



# PEACE ACTION FOR RAPID AND TRANSFORMATIVE NIGERIAN EARLY RESPONSE (PARTNER) Activity

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## Randomized Control Trial (RCT) Report

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**DISCLAIMER:** *This Randomized Control Trial (RCT) is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the USAID Peace Action for Rapid and Transformative Nigerian Early Response (PARTNER) implemented by Mercy Corps. The contents are the responsibility of Mercy Corps and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.*

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## Executive Summary

Organized and coordinated violence against civilians has plagued the Nigeria’s Plateau and Kaduna States for decades. The nature of violence in these regions is diverse, multi-faceted, and dynamic. Much of the conflict, however, is driven by sophisticated gangs, known locally as “bandits,” who engage in widespread killing, kidnapping, and looting. Resources are another driver of conflict, stemming from grazing routes and farmland encroachments between herders and farmers. Occasional attacks have been attributed to terrorist groups like Boko Haram. However, these attacks have declined in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The violence in these regions often pits ethnic and religious groups against one another, with local leaders seeking to rally support frequently seize upon and exacerbate.<sup>2</sup>

The Peace Action for Rapid and Transformative Nigerian Early Response (PARTNER) program was developed against this background, implemented by Mercy Corps from 2021-2024 with funding from USAID. Implemented by Mercy Corps and funded by USAID, PARTNER aims to strengthen early warning systems for violence in 50 communities across Plateau and Kaduna states. It aims to enhance community-based efforts to promote communication, facilitate dispute resolution, and foster dialogue. PARTNER’s overarching goal is to prevent violence by enhancing collaboration amongst Nigerian communities, government, security and civil society actors to improve Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) Systems’ effectiveness, local ownership, and sustainability.

PARTNER was designed to work with local partners to promote local and direct engagement and ensure sustainability, specifically through a subaward to the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and tripartite memoranda of understanding (MoU) between Mercy Corps, WANEP, and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), the Kaduna State Peace Commission (KSPC) and the Plateau Peace Building Agency (PPBA), respectively. Initially, Mercy Corps focused resources on building the technical and organizational capacity of WANEP, the goal of which was to allow the organization to eventually take the lead in the project implementation in Year 3 through a “transition award” from USAID. This is a type of assistance award to a local entity or locally established partner that is or has been a USAID subrecipient. Transition awards help USAID increase local engagement, promote self-reliance, foster and strengthen local sustainability, and enhance the quality of USAID’s relationship with local partners. To achieve this, USAID engaged Stopping at Success Activity (SAS+) to facilitate the transition from Mercy Corps to WANEP at the organizational, project, and activity level. The transition began in March 2024, with WANEP assuming full program leadership in September 2024, working with other local organizations and government agencies, including IPCR, PPBA, and KSPC.

To tell PARTNER’s story accurately and with evidence, Mercy Corps worked with a team of independent academics to design and implement a randomized controlled trial (RCT) from 2021-2024 to measure the impact and assess the effectiveness of PARTNER activities. In 2022, as part of the RCT’s design, it divided PARTNER communities in Plateau and Kaduna states into three groups. The first set of communities received an early warning reporting system, which included connecting them to an Abuja-based regional situation room that would detect warnings of violence and coordinate effective responses. PARTNER also trained these community members to recognize and report signs of violence. The aim was to increase social cohesion and promote local conflict mediation and de-escalation.

The second set of communities received the same early warning system, but did not participate in the social cohesion activities, and the third group received no intervention during the first three years of the program (but will receive early warning systems starting in 2025).

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<sup>1</sup> Dorff, Cassy, Max Gallop, and Shahryar Minhas. 2020. "Networks of violence: Predicting conflict in Nigeria." *The Journal of Politics* 82, no. 2: 476-493.

<sup>2</sup> Mercy Corps. 2021. “FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN’ Religion, Identity, and Conflict in Northern Nigeria.” Mercy Corps and USAID. [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/FearoftheUnknown\\_Full\\_6-30-21.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/FearoftheUnknown_Full_6-30-21.pdf).

## Key Findings

In summary, evidence from the RCT indicates PARTNER’s effectiveness in attaining its overarching goals in the following areas:

- Strengthening collaboration amongst local, state and national stakeholders to develop and deploy an early warning reporting system using basic technology.
- Better response by the community and security agencies to early warning alerts.
- Increasing social cohesion in local communities, including mediation training, community dialogues, and sports and cultural events.
- Increasing trust amongst diverse ethnic and religious groups and security actors.

