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Full Length Research

Monitoring and evaluating peacebuilding initiatives in Africa: A multi-pillar framework applied to Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Conflict recurrence remains the dominant pattern of armed conflict in Africa, as relapses in South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Mali show. Such recurrence signals a learning deficit: peacebuilding programmes often cannot show what has changed, for whom, under what conditions and why. Existing scholarship diagnoses this deficit but offers few integrated frameworks that track change across several dimensions of peace at once and that have been tested against African programmes. This article addresses that gap. Its objectives are to identify the structural constraints on peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation in Africa, to develop a framework that responds to them, and to assess how far Nigerian programmes capture change across its dimensions. The study is qualitative and desk-based: it synthesises theory-based evaluation, contribution analysis, complexity thinking, conflict transformation and bottom-up approaches to measuring peace, and applies the resulting framework through a structured comparison of four purposively selected Nigerian cases using triangulated secondary evidence. It identifies five constraints: attribution, timeframe mismatch, weak community ownership, multi-level complexity and indicator validity. In response, it proposes a multi-pillar framework that tracks change simultaneously across the security, governance, socio-economic, reconciliation and justice, and local ownership dimensions, anchored in an adaptive learning cycle. The cases are Operation Safe Corridor, conflict-sensitive election programming, early warning and response systems, and civil society peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. The findings show that Nigerian programmes record outputs and individual-level change with reasonable consistency but seldom capture community-level outcomes, cross-pillar interdependencies or local ownership. The article contributes an integrated, field-ready framework and concludes that credible peacebuilding evaluation in Africa requires funding cycles long enough to observe relational change, community-validated indicators, genuine local ownership and the routine use of evidence in adaptive programme management.

Keywords: Adaptive peacebuilding, conflict sensitivity, contribution analysis, early warning, everyday peace indicators, local ownership.

INTRODUCTION

Peace agreements often end the fighting without ending the conflict. The World Bank (2011) *World Development Report* found that more than 90 per cent of the civil wars fought in the 2000s occurred in countries that had already experienced a civil war in the preceding 30 years. Walter (2011) background analysis for that report places the recurrence rate for civil wars between 1945 and 2009 at 57 per cent and shows that recurring civil war has become the dominant form of armed conflict, concentrated disproportionately in the poorest states of sub-Saharan Africa. Walter (2004) also shows that recurrence is driven less by the legacy of previous fighting than by poor living conditions and the absence of non-violent avenues for political participation. More recent data show that the problem has deepened: 2025 recorded 65 state-based conflicts in 35 countries, the highest number since 1946, and Africa hosted more non-state conflicts than any other region (Rustad, 2026). Recurrence, in other words, is a failure to transform the conditions that sustain violence, which are not always those that triggered it, and a failure

to notice, in time, that those conditions have remained unchanged.

That second failure is the concern of this article. Peacebuilding programmes routinely report what they did: dialogues convened, youth trained and committees formed. They far less often report what changed as a result, for whom and why. Church and Rogers (2006) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) both identify this preoccupation with outputs rather than outcomes as a structural weakness of the field. Outputs remain necessary because they document delivery; the problem is that monitoring often stops at outputs instead of extending to the outcomes they are meant to produce. Only a programme that can assess its contribution to peace can improve, and only a donor that can identify effective investments can allocate resources rationally. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is therefore not an administrative appendage to peacebuilding; it is the mechanism through which peacebuilding learns and sustains its gains.

The stakes are acute in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, where insurgency in the North-East, farmer–herder violence in the Middle Belt, banditry in the North-West and recurrent instability in the Niger Delta coexist within a single federation (Obi, 2018b; Obi *et al*., 2026b; Obi *et al*., 2026a). Peacebuilding responses to these conflicts are numerous, but evidence of what they achieve is thin. Event datasets such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) (Raleigh *et al*., 2010) trace violence with considerable precision, but a fall in violent events does not by itself show that a peacebuilding programme contributed to it. Evaluating that contribution is a distinct task.

