



APPLICATION OF DELIBERATIVE TECHNOLOGY IN ECOWARN: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Gbenga Erin

About the Author



GBENGA ERIN

Gbenga Erin is a Programme Officer at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS Commission), where he works on early warning, data analysis, and conflict prevention systems. With over two decades of experience in development and peace and security programming, he specializes in the application of geospatial technologies and data-driven approaches to human security, electoral monitoring, disaster risk reduction, and crisis response in West Africa. He has contributed to the development of ECOWARN and regional risk and vulnerability assessments across ECOWAS Member States. His research interests include deliberative technologies, early warning systems, and the integration of digital tools into peacebuilding and governance processes.

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Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5F,
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku
Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Tel. +81-3-3356-5481
Fax. +81-3-3356-5482
Email: contact@toda.org

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Abstract

This paper examines institutional applications of deliberative technology within the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN). ECOWARN has traditionally relied on incident reporting and expert analysis to monitor human security risks. In 2025, we used the Pol.is deliberative platform during an ECOWAS retreat and health security workshop. The paper documents the technology's introduction, institutional hesitations, and insights generated. While the platform visualized consensus and divergence among participants, adoption required reframing. Concerns about diplomatic neutrality, data privacy, and institutional culture shaped its reception. Positioning the tool as a facilitation mechanism proved essential for acceptance. The paper argues that deliberative technology can enhance early warning systems by integrating perception data into monitoring frameworks. By capturing trust, sovereignty sensitivity, and shared priorities, deliberative platforms provide depth to existing indicators, particularly in regional health security where cooperation across actors is crucial. The paper concludes that deliberative technology shows promise for early warning systems, especially through national coordination and community engagement, while highlighting both opportunities and constraints within regional security architectures.

Introduction: ECOWAS early warning and response

This paper looks at how deliberative technology was first used in the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN). ECOWARN is a key part of the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture. It works under the Office of the Vice-President of the ECOWAS Commission. ECOWARN started in 2003. It is a system that uses data to watch for early signs of crises. It helps connect regional and national groups. ECOWARN mainly uses reports and expert analysis to track risks to human security. This paper describes a trial to use the digital platform Pol.is in internal meetings and regional health security workshops in 2025.

ECOWARN's analytical framework is built around five thematic sectors: Crime and Criminality, Security, Governance and Human Rights, Health, and Environment. Through 77 field monitors deployed across Member States, the system collects and processes thousands of incident and situation reports. This data feeds into a robust database guided by 56 indicators, structured to track both the structural (root cause) and proximate (trigger) factors influencing regional peace and stability.

This study tells the story of bringing deliberative technology into a sensitive, intergovernmental security institution. We worked inside a diplomatic setting where relationships, neutrality, and trust matter every day. We faced real concerns. Leaders worried about political neutrality. They worried about data sensitivity. They questioned how a digital platform would handle multiple languages. Some felt uneasy about introducing new tools into long-standing diplomatic practice.

At first, the Pol.is platform sparked excitement. Participants could see areas of agreement. They could see where views diverged. The visuals helped people make sense of complex discussions. But excitement did not guarantee adoption. We had to shift how people understood the tool. We stopped describing it as a public opinion platform. We framed it as a structured facilitation method. We showed how it could support high-level policy dialogue rather than replace it.

The pilots did more than test a new platform. They helped strengthen early warning work. Traditional early warning systems track quantitative indicators such as incidents and trends. Our process added something different. The platform captured perceptions. It revealed trust levels. It surfaced policy tensions before they escalated. This approach treated early warning as more than event detection. It focused on how people interpret events and how much support policies actually hold.

The experience points toward a practical next step. We can use deliberative technologies in national coordination bodies. We can use them at the community level. This creates a bridge between regional analysis and local realities. It offers a scalable way to bring citizen perspectives into human security systems.

The ECOWARN case remains exploratory. It does not solve every institutional barrier. But it shows what becomes possible when practitioners use deliberative tools with care. It also shows the limits we must navigate. Together, these lessons contribute to ongoing efforts to modernize early warning and make it more responsive to the people it aims to protect.