## Program Overview

In collaboration with local, international, government, and non-government stakeholders, Mercy Corps implemented the USAID-funded PARTNER Activity to address violence prevention. The main goal was to increase the effectiveness, local ownership, and sustainability of an inclusive EWER system for improved violence prevention. To achieve this, PARTNER focused on two forms of intervention in local communities in Kaduna and Plateau.

The first form of intervention involved working with local, state and national stakeholders to help to develop and deploy an EWER system, which included a mobile phone app and SMS reporting service. Stakeholders trained community members to recognize signs of violence and how to use the app and SMS service to report early warning signs. PARTNER also helped to establish a situation room to monitor and aggregate information from these reporting services. The situation room received reports from all PARTNER sites and made connections to state and national warning and response systems as necessary. The Activity also organized state and national-level workshops to improve awareness of the early warning reporting system as well as coordination amongst relevant actors.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the early warning reporting intervention, PARTNER also implemented a variety of training programs to increase social cohesion in communities. These included conflict mediation training, conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm (DNH) training, community dialogues, and sports and cultural events. They aimed to strengthen the beliefs, shared identities, and behaviors that hold communities together and prevent violence. A key objective was to increase social cohesion, which would increase community members’ willingness to share relevant information about potential violence.<sup>4</sup>

## Methodology

Mercy Corps designed an RCT to measure PARTNER’s impact and assess its effectiveness in communities with a history of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict. The RCT surveyed 46 communities in Plateau and Kaduna in two

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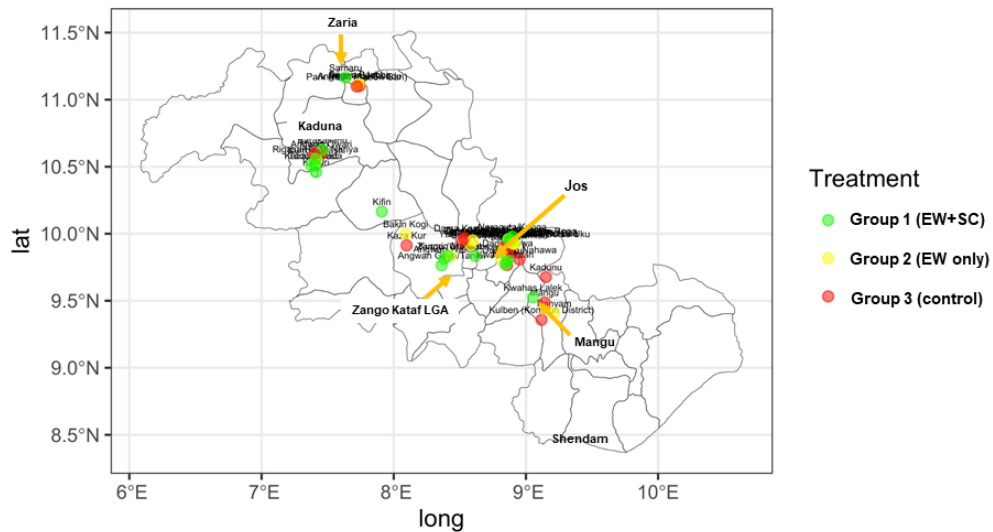
<sup>3</sup> As noted in both the executive summary and methodology sections, the first and second set of communities both received this early warning response system along with the app, SMS service, trainings, and workshops associated with it.

<sup>4</sup> As noted in both the executive summary and methodology sections, only the first set of communities received these social cohesion activities.

waves: once in 2022 and again in 2024,<sup>5</sup> surveying approximately 60 individuals in person per community using a random walk selection procedure, totaling approximately 2,700 individuals in each wave.

Mercy Corps randomly assigned these communities into three groups with stratification on pre-existing levels of violence, assigning 20 communities to the first group. This group received the EWER system and social cohesion training. The second group, with 15 communities, received only the early warning system. The final group, with 15 communities, received no intervention, but will receive the early warning system starting in 2025. Figure 1 below illustrates the location of the communities in Plateau and Kaduna and their designated treatment group.