The literature has diagnosed these weaknesses (Caplan, 2019; Church and Rogers, 2006; OECD, 2012) and produced bottom-up alternatives (Firchow, 2018), but it offers few integrated frameworks that track change across several dimensions of peace at once and that have been examined against African programmes. This is the gap the article addresses. It asks three questions: (1) What structural constraints limit peacebuilding M&E in African settings? (2) What framework can respond to them? (3) How far do Nigerian programmes capture change across the dimensions of that framework? The corresponding objectives are to identify the constraints, to develop a multi-pillar M&E framework and to assess Nigerian practice against it. The next section sets out the methodology, followed by the theoretical framework. The results and discussion then examine the constraints, present the framework and apply it to Nigeria; the conclusion states the findings, contributions and implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this article, learning means the process by which an organisation detects and corrects errors by comparing expected with actual results. Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguish single-loop learning, which adjusts actions within existing assumptions, from double-loop learning, which questions the assumptions themselves. Peacebuilding M&E needs both: it must show whether activities are delivered and whether the theory behind them holds. Six theoretical foundations inform the framework: (1) theory of change; (2) theory-based evaluation and contribution analysis; (3) complexity theory and adaptive peacebuilding; (4) conflict transformation; (5) the local turn and everyday peace; and (6) conflict sensitivity.

Peacebuilding M&E rests on a distinction between monitoring, the continuous tracking of implementation and context, and evaluation, the periodic assessment of relevance, effectiveness, impact and sustainability (OECD, 2012). Both depend on an explicit *theory of change*: a causal account of how and why a set of activities is expected to produce a desired change (Rogers, 2014). Church and Rogers (2006) argue that the principal weakness of peacebuilding programmes is not the absence of data but the lack of articulated theories against which the data can be interpreted. Where assumptions of the kind they catalogue, for example that dialogue reduces prejudice or that livelihoods reduce recruitment, remain implicit, evaluation cannot test them, and failure cannot be diagnosed.

A second foundation is *theory-based evaluation* and, within it, *contribution analysis*. Conventional impact evaluation seeks to attribute an observed change to a single intervention through a counterfactual comparison. Woolcock (2013) shows that the external validity of such designs is weakest precisely where interventions are complex, implementation is uneven, and context is volatile, which describes most peacebuilding settings. Mayne (2012) proposes contribution analysis as a credible alternative: rather than asking whether a programme caused peace, the evaluator builds and tests a contribution story that asks through which mechanisms and under what conditions the programme plausibly contributed to observed change, while systematically weighing rival explanations.

A third foundation is *complexity*. Conflict systems are non-linear, adaptive and path-dependent; small interventions can produce disproportionate effects, and effective interventions can be overwhelmed by exogenous shocks. de Coning (2018) accordingly argues for adaptive peacebuilding, in which programmes proceed through iterative cycles of action, feedback and adjustment. Ricigliano (2012) similarly urges systems thinking that links attitudinal, institutional and structural change. For M&E, complexity implies that monitoring must be continuous and must feed into management decisions, rather than being reserved for end-of-programme verdicts.

A fourth foundation is *relational and long-term transformation*. Lederach (1997) situates peacebuilding

within a timeframe of decades and locates its core in the restoration of relationships. Lederach *et al*. (2007) translate this into reflective practice, in which programme teams routinely examine whether their theories of change are still valid. Because the most important peacebuilding outcomes are relational and include events that do not happen, such as retaliations averted and recruitment forgone, they are difficult to observe with conventional indicators (Caplan, 2019).

A fifth foundation is *local and everyday peace*. Mac Ginty (2011) and Autesserre (2014) show how international intervention privileges external knowledge and standardised templates over local understanding. Firchow and Mac Ginty (2017) and Firchow (2018) respond with bottom-up "everyday peace indicators" generated by communities themselves, demonstrating that locally defined measures can be both valid and comparable. This resonates with Albert's (2001) emphasis on grounding third-party intervention in the social realities of the communities concerned, and with Donais (2012) account of local ownership as a negotiated, rather than proclaimed, condition.

