What made it effective, and what did you learn from the experience?

Responding to this question, the interviewee affirms that strategic communication has been applied in different instances in achieving a peaceful resolution of conflict. According to him, this had worked because members of the community were involved in the conflict resolution initiatives for easy buy-in and successful implementation.

On what challenges or barriers were faced in the implementation of effective strategic communication during inter-communal conflicts, and how those challenges were addressed in improving conflict resolution outcomes, he replied that calling for town hall meetings sometimes often leads to suspicions and arguments; therefore, a healing process should occur before town hall meetings.

Can you suggest ways of improving peaceful co-existence among community members especially, post conflict period?

On this question, the interviewee advised that government and community leaders should always react immediately to reports of conflict to nib the conflict in the bud and also penalise defaulters where necessary to avoid further conflict.

Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that while strategic communication channels were deployed during the Erei crisis, their effectiveness was significantly hampered by several challenges. Despite some success in educating the population about peaceful conflict resolution, key issues persisted, preventing these systems from fully achieving their intended outcomes. A major challenge identified was the struggle over land, with 52.7% of respondents stating this as a key issue. The outbreak and escalation of the conflict in Erei, despite these efforts, point to the ineffectiveness of the early warning systems in preventing violence. This gap highlights deeper structural and functional issues in the design, implementation, and reception of these systems at the community level.

One of the primary challenges was the limited responsiveness and timely action following early warning signals. Communication strategies, including town hall meetings, public enlightenment campaigns, and media advocacy, were often reactive rather than proactive. As a result, by the time messages of peace and education reached the grassroots, hostilities had often already escalated. Another critical issue was the mistrust and suspicion that arose during stakeholder engagements. Interviews revealed that town hall meetings, although vital for communication, sometimes led to arguments and deepened divides, particularly when not preceded by adequate reconciliation and healing processes. This reflects a critical weakness in the emotional readiness and cohesion of the communities, which are necessary prerequisites for effective communication.

These findings reinforce Akinleye's (2002) argument, drawing on a UNESCO (1980) report, that communication has a strong, evolving relationship with education. Communication can act as a powerful tool for transforming social attitudes and promoting understanding, but this potential is often undermined by poor infrastructure, lack of trained personnel, and insufficient coordination among communication actors in conflict-prone areas like Erei. The Integrated Conflict Management Theory, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive and collaborative conflict resolution, also supports this finding. It stresses that strategies not rooted in community participation are unlikely to lead to long-term peace.

The communal clashes in the Erei Clan, located within Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, have deep roots in a complex mix of historical, socio-political, and economic tensions. Historically, land disputes have been a persistent issue between communities, particularly regarding farmlands, which are central to their agrarian economies. Many of these land claims, often lacking formal documentation, have led to overlapping territorial boundaries and lingering grievances. Interviews, especially with residents of Urugbam and Ibini, confirmed that unresolved ancestral land disputes and shifting narratives about ownership contributed significantly to the hostility. For example, a respondent from Urugbam noted confusion over Abanwan's sudden claim to land that had never been contested between the two communities, illustrating how the reinterpretation of historical boundaries can fuel conflict.

Socio-politically, the weakening of traditional authority structures and the increasing politicization of community leadership have further escalated tensions. The absence of a unified voice among stakeholders due to competing interests and local power dynamics undermined efforts at collective decision-making. This aligns with Akinleye's (2002) assertion that modernization and weakened communal governance can lead to instability in traditional societies. Economically, competition over fertile land for

agricultural activities, particularly the cultivation of cassava and oil palm, intensified rivalries between neighboring communities. As noted by Mr. Wisdom Owa in the interviews, around 90% of inter-communal conflicts in Cross River State are land-related, suggesting that economic insecurity is a core driver of these clashes. The Integrated Conflict Management Theory supports this interpretation by emphasizing the need to examine underlying resource-based motivations in communal disputes. In Erei, the convergence of historical, socio-political, and economic pressures created a volatile environment, ripe for conflict.

The Erei crisis further revealed the consequences of failing to act on early warning signs. Strategic communication tools such as advocacy, town hall meetings, and media campaigns were employed, but the response was delayed and reactive rather than preventive. Interviews with community members and government officials confirmed that, although there were signs of growing tensions such as increased land claims, refusal to attend peace meetings, and subtle threats no coordinated response mechanism was activated in time to prevent violence. The study's data shows that communication channels were somewhat effective in educating the population, with respondents strongly agreeing that the information helped. However, this education came too late, indicating a structural failure in proactive conflict management.