Figure 1: Map of PARTNER Communities in Plateau and Kaduna by RCT group



This RCT is a first-of-its-kind effort to scientifically evaluate an atrocity prevention program in the field. By comparing changes in responses between the three groups across the two waves (2022 and 2024), this RCT can assess PARTNER’s effects. Mercy Corps hypothesized communities receiving PARTNER interventions in the first wave will show greater improvements in key indicators than the communities assigned to the control group.

Assessing PARTNER proved to be a challenging task, as it only had two years to demonstrate impact through this RCT. The structures and beliefs that contribute to violence in these areas are deeply entrenched and can take considerable time to change. Given the RCT’s small number of communities, however, it is important to note some results do not reach standard levels of statistical significance. Additionally, the due to this small size, any identified effects were expected to be rather small. However, the findings indicate that PARTNER has had a positive effect.

The surveys measured changes in four key sets of outcome indicators: warning indicators, response indicators, violence indicators, and social cohesion indicators, with results showing improvements in the expected direction of all four areas compared to the control group. In particular, the RCT observed improvements in awareness of early warning system, satisfaction with police responsiveness, and perceptions of responsiveness of security forces. Arguably most crucially, there was a decrease in in the number of fatalities, with communities receiving both early warning and social cohesion interventions experiencing an average decline of nearly 75% in conflict-related deaths. Communities receiving only the early warning program saw a 61% average reduction. In contrast, communities in the control group, which did not participate in any PARTNER activities, saw violence increase by over 13%.

<sup>5</sup> Four other communities were surveyed only once and are not included in the analyses reported here.

These results suggest PARTNER’s interventions have worked. However, further research is necessary to understand the conditions required for Activities like this to succeed. One step will be following outcomes in the studied communities to determine these effects’ sustainability and assess the data the early warning system has generated.

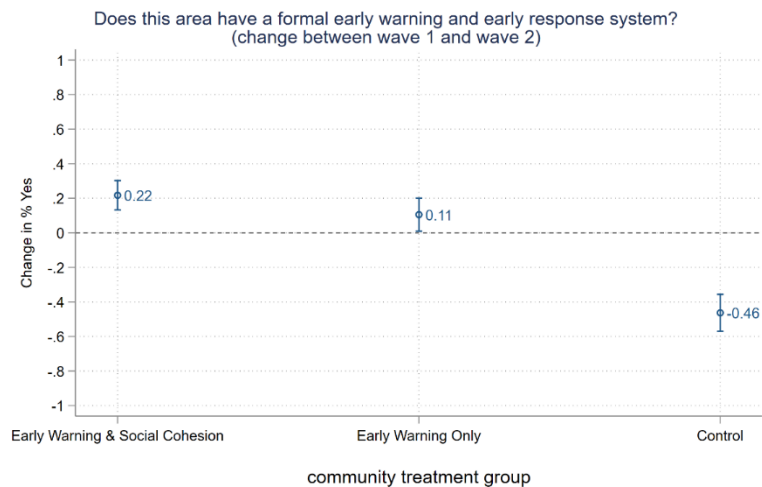
## Key Results

The analysis below reports changes in indicators between the survey’s first and second waves, based on the four categories of outcome indicators (warning, response, social cohesion, and violence). Mercy Corps hypothesizes any observed improvements will be larger in treated communities than in control communities. Mercy Corps also hypothesizes any observed deteriorations will be smaller in treated communities than in control communities.

### Warning Indicators

*PARTNER COMMUNITIES SHOWED MODEST IMPROVEMENT IN THE TIMELINESS AND ACCURACY OF WARNINGS:* As some communities had pre-existing early warning systems, Mercy Corps sought to determine whether PARTNER had increased awareness of said early warning systems. Respondents were asked: “Does this area have a formal early warning and early response system?” Of those asked, 22% more respondents in communities receiving early warning and social cohesion interventions reported the presence of an early warning system. In early warning-only communities, 11% more respondents reported having an early warning system than those in control communities.<sup>6</sup> Surveys from 2024 found that 82% of respondents in the early warning and social cohesion group were aware of early warning systems in their area, compared to 46% in the control group. These results demonstrate that PARTNER had an impact on awareness of early warning resources.