Finally, M&E must itself be *conflict-sensitive*. Anderson (1999) established that aid inevitably interacts with conflict and can reinforce either connectors or dividers, while Bush (1998) pioneered peace and conflict impact assessment as a means of anticipating those effects. Obi (2018c) extends conflict sensitivity to election programming in Nigeria, showing that electoral support can inflame tensions if its conflict effects are not deliberately monitored. The same logic applies to M&E: the selection of respondents, the questions asked, and the storage of data can expose informants to risk or reinforce divisions.

Civil society is central to all six foundations. Paffenholz (2010) identifies monitoring as one of the core peacebuilding functions of civil society, alongside protection, advocacy, socialisation, social cohesion, intermediation and facilitation, and service delivery. Obi (2018a) applies a functional perspective to civil society peacebuilding, and Obi and Edet (2023) argue that peace must be built "from the ground up", with civil society organisations acting as intermediaries between communities and formal institutions. These insights position civil society not merely as a subject of evaluation but as a producer and custodian of peace-relevant evidence.

These foundations are not fully consistent. Contribution analysis seeks credible causal claims, whereas complexity theory warns that causal pathways in conflict systems are non-linear and unstable. Donors favour standardised indicators that allow comparison, whereas the local turn holds that valid indicators must be defined by communities. Conflict transformation stresses change over decades, whereas accountability demands results within funding cycles. The framework reconciles these tensions in three ways. It treats the theory of change as a hypothesis to be revised through the adaptive cycle, so causal claims remain provisional. It combines common pillars, which allow comparison, with community-defined indicators within each pillar, following Firchow and Mac Ginty (2017) case for complementarity. It also pairs long-term outcomes with leading indicators observable within programme cycles.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design that combines framework development with a structured comparative case study. In the first stage, the framework was built deductively from a synthesis of the peacebuilding evaluation literature, using the post-conflict reconstruction pillars of Hamre and Sullivan (2002) as its organising structure. In the second stage, the framework was applied to Nigerian programmes through structured, focused comparison: the same four questions were asked of each case. Which pillars are monitored? At what level (individual, community, institutional or systemic) is change measured? Do communities help define indicators? Does evidence feed back into programme decisions?

Four cases were selected purposively: Operation Safe Corridor, conflict-sensitive election programming, early warning and response systems, and civil society peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. Together they cover the North-East insurgency, the national electoral arena and the Niger Delta; they span state, regional and civil society implementers; and each maps onto a different pillar of the framework. Each also has a documented evidence base sufficient for assessment.

The study relies on secondary data: peer-reviewed evaluations and field studies, programme and policy documents, regional frameworks and the authors' earlier research on Nigerian peacebuilding. To limit the bias of any single source, the findings for each case were triangulated across at least two independent studies, with particular weight given to studies based on fieldwork with affected communities (Hassan, 2022; Ike *et al*., 2021; Owonikoko, 2022). The analysis used pattern matching: monitoring practice observed in each case was compared with the practice the framework requires, and gaps were recorded by pillar and level (Table 2). The main limitation is the absence of primary fieldwork; the findings therefore identify gaps in documented practice rather than measure programme impact.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structural constraints on peacebuilding evaluation in Africa

The synthesis identifies five structural constraints that weaken peacebuilding M&E in volatile African settings. Each is stated below with its design response, which the framework then incorporates.

The attribution problem

Peace outcomes emerge from the interaction of many actors and forces, including security operations, elite bargains, economic shocks, climate stress and the choices of armed groups. Isolating the effect of one programme is usually unfeasible, and randomised designs are often ethically or practically impossible in active conflict (Woolcock, 2013). The appropriate response is not to abandon causal inquiry but to reframe it through contribution analysis, process tracing and triangulation, which render claims about influence transparent and testable (Mayne, 2012; OECD, 2012).