This negligence reflects gaps in the early warning framework. Despite the existence of communication tools, there was no structured system for monitoring, verifying, and escalating community grievances before they erupted into violence. According to the Theory of Dialogue, early interventions should focus on fostering mutual understanding and trust between communities, but such dialogic engagements were not adequately facilitated in the case of Erei. Moreover, Mr. Owali's remarks on the importance of timely and accurate information dissemination reinforce Lasswell's Communication Model, which stresses that for communication to

be effective, timing, context, and feedback are critical. The Integrated Conflict Management Theory also emphasizes that conflict resolution must be anticipatory and collaborative. In Erei, the failure to deploy early warning tools effectively allowed mistrust and misinformation to fester, leading to violence that could have been prevented through coordinated and timely interventions.

Before the crisis, the relationship between Urugbam, Afono, Half Edu, and Erei communities was characterized by cultural ties, intermarriage, and periodic cooperation, albeit strained by underlying tensions. Interview data revealed that these communities had long-standing interactions based on shared boundaries, trade, and social affiliations. Notably, there was no documented land dispute between Urugbam and Abanwan or between Urugbam and Half Edu before the conflict. A respondent from Ibini expressed surprise at how Abanwan, historically in peaceful relations with Urugbam, suddenly began asserting ownership over land that had never been contested, suggesting a rupture in what was once a stable relationship.

The deterioration of these relationships seems to be driven by shifting alliances and the politicization of land ownership. When communities such as Abanwan and Erei later aligned with Egbor against Urugbam, trust was broken, and the social fabric binding the groups began to unravel. The Theory of Dialogue emphasizes the need for sustained relational engagement and empathy to maintain peaceful coexistence. However, the failure to engage some communities, like Abanwan, in early peace discussions deepened divides. The Integrated Conflict Management Theory also suggests that excluding certain groups from conflict resolution processes can lead to feelings of alienation and retaliation, as demonstrated by the eventual alliance formed to attack Urugbam.

This transformation from cooperation to conflict illustrates how quickly long-standing relationships can deteriorate in the absence of consistent, inclusive communication and conflict-sensitive governance. The

findings suggest that rebuilding trust will require more than just conflict resolution; it will require sustained reconciliation and the re-establishment of shared values across these communities, based on open dialogue and mutual recognition of historical boundaries and communal interdependence.

Conclusion

The study critically assessed early warning and conflict prevention mechanisms in the context of communal conflict in Erei, Biase Local Government Area, Cross River State, revealing significant gaps in both preparedness and response. Despite the eventual deployment of strategic communication channels such as advocacy, public sensitization, and stakeholder engagements, the delayed and poorly coordinated nature of these interventions limited their effectiveness in preventing conflict. Historical land disputes, political manipulation, weak traditional authority, and socio-economic pressures particularly competition over agricultural land served as major drivers of the crisis. Furthermore, the neglect of inclusive, community-based early warning systems and the exclusion of certain communities from early dialogue processes undermined trust and escalated tensions. Drawing on the Integrated Conflict Management Theory and the Theory of Dialogue, the study emphasizes the need for a proactive, inclusive, and culturally sensitive approach to conflict prevention. Strengthening traditional institutions, improving inter-community communication, and institutionalizing early warning systems are essential steps toward achieving sustainable peace and preventing future communal clashes in Cross River State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study made the following recommendations.

1. Community leaders in Erei should create locally-driven early warning mechanisms that involve community members in monitoring and reporting signs of tension. These systems should be supported by state agencies for quick intervention.

2. Community members should align all communication efforts-media, town halls, and advocacy under a unified framework to ensure timely, consistent, and proactive messaging that addresses root causes before conflict escalates.
3. Community leaders should reinforce the role of traditional leaders in conflict mediation by providing them with support and ensuring their neutrality. Minimize political influence in community matters to build trust in peace processes.
4. Government of Cross River State Should Encourage regular inter-community dialogue sessions, ensuring all stakeholders, including marginalized or neutral groups, are involved to foster trust and prevent shifts in alliances that may lead to conflict.

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