Figure 2: Awareness of Early Warning

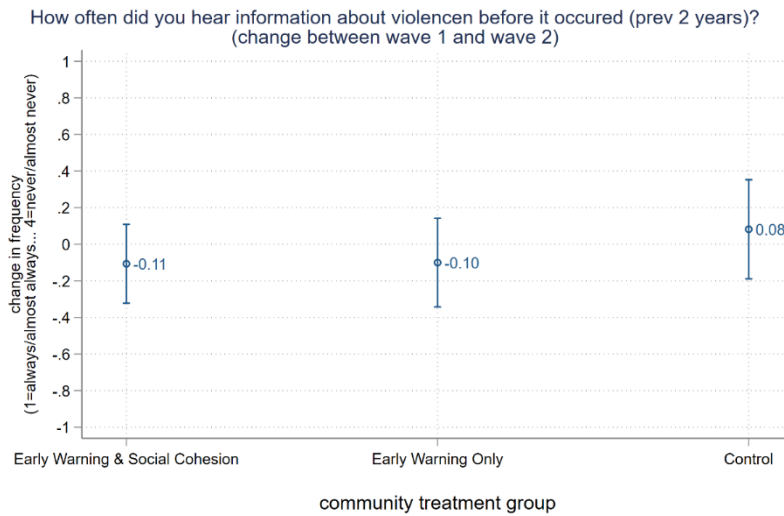


To examine whether the PARTNER system contributed to more timely warnings, Mercy Corps asked community members “When violent conflict has occurred in this area in the past 2 years, how often did you hear some

<sup>6</sup> Note: Circles illustrated in figures within this report represent the mean for each indicator, while the vertical line represents the 95% confidence interval.

information about it from any source before the violence actually occurred?” Answers ranged from 1 (*always or almost always*) to 4 (*never or almost never*). As Figure 3 shows, scores for both treatment groups improved by about .1 on the 4-point scale, indicating treatment community members were more likely to receive warnings in 2024 (just over a year after the system were put in place) than in 2022. In control communities, scores increased by .8, indicating their warnings became less timely over the same period. Though these effects demonstrate positive improvement, they are not considered statistically significant at conventional levels.