The timeframe mismatch

Donor funding cycles typically span one to five years, whereas relational and structural transformation unfolds over a generation (Lederach, 1997). The mismatch biases M&E towards short-term, visible outputs that justify renewal. A partial remedy lies in identifying leading indicators, such as changes in inter-group contact, trust in local institutions or willingness to use non-violent dispute resolution, that can be observed within programme cycles and are theoretically linked to long-term outcomes.

The community ownership deficit

External agencies design many M&E systems, populate them with standardised indicators, administer them through external evaluators, and report the results upward to donors. Such systems are frequently uninformative about the dimensions of peace that communities value (Firchow, 2018). Obi and Edet (2023) identify dependence on external funding and the associated upward accountability as a persistent constraint on civil society peacebuilding in Africa, while Obi and Nyong (2018) show, in the anti-corruption field, that civil society participation depends on genuine space to shape and scrutinise implementation. Participatory evaluation, in which communities help define indicators and interpret findings, improves both legitimacy and data quality.

Multi-level complexity

Peacebuilding operates simultaneously at individual, community, institutional and systemic levels. The most measured outcome, individual attitude change, is insufficient if community norms, institutional arrangements and political-economic incentives remain unchanged. Obi *et al*. (2026a) show how war economies generate vested interests in continued insecurity in Nigeria, and Obi *et al*. (2026b) trace how climate stress and resource insecurity reshape the geography of communal violence. Such systemic drivers can neutralise individual-level gains, and M&E that ignores them will misread progress. The design response is to measure change at each level and to monitor systemic drivers, such as illicit economies and resource stress, as contextual indicators against which programme results are interpreted.

The indicator validity gap

The most pervasive weakness is reliance on proxies that measure activity rather than change: attendance at dialogues, number of committees formed or test scores after training. Such indicators document expenditure rather than effect. Valid outcome indicators are harder to define and measure, and some real change may be only partly observable. That difficulty is a reason to measure carefully, not to retreat to activity counts. Valid outcome indicators must be proximate to the peace dynamics they are intended to capture; examples include the share of disputes settled non-violently, the frequency of inter-group market exchange and willingness to accept returnees (Table 1). Early warning scholarship offers useful models; Akujobi and Obi (2024) and Obi (2025) emphasise indicators that detect shifts in community relations and risk before violence escalates, which can be repurposed as outcome measures when they move in a positive direction.

A multi-pillar framework for monitoring and evaluation

The framework proposed here responds to these constraints by combining two elements: a set of analytical pillars across which change is tracked simultaneously, and an adaptive learning cycle through which evidence is generated, validated and used (Figure 1). The pillars adapt the post-conflict reconstruction framework of Hamre and Sullivan (2002), which distinguishes security, governance and participation, social and economic well-being, and justice and reconciliation, and add a fifth pillar on local ownership drawn from the literature reviewed above (Donais, 2012; Obi, 2018a; Obi and Edet, 2023).

The rationale for simultaneous tracking is analytical rather than administrative: its purpose is to reveal how change in one pillar affects another, not to complete a reporting checklist. Hamre and Sullivan (2002) stress that progress in one pillar is unsustainable without progress in the others. An M&E system that monitors only one or two pillars will generate false positives, for example, security gains that mask political exclusion, and false negatives, for example, reconciliation gains that appear to stall because the socio-economic conditions required to sustain them are unmeasured. Monitoring across all five pillars exposes these interdependencies and enables programmes to recognise when progress in one dimension is being undermined by deterioration in another.

The *security pillar* tracks physical safety and freedom

Table 1. Illustrative indicators, methods and Nigerian applications by Pillar.