First introduction of deliberative technology (April 2025)

ECOWAS introduced deliberative technology for the first time during a departmental retreat of the Office of the Vice President of ECOWAS in April 2025. The demonstration showcased how digital deliberation platforms can collect structured viewpoints, visualize areas of agreement, and clarify divergences within a group. [Pol.is](#) was run for the three days of the retreat and the topic of the deliberation was “How can we enhance teambuilding in OVP”? This question is in line with the objective of the retreat which was to “foster team bonding among staff and enhance their understanding of the various units and programs within the office of the Vice-President (OVP)”. The seed statement was a controversial one deliberately used to trigger conversation; the first statement was: “The biggest problem with OVP is lack of collaboration between units and Directorates. The Directors need to do better.” Participants agreed or disagreed and added new comments which were also voted on throughout the days of the retreat. 26 participants voted while 288 votes were cast, at 11.08 votes per participant on average, while 12 participants submitted 20 comments.

The tool offered a refreshing, highly interactive alternative to traditional discussions, and many were intrigued by the value for rich anonymous dialogues and engagement between all levels of staff within the department, especially because the aim of the retreat was for intra departmental collaboration.

However, this early momentum did not immediately translate into sustained usage. Several concerns emerged:

- **Fear that digital tools might replace physical meetings**, which remain culturally and politically significant within ECOWAS.
- **Worries about political sensitivities**, particularly the risk that public digital input may introduce opinions that could complicate ECOWAS’ need for diplomatic neutrality.
- **Scepticism about feasibility**, given linguistic diversity, varying digital literacy levels, and institutional caution around new methods.

As a result, deliberative technology entered a quiet phase within the Directorate. The initial spark was present — but institutional hesitation slowed further exploration.

Re-emergence and demonstration at the Health Security Workshop (September 2025)

The most significant deployment of deliberative technology occurred later in the year during the Regional Coordination on Health Security Workshop, held in Abuja from September 3–5, 2025. Organized in partnership with the Regional Centre for Surveillance and Disease Control (RCSDC), the workshop brought together 35 participants from ministries of health, technical agencies, academia, and civil society.

The workshop's aim was to strengthen the integration of health into ECOWAS' regional human security framework by building analytical capacity, enhancing surveillance systems, and fostering collaboration among Member States, national coordination mechanisms, and ECOWAS institutions. A digital deliberation platform, Pol.is, was used as a facilitation tool to support discussions on: "Synergies Between Regional and National Health Initiatives". After consultation internally among the facilitators, the seed statements were generated by AI as most suitable for the objectives of the workshop. The first seed statement: "National ownership should take priority, with regional frameworks serving mainly as technical support rather than directive mechanisms" was posted followed by another statement "Funding for health initiatives should be centralized at the regional level to ensure fairness, rather than relying on uneven national budgets." These statements triggered votes and other comments and a total of 25 participants voted while 243 votes were cast, with 18 statements submitted and three opinion groups were identified.

The online deliberation sparked candid reflections on the varying levels of trust in regional integration. While some participants saw harmonization as essential for effective disease surveillance, others expressed concern that national contexts, political realities, or limited resources could create friction.

The platform clearly identified areas of broad agreement, allowing facilitators to bank these as points of consensus and focus discussion time on areas of disagreement. Statements with the most consensus included:

- Consensus Statement 1: *"Cross-border health challenges like epidemics and pandemics require both national action and regional coordination."*
- Consensus Statement 2: *"Using the One Health approach to tackle disease outbreaks should be cascaded among member states in the region."*
- Consensus Statement 3: *"There is a need for a collaborative effort that ensures that all stakeholders will see human security as the focus of every intervention."*
- Consensus Statement 4: *"Intra-Action and After-Action reviews are vital tools used during a disease outbreak. Outcomes should be shared across the region."*

The most divisive statements, highlighting key points of conflict, were:

- Most Divisive 1: *"Regional directives from ECOWAS often overlook country-specific realities, creating more administrative burden than practical solutions."*
- Most Divisive 2: *"Funding for health initiatives should be centralized at the regional level to ensure fairness, rather than relying on uneven national structures to disburse such funds."*

The diversity of opinions underscored the importance of balancing regional oversight with national sovereignty. This discussion highlighted that regional progress depends not only on technology but on building trust, ownership, and accountability among Member States.