Figure 3: Timeliness of Early Warning

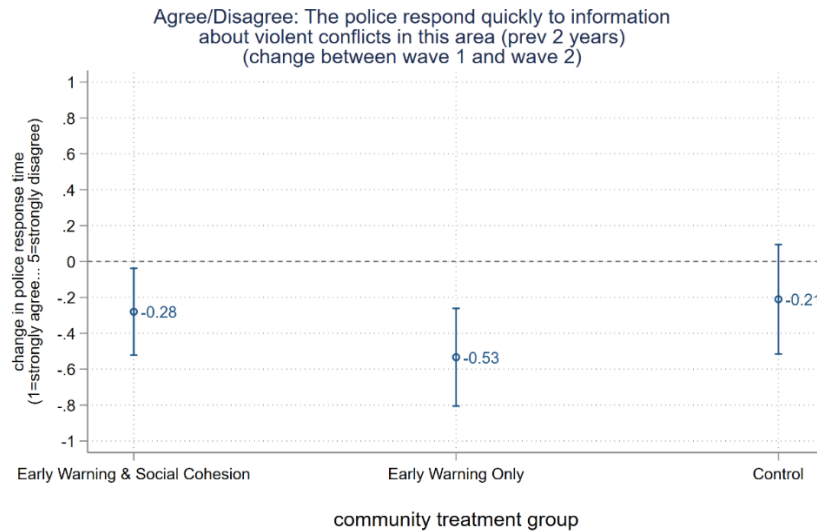


## Response Indicators

### *PARTNER COMMUNITIES SHOWED SOME IMPROVEMENT IN THE RESPONSIVENESS OF SECURITY FORCES:*

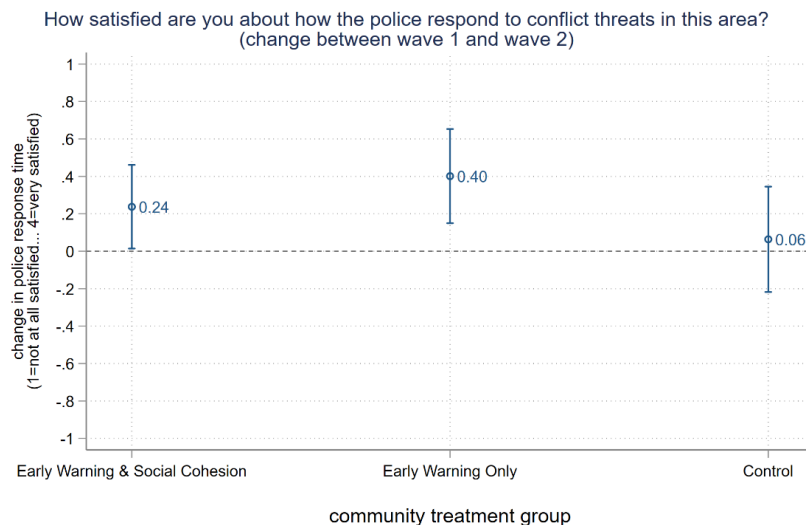
The RCT asked community members how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “*The police respond quickly to information about violent conflicts in this area*” on a scale of 1 (*strong agreement*) to 5 (*strong disagreement*). As illustrated in Figure 4, all three groups saw improvement between waves 1 and 2, with treatment communities improving between .28 and .53 points, and the control group improving by .21 points. The difference between the early warning only group and the control group was statistically significant at the .1 level. These findings suggest PARTNER’s positive impact on security forces’ responsiveness.

Figure 4: Response of Security Forces



Community members were also asked “How satisfied are you about how the police respond to conflict threats in this area? In other words, how responsive do you think these actors are in preventing violence and resolving violent situations?” on a scale of 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very satisfied). Figure 5 shows satisfaction with the police response increased in both treatment groups, rising between .24 and .4 points. In the control group, however, satisfaction barely increased. The difference between the early warning-only and control group was statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level. This credibly demonstrates that PARTNER increased satisfaction with police response.

Figure 5: Satisfaction with Police Response



## Social Cohesion Indicators

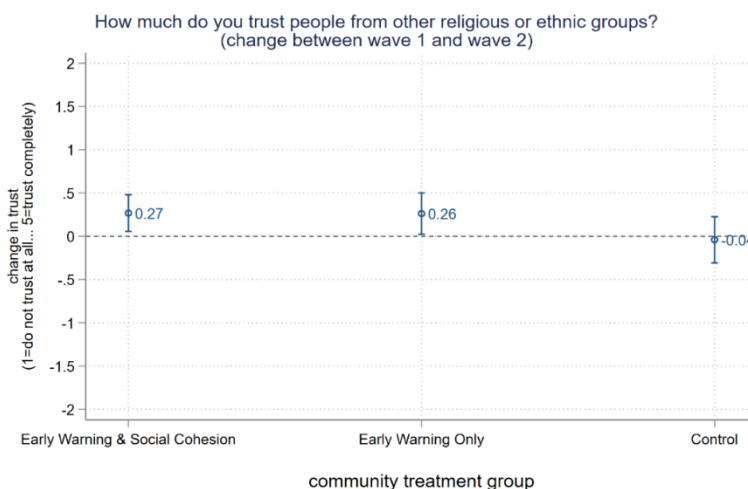
### PARTNER COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCED INCREASED TRUST:

For the first social cohesion indicator, respondents were asked “how much do you trust people from other religious or ethnic groups?” on a scale of 1 (do not trust at all) to 5 (trust completely). Figure 6 shows trust increased in both



PARTNER treatment communities and decreased in control communities. The difference between the early warning and social cohesion treatment group and control group is statistically significant at the  $p < .1$  level.

Figure 6: Trust in Others



**PARTNER COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCED IMPROVEMENT IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS:**

Respondents were asked if they agreed that they “*have the knowledge, skills, and tools to help resolve conflicts in this area*” on a scale of 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Figure 7 demonstrates PARTNER’s strong effect. Respondents in both treatment groups were statistically significantly more likely to show improvement in conflict management skills than those in control communities. The surveys in wave 2 found that 85.5% of respondents in the early warning and social cohesion communities and 81.8% in the early warning-only communities agreed or strongly agreed that they had these skills, compared to 68.9% in control communities.