Pillar	Illustrative outcome indicators	Data sources and methods	Nigerian application
Security	Conflict incidents and fatalities; displacement and return; perceived safety; trust in police	Event data; official records; safety perception surveys; trend analysis	Early warning indicators (Akujobi and Obi, 2024; Obi, 2025); community policing (Obi and Edet, 2024)
Political and governance	Electoral violence; inclusion of marginalised groups; perceived fairness and legitimacy	Election observation reports; governance surveys; stakeholder interviews; process tracing	Conflict-sensitive election programming (Obi, 2018c)
Socio-economic	Youth livelihoods; access to services; horizontal inequalities; resource-related disputes	Household surveys; administrative data; participatory wealth ranking	Youth development (Obi, 2024b); climate and resource stress (Obi *et al*., 2026b)
Reconciliation and justice	Inter-group contact and trust; acceptance of former combatants; victim satisfaction	Social cohesion surveys; focus groups; Most Significant Change stories	Operation Safe Corridor reintegration (Hassan, 2022; Owonikoko, 2022)
Local ownership	Community leadership in design; downward accountability; sustainability after external funding	Organisational assessments; community feedback; participatory evaluation	Civil society peacebuilding in the Niger Delta (Obi, 2018b; Obi and Edet, 2023)

Note. Indicators are illustrative and should be adapted to local context and data capacity.

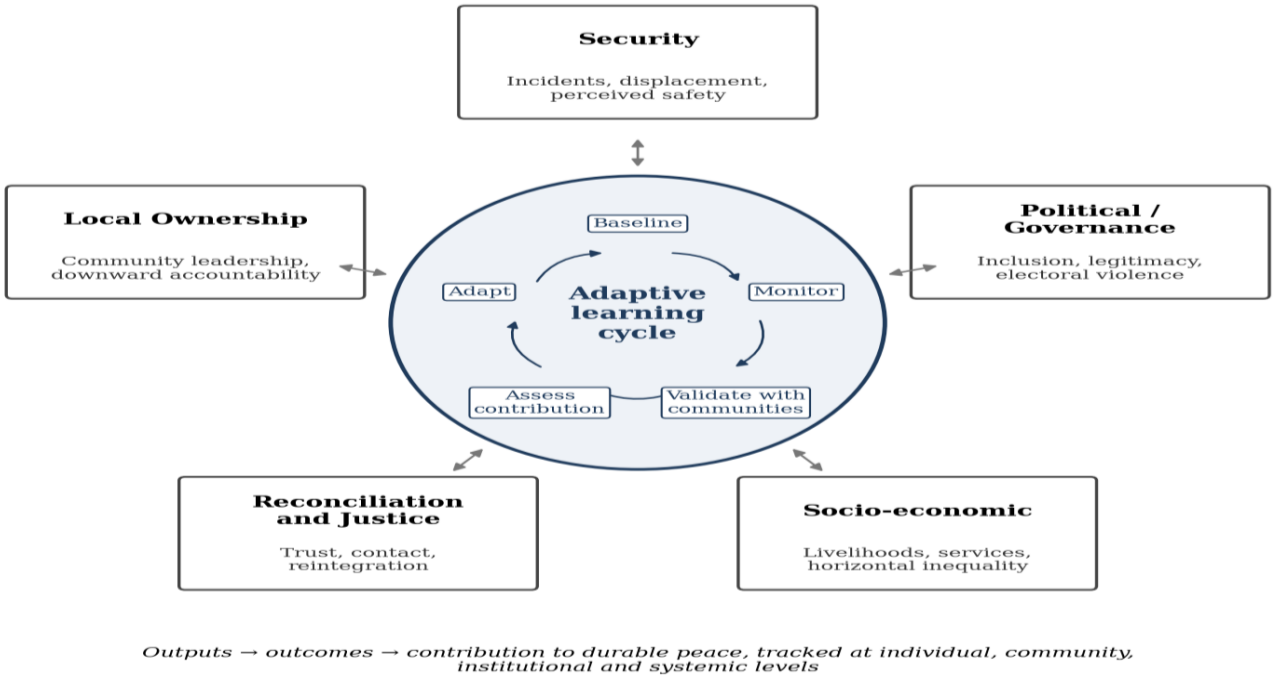


Figure 1. Multi-pillar adaptive framework for monitoring and evaluating peacebuilding. The five pillars are tracked simultaneously; the central cycle shows the five steps of adaptive learning. Source: Authors' construct, adapted from Hamre and Sullivan (2002), Church and Rogers (2006) and de Coning (2018).