There was no contestation around the *need* for cooperation except for how it should be structured. Participants also agreed that resource constraints, not lack of political will alone, undermine health preparedness. This strengthens the case for regional pooled financing mechanisms, emergency health contingency funds and better alignment between ECOWAS, national budgets, and partners. In addition, there was strong support for subsidiarity, that national governments should lead while ECOWAS should support, not

command. It suggests that ECOWAS health initiatives are more effective when co-created with member states, flexible in implementation and framed as facilitative rather than prescriptive. Participants also endorse cascading One Health approaches across member states, indicating openness to integrated human–animal–environment surveillance. The deliberation reveals that participants are neither anti-ECOWAS nor uncritical of it. They support regional health synergies but insist on national ownership, context sensitivity, and collaborative design.

Challenges of deploying deliberative technology in ECOWAS

The primary challenge in introducing this technology was not technical but institutional. There was significant scepticism regarding the acceptance of deliberative technology within the setting of my organization.

Deliberative tools, particularly those designed to collect public or semi-public opinion, are often viewed as tools for civil society organizations (CSOs) or government agencies focused on citizen engagement. Within the context of an international organization dealing with high-level state actors, there were concerns about the ‘sensitivity’ of the data being collected.

The idea of ‘collecting public opinion’ or even ‘expert opinion’ in a transparent, digitally-tracked format was novel and met with hesitation. Questions were raised about data privacy, data ownership, and how this ‘opinion data’ would be used. There was a perception that some candid feedback could be politically incorrect. We had to overcome this by framing the tool not as a public poll, but as a ‘facilitator's tool’—a high-tech, digital-whiteboard to help a closed-door expert meeting be more efficient. This reframing was crucial for its acceptance.

Opportunities and perspectives

Despite the initial challenges, the success of the pilot workshops has opened opportunities for the future. The most promising avenue is the deployment of deliberative technology through the National Centers for Coordination of Response Mechanisms (NCCRMs) and West Africa Network of Peacebuilding (WANEP).

This approach shifts the focus from high-level regional workshops to national-level and community-level engagement. The NCCRMs are the ideal vector for this, as they are already mandated to coordinate response and liaise with civil society and community actors.

A project is already in the pipeline in Nigeria, with the Office for Strategic Preparedness and Resilience (OSPRES). This project envisions a more robust application of deliberative technology to gather citizen-centric insights on human security. The project involves the application of Pol.is and Talk to the City for broader public-facing deliberations, allowing OSPRES to gather public opinion on specific security or development challenges and map areas of consensus and divergence at a national scale. It also allows for more qualitative, story-based input, which can be crucial for understanding the nuances of community-level conflicts or health crises.

This ‘bottom-up’ approach, facilitated by the national centres, represents a significant evolution. It moves deliberative technology from a tool for expert consultation to a tool for community-level early warning. It allows the ECOWARN system to gather rich, qualitative insights directly from affected populations, fulfilling the mandate of a ‘human security’ framework by integrating public perception directly into early warning and response planning.

Conclusion

Deliberative technology is a crucial innovation for the next generation of early warning and response modules in ECOWARN. Its value is not just in making high-level workshops more efficient. Its true prospect lies in its ability to bridge the gap between regional analysis and local reality. Traditional systems detect incidents and analyse risk factors. Yet prevention also requires understanding how policies are perceived, where trust gaps exist, and how coordination tensions unfold before crises escalate. Deliberative technology offers a structured way to surface these qualitative dynamics. In this sense, early warning is not only about detecting events; it is about interpreting meaning.

The broader contribution of this study lies in reframing early warning itself. By providing a scalable, data-driven method for collecting and analyzing insights at the community level, this technology allows ECOWARN to capture the 'why' behind the data, adding critical context to its quantitative indicators, and strengthening its capacity for a truly effective, human-centric conflict prevention.

This pilot project remains limited in scale. However, it signals a possible evolution from expert-only analysis toward human-centred early warning that focuses on perceptions. The ECOWARN case demonstrates that integrating deliberative tools into regional security architectures is possible. However, it will require more experimentation to improve clarity around clear data safeguards, institutional legitimacy, and strategic purpose.



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CONTACT US

Toda Peace Institute

Samon Eleven Bldg. 5 th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Email

contact@toda.org

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