Figure 7: Conflict Management Skills



## Violence Indicators

### *PARTNER COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCED LESS CONFLICT-RELATED DEATHS THAN CONTROL COMMUNITIES:*

To test PARTNER’s effect on actual levels of violence, Mercy Corps used information from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data dataset,<sup>7</sup> which gathers data on conflicts using international and local news sources as well as a network of local reporters. The RCT recorded the levels of conflict-related fatalities within a 25km radius of each community in 2022 and 2024. This resulted in 12 “clusters” of armed conflict comprising 1-4 communities.

The results reported in Figure 8 show fatalities increased in the control community clusters by an average of 6.83 per community over this period. In the early warning and social cohesion treatment communities, however, they decreased by 73.47 deaths. Deaths also decreased by an average of 30.4 in the early warning only communities

In the control communities, fatalities increased by 13.6% from 2022-2024, while they decreased in the two treatment communities by 74.7% and 60.8%. Despite the small sample size, the difference between fatalities in the early warning and social cohesion treatment group and the control group was statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . This represents a potential story success for PARTNER, as it strongly indicates that its interventions have saved lives.

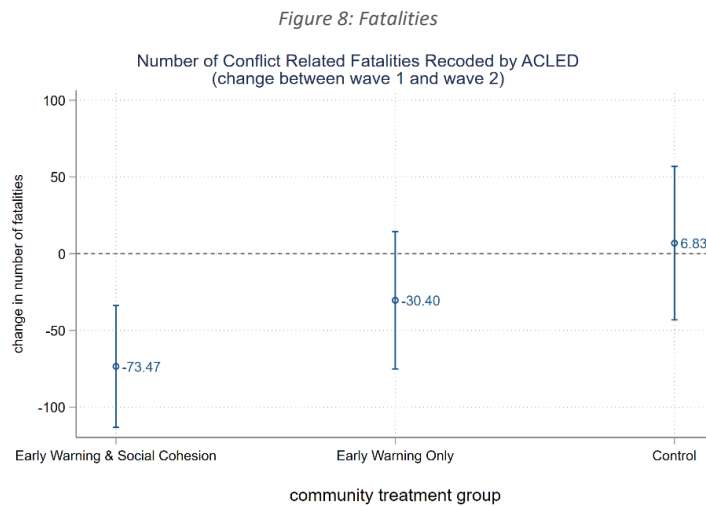
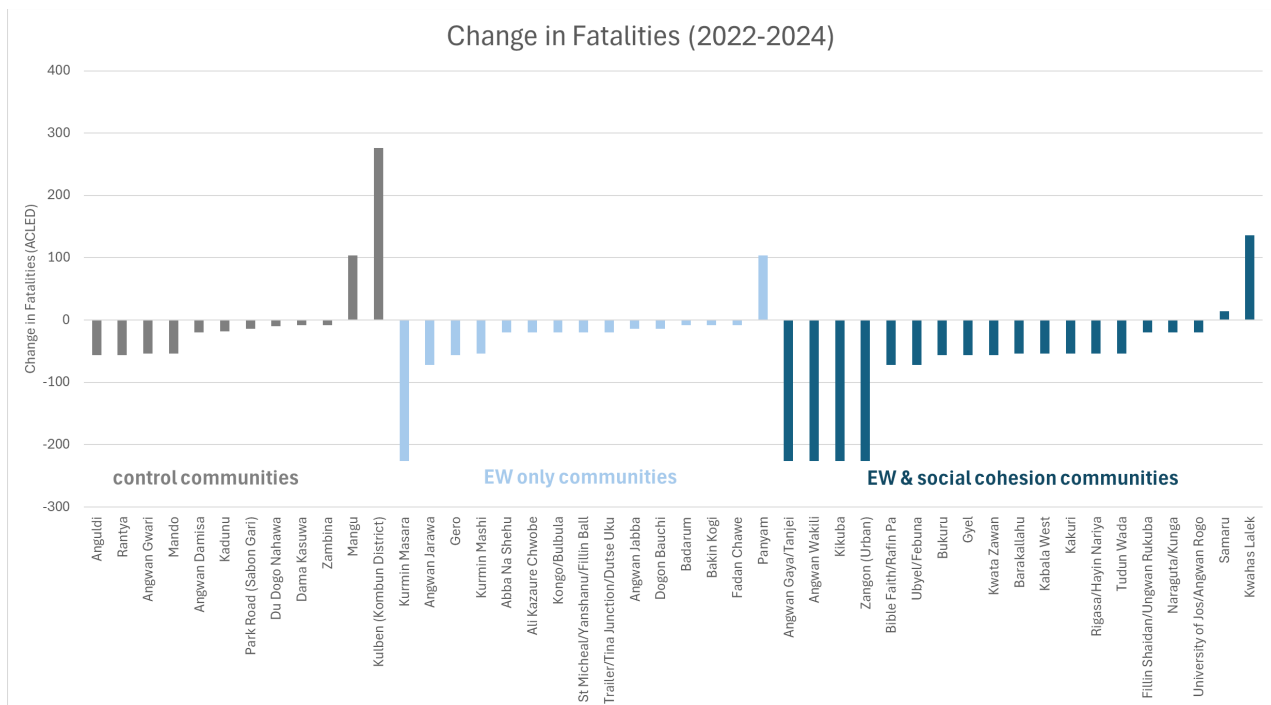