from violence, drawing on event data (Raleigh *et al*., 2010), official records and community safety perception surveys. The *political and governance pillar* tracks the inclusiveness, legitimacy and responsiveness of institutions, including the incidence of electoral violence and the participation of marginalised groups (Obi, 2018c). The *socio-economic pillar* tracks the material conditions that sustain or undermine peace, with particular attention to horizontal inequalities between identity groups, which Stewart (2008) identifies as a significant driver of group violence, and to youth livelihoods (Obi, 2024b). The *reconciliation and justice pillar* tracks relationships,

acknowledgement and accountability, including inter-group contact, trust and the reintegration of former combatants. The *local ownership pillar* tracks whether communities and civil society organisations lead, sustain and hold others accountable for peace processes independently of external support (Obi and Edet, 2023). Table 1 summarises illustrative indicators, data sources and methods for each pillar.

The adaptive learning cycle at the centre of the framework comprises five recurring steps. Baselines are established across all pillars before implementation. Monitoring data are then collected at regular intervals. Communities validate indicators and interpret emerging findings. Evaluators assess the programme's contribution against rival explanations. Finally, managers adapt strategy in light of the evidence. The cycle operationalises de Coning (2018) adaptive peacebuilding and Lederach *et al*. (2007) reflective practice within a single, repeatable routine.

The framework builds on, rather than replaces, existing approaches. The OECD (2012) guidance supplies evaluation criteria but not a structure for tracking interdependent dimensions of peace. Church and Rogers (2006) supply the theory-of-change and indicator logic but focus on individual programmes. Everyday peace indicators (Firchow, 2018) supply community-defined measures but do not by themselves link them to institutional and systemic change, and reflective peacebuilding (Lederach *et al*., 2007) supplies the learning routine. The framework's contribution is to combine these elements: it makes local ownership a pillar in its own right, requires simultaneous tracking across pillars and builds community validation into a repeatable cycle. Its main cost is data demand, which is why indicators should be scaled to local capacity (Obi, 2026).

Principles for applying the framework

The framework is an adaptable instrument rather than a fixed template. Programme designers should select and calibrate indicators to the conflict dynamics and data capacity of each setting while preserving coverage across all five pillars. Five principles govern its use.

The first is *baseline establishment*. Change cannot be measured without a starting point. Where insecurity prevents comprehensive baseline surveys, retrospective questions, secondary event data and administrative records can be triangulated to construct a provisional baseline, provided their limitations are acknowledged (OECD, 2012).

The second is *community validation*. Communities frequently recognise signals of peace that external analysts overlook, such as the resumption of shared markets, cross-community festivals or the return of mixed commercial partnerships. Firchow and Mac Ginty (2017) show that we can systematically generate and aggregate indicators of this kind. Techniques such as the Most Significant Change method (Davies and Dart, 2005) allow communities to identify and explain changes they consider important and are particularly useful for the reconciliation and justice pillar.

The third is *conflict-sensitive data practice*. Data collection in volatile settings can endanger respondents, raise expectations or be perceived as partisan. Following Anderson (1999), M&E teams should assess how their presence interacts with local dividers and connectors, protect respondent identities and ensure that sampling does not systematically exclude groups.

The fourth is *adaptive management*. Monitoring findings should feed programme decisions at regular intervals rather than wait for final evaluation. Church and Rogers (2006) and de Coning (2018) both hold that the programmes most likely to succeed are those that adjust strategy in response to feedback. Because outcome indicators register change after the fact, each pillar should pair them with leading indicators, such as hate speech, rumours of mobilisation or declining attendance at shared markets, that signal deterioration early enough for programmes to adjust.

The fifth is *triangulation across levels and sources*. Because no single data source is reliable in conflict settings, event data, surveys, qualitative interviews and community reports should be cross-checked, and findings should be disaggregated by gender, age, location, ethnicity, religion and other identity groups to reveal differential effects.