Figure 9 shows the changes in the number of fatalities at the community level. It illustrates that, while most communities experienced reduced violence from 2022-2024, the declines were larger and more consistent in treatment communities, especially for those receiving both early warning and social cohesion interventions.

*Figure 9: Change in Fatalities by Community*

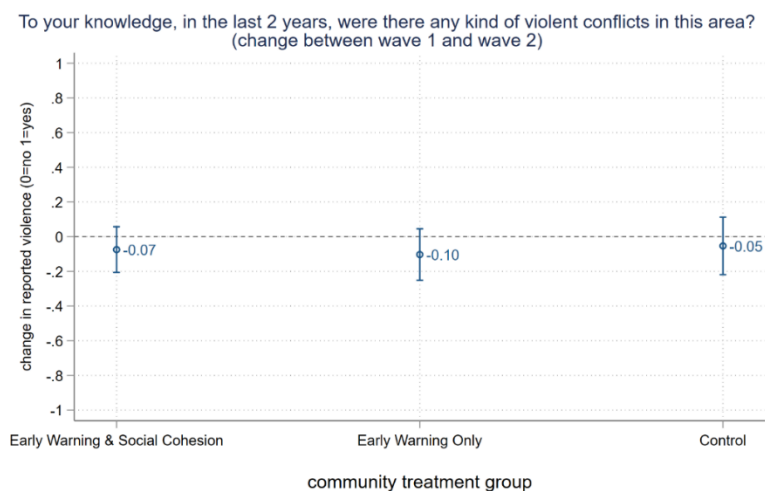
<sup>7</sup> Raleigh, Clionadh, Rew Linke, Håvard Hegre, and Joakim Karlsen. 2010. "Introducing ACLED: An armed conflict location and event dataset." *Journal of peace research* 47, no. 5: 651-660.



**PARTNER COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCED SOME IMPROVEMENTS OF SECURITY SITUATIONS:**

To examine whether the PARTNER intervention helped to reduce levels of violence in the treatment communities, the RCT asked respondents, “To your knowledge, in the last 2 years, were there any kind of violent conflicts in this area?” Figure 10 shows community members across all three groups reported a small decrease in violence, ranging from 10% in early warning only communities, to 7% in early warning and social cohesion communities, to 5% in control communities. None of these differences were statistically significant. However, it is important to note that detecting small effects at high levels of confidence is very challenging with this blunt, binary measure of violence.