Applying the framework to Nigerian experience

This subsection presents the results of the case analysis. Each case is examined for what is monitored (a strength) and what is not (a gap); Table 2 summarises the results.

Operation Safe Corridor, established by the Defence Headquarters in 2016 as the federal programme for the deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of former Boko Haram members (Hassan, 2022), illustrates the gap between individual-level and community-level monitoring. Hassan (2022) assessment, based on interviews and focus groups in Borno, Adamawa and Gombe States in North-East Nigeria, finds that the programme has been commended for receiving and rehabilitating former combatants but faces serious problems of credibility and acceptance in the wider community. Owonikoko (2022) and Ike *et al*. (2021) similarly document community resistance to the return of former combatants, linked to unaddressed grievances and concerns about justice for victims. In terms of the framework, the programme monitors the individual dimension of the reconciliation and justice pillar but lacks systematic community-level outcome data on acceptance, trust and victim satisfaction. Community acceptance, which early warning frameworks treat as a signal of reintegration risk (Akujobi and Obi,

Table 2. Summary of case results: what is monitored and what is missing, by pillar.

Case	Main pillar	Monitored (strength)	Gap and recommended response
Operation Safe Corridor	Reconciliation and justice	Numbers received, rehabilitated and graduated; individual deradicalisation	Community acceptance, trust and victim satisfaction untracked; add acceptance surveys and trigger dialogue and victim support when acceptance falls
Election programming	Political and governance	Accords signed; dialogues held	Violence, perceived fairness and post-election relations untracked; add predictive early warning and post-election perception surveys
Early warning and response	Security	Risk incidents reported by community observers	Improvement rarely documented; weak link to response; record positive change and response time
Niger Delta civil society	Local ownership	Activities and mediation roles	Exclusion, livelihoods, funding dependence and distribution of benefits untracked; add inclusion and downward-accountability measures

Source: Authors' analysis of the cases discussed above.

2024), should be tracked as a core outcome indicator. Where acceptance falls, the adaptive cycle should trigger concrete responses, such as community dialogues before further returns, support for victims and adjusted reintegration timelines.

Election programming presents a comparable pattern within the political and governance pillar. Obi (2018c) argues that election support in Nigeria must be conflict-sensitive, since electoral processes can trigger violence where political competition overlaps with identity cleavages. Pre-election peace accords and dialogue sessions are easily counted, but a signed accord records a commitment rather than an achievement. Accords remain useful, but they should be paired with predictive indicators, such as hate speech, the mobilisation of party thugs and pre-election incidents, which allow violence to be anticipated rather than merely recorded (Akujobi and Obi, 2024; Obi, 2018c). Outcome monitoring should also track the incidence and geography of electoral violence, perceptions of fairness among losing constituencies and the durability of inter-party relations after results are declared.

Early warning and response systems demonstrate the potential of distributed community monitoring. Akujobi and Obi (2024) and Obi (2025) show that early warning is effective only when data collection is linked to timely response and that community-based observers are indispensable for detecting localised risk. At the regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Conflict Prevention Framework (ECOWAS, 2008) institutionalises early warning as part of the regional peace and security architecture, although Achu *et al*. (2026) observe that continental mechanisms continue to struggle to translate information into effective conflict management in the Sahel. Community observer networks can serve a dual function: warning of deterioration and documenting improvement. Integrating early warning indicators into programme M&E would give Nigerian peacebuilding the community-level outcome data it currently lacks. Community policing offers a related avenue, since Obi and Edet (2024) show that its effectiveness depends on trust and collaboration between police and communities, which can be monitored as security pillar outcomes.

Civil society peacebuilding in the Niger Delta illustrates the local ownership pillar. Obi (2018b, 2022) shows that civil society organisations have played important roles in mediating between communities, companies and government, but that their contribution is constrained by limited capacity, dependence on external funding and uneven partnership with the state. Ikelegbe and Umukoro (2016) demonstrate that the Presidential Amnesty Programme, launched in 2009, while reducing militant violence, excluded significant constituencies and left underlying grievances unresolved. Obi and Sonime (2026) further question whether amnesty stipends and host-community trust funds finance peace or fund fragility, which makes tracking who benefits a core monitoring task. Monitoring that had tracked exclusion, livelihoods and community perceptions alongside the decline in attacks would have signalled earlier that security gains rested on fragile socio-economic and political foundations. The same lesson applies to countering violent extremism, where Obi (2024a) finds that civil society effectiveness depends on sustained engagement rather than short-term project cycles.

Across these cases, a consistent pattern emerges (Table 2). Nigerian programmes measure outputs and individual-level change with reasonable consistency, but community-level outcomes, cross-pillar interdependencies and local ownership are rarely tracked systematically. The multi-pillar framework is designed to close precisely these gaps.

These results support the article's central argument. The gap is not an absence of data but a mismatch between what is measured and what matters: data are concentrated at the individual and output levels, while the community and systemic levels, where recurrence is decided, remain

largely unmeasured. This is consistent with the output bias identified by Church and Rogers (2006) and the OECD (2012), and with Firchow (2018) finding that externally designed systems overlook what communities value. It also helps explain why security gains in the Niger Delta and the North-East have proved fragile: monitoring registered the decline in attacks but not the persistence of exclusion and grievance.

Conclusion

Monitoring and evaluation is the strategic spine of peacebuilding rather than its technical tail. A programme that cannot establish whether it is contributing to peace is not merely inefficient; it is unaccountable to the communities whose lives it affects and to the resources committed in its name. The persistence of conflict recurrence documented by the World Bank (2011) and Walter (2011) reflects, in significant part, a failure of learning. The multi-pillar framework developed here addresses that failure by combining simultaneous tracking across five analytical pillars with an adaptive learning cycle, grounded in theory-based evaluation, complexity thinking and bottom-up approaches to measuring peace.

The study has three main findings. First, five structural constraints (attribution, timeframe mismatch, weak community ownership, multi-level complexity and indicator validity) consistently weaken peacebuilding M&E in Africa. Second, a framework that tracks five pillars simultaneously within an adaptive learning cycle can address these constraints. Third, Nigerian programmes measure outputs and individual change reasonably well but rarely capture community-level outcomes, cross-pillar interdependencies or local ownership. The article contributes to knowledge in three ways: it integrates separate strands of evaluation theory into a single operational framework; it treats local ownership as a measurable pillar rather than a principle; and it provides a structured, cross-case assessment of Nigerian peacebuilding M&E that shows where evidence is missing.

Several implications follow. Programme designers should articulate explicit theories of change, establish baselines across all five pillars and validate indicators with communities before monitoring systems are finalised. Implementing organisations should build distributed community monitoring networks, drawing on early warning infrastructure, and hold regular adaptive management reviews in which evidence informs their strategies. Donors should fund programmes over periods long enough to observe relational change, reward demonstrated learning rather than only reported results, and fund community M&E capacity as a peacebuilding investment. Universities, research institutes and regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union should invest in longitudinal datasets and collaborative research that test and refine outcome indicators across African conflict settings.

These reforms are political, not merely technical, and they create winners and losers. Communities and civil society organisations gain voice and a role in judging success. Implementing agencies lose the comfort of output reporting, since outcome data can expose failure and threaten funding, and donors cede some control over indicators to communities. State agencies may resist community-level data that reveal weak acceptance or exclusion, as in reintegration and amnesty programmes, and actors who profit from war economies or patronage stand to lose most from transparent monitoring. Reform is therefore more likely where donors reward honest reporting of failure and where communities hold a formal role in validation.

Implementing these changes would shift peacebuilding M&E from ritual compliance to genuine learning. A designed but unused M&E system performs accountability superficially. Only when evidence routinely informs decisions can peacebuilding in Africa learn whether it is building the peace it claims to pursue. Future research should test the framework through primary fieldwork in the cases examined here.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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