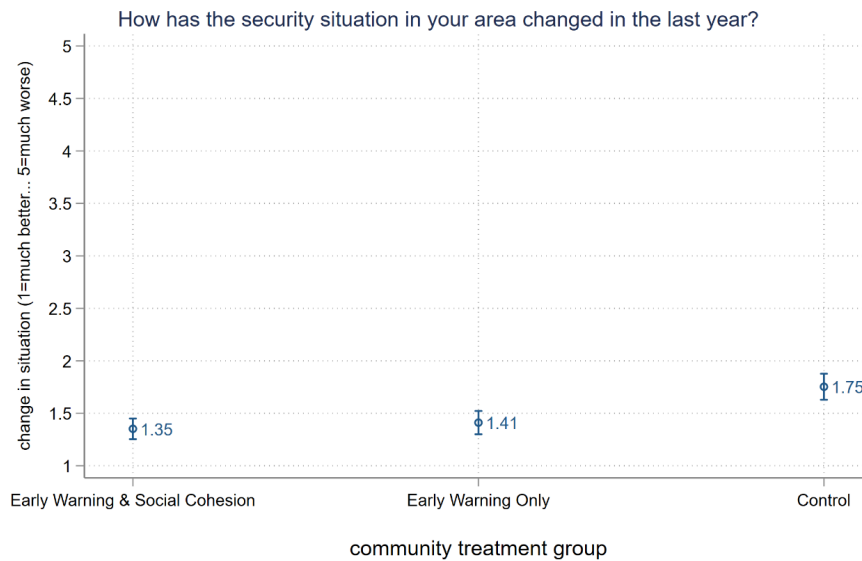
Figure 10: Changes in Reported Violence



To further explore how PARTNER might have affected communities’ experience with violence, the RCT asked respondents in the second wave if the “security situation” in their area had improved or deteriorated over the

previous year, with answers ranging from 1 (*gotten much better*) to 5 (*gotten much worse*). Figure 11 shows that respondents from both treatment communities were statistically significantly more likely to say the situation had improved compared to respondents in control communities. While surveys showed only 45% of people in control communities said the situation had *gotten much better* in 2024, 70% in early warning and social cohesion communities and 65% in early warning-only communities said their situation had *gotten much better*.

Figure 11: Reported Improvement in Security Situation



## Conclusion

Together, the results of this RCT suggest PARTNER may already be having a positive impact within treatment communities in Nigeria’s Kaduna and Plateau States. Citizens in the communities receiving PARTNER programs were more likely to be aware of their early warning systems and receive timely warnings. They were also more likely to see improvement in security forces’ response to violent events. Citizens in PARTNER communities were more likely to trust others and report that they have the skills to resolve conflicts in their communities. Finally, PARTNER communities witnessed significant decreases in violence and perceptions of security issues.

These results are especially promising, given PARTNER only had two years to demonstrate impact through this RCT, with some elements of the early warning system being operational for less than a year. To better understand how PARTNER worked and can be widely applied, it is important to continue this kind of research. Therefore, Mercy Corps recommends PARTNER communities be followed for at least two more years and then, be surveyed again.

## Key Recommendations

PARTNER’s key findings highlight critical strategies for enhancing EWER systems and fostering social cohesion in communities affected by violence. To build on these successes and ensure these interventions’ sustainability and scalability, Mercy Corps proposes the following recommendations for donors, policymakers, and practitioners engaged in peacebuilding and violence prevention efforts:

- *SCALE AND EXPAND EARLY WARNINGS AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS*: Expand the reach of EWER systems to more communities, particularly those with a high risk of violence, and ensure their integration with local and national response mechanisms to enhance effectiveness and sustainability.
- *EMBED SOCIAL COHESION INITIATIVES*: Integrate social cohesion-building initiatives into atrocity prevention programs to enhance trust, cooperation, and conflict resolution capabilities, as communities receiving combined interventions show stronger outcomes than early warning systems alone.
- *PRIORITIZE EVIDENCE IN PEACEBUILDING PROGRAMS*: Promote the use of rigorous evidence-based approaches in the design, implementation, and evaluation of peacebuilding programs to ensure resources target interventions with proven impact.
- *DEPLOY AND INTEGRATE BASIC TECHNOLOGY INTO EWER*: Leverage accessible and cost-effective technologies, such as mobile applications and SMS services to strengthen the efficiency and scalability of EWER systems.
- *INFLUENCE POLICY IN EWER AND PEACEBUILDING AT MACRO, MESO, AND MICRO LEVELS*: Advocate for inclusive policies that prioritize EWER and peacebuilding efforts across all levels of governance, fostering synergy among community, state, and national actors.
- *VALIDATE AND AMPLIFY INDIGENOUS EWER INITIATIVES AND ORGANIC PEACEBUILDING INITIATIVES*: Recognize, support, and scale indigenous and community-driven EWER and peacebuilding practices, ensuring their alignment with broader program objectives while maintaining local ownership.
- *PROMOTE LOCAL OWNERSHIP OF EWER SYSTEMS*: Promote collaboration among communities, governments, CSOs, and security actors to build inclusive, locally led EWER systems that are sustainable and culturally sensitive.