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**DIPLOMACY UNDER STRAIN: ASSESSING THE NIGERIA–SOUTH AFRICA
EARLY WARNING MECHANISM AND BILATERAL RELATIONS IN THE
AFTERMATH OF THE APRIL 2026 XENOPHOBIC ATTACKS**

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Abstract

Recurring xenophobic violence in South Africa has continued to strain diplomatic relations between Nigeria and South Africa despite several bilateral and continental initiatives aimed at promoting African solidarity and conflict prevention. In December 2024, both countries agreed to establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on an Early Warning Mechanism designed to facilitate intelligence sharing, coordinated intervention, and preventive diplomacy against xenophobic attacks. However, renewed violence against Nigerian nationals and other African migrants especially in April 2026 raised serious concerns regarding the effectiveness of the framework. This study examines the implementation and performance of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and its implications for bilateral relations following the April 2026 xenophobic attacks. The study adopts a qualitative case study design and relies on secondary data obtained from official documents, African Union reports, NiDCOM advisories, diplomatic communiqués, media reports, and scholarly literature. The analysis is anchored on constructivist theory, which emphasizes the influence of identities, norms, and social perceptions in shaping interstate relations. Findings reveal that despite the existence of the bilateral framework, state responses remained largely reactive rather than preventive. Measures adopted during the crisis included diplomatic consultations, public safety advisories, and appeals for African Union intervention, while evidence of coordinated preventive action remained limited. The study concludes that diplomatic agreements alone are insufficient to address xenophobia without institutional capacity, political commitment, and societal reorientation. It recommends stronger operationalization of the mechanism, integration with AU frameworks, and intensified citizen diplomacy initiatives.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Early Warning Mechanism, Citizen Diplomacy and Preventive Diplomacy.

Introduction

Nigeria and South Africa remain the two most influential powers in Sub-Saharan Africa, exercising considerable political, economic, and diplomatic influence across the continent. Since the collapse of apartheid in 1994, both countries have maintained relations characterized by cooperation, strategic rivalry, and periodic diplomatic tension. Nigeria played a central role in

supporting the anti-apartheid struggle through financial assistance, diplomatic pressure, and moral advocacy against racial segregation in South Africa. Consequently, expectations emerged that post-apartheid relations would be built on enduring Pan-African solidarity, mutual respect, and continental cooperation (Adebajo, 2010). Despite these expectations, recurrent xenophobic attacks against African migrants in South Africa have repeatedly strained bilateral relations. Nigerian nationals have frequently been among the victims of attacks involving killings, destruction of businesses, looting, and forced displacement. Significant outbreaks occurred in 2008, 2015, 2019, and recently in April 2026, generating diplomatic protests and tensions between Abuja and Pretoria (Crush & Ramachandran, 2026). These incidents exposed contradictions between South Africa's constitutional commitment to human rights and the realities of anti-foreigner violence within sections of its society.

In response to previous crises, both countries adopted several diplomatic initiatives aimed at stabilizing bilateral relations and preventing future violence. These included high-level diplomatic consultations, cultural exchange programmes, economic cooperation agreements, and the strengthening of the Nigeria–South Africa Bi-National Commission. However, critics argued that most responses remained reactive and temporary rather than preventive and institutionalized (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2023).

A major diplomatic development occurred in December 2024 when Nigeria and South Africa agreed to establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on an Early Warning Mechanism scheduled for implementation by March 2025. The framework was intended to facilitate intelligence sharing, rapid response coordination, and preventive diplomacy aimed at detecting and addressing xenophobic threats before escalation (African Union, 2023). The initiative reflected growing recognition that crisis-driven diplomacy alone was insufficient in managing recurring violence. However, renewed xenophobic attacks in April 2026 raised serious concerns regarding the operational effectiveness of the mechanism. The Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM) issued urgent safety advisories to Nigerians residing in South Africa, while Nigerian diplomatic officials engaged South African authorities in emergency consultations. Calls were also made for intervention by the African Union (NiDCOM, 2026). These developments generated important questions regarding the extent to which the Early Warning Mechanism functioned effectively during the crisis.

This study therefore examines the effectiveness of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and related diplomatic measures in the aftermath of the April 2026 xenophobic attacks. The study further assesses the implications of the crisis for bilateral relations, citizen diplomacy, and continental conflict prevention mechanisms.

Problem Statement

Recurring xenophobic violence in South Africa continues to undermine diplomatic relations between Nigeria and South Africa despite repeated bilateral engagements and continental interventions. Although, several diplomatic initiatives have been introduced since the major xenophobic crises of 2008, 2015, and 2019, attacks against African migrants have persisted, revealing significant weaknesses in preventive diplomacy and institutional coordination. Going forward, the December, 2024 agreement establishing a Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism represented an important attempt to shift from reactive crisis management toward preventive conflict prevention. The mechanism was expected to facilitate intelligence sharing, coordinated responses, and rapid intervention against recurring xenophobic threats. However, the resurgence of anti-foreigner violence in April 2026 suggests that the mechanism may not have been effectively operationalized.

Another problem is that existing studies have largely concentrated on the causes and consequences of xenophobia in South Africa prior to 2024, with limited scholarly attention devoted to the implementation and effectiveness of the newly established bilateral framework. Furthermore, insufficient research exists on the interaction between bilateral preventive diplomacy and broader African Union conflict prevention mechanisms during active crises. Consequently, there is a significant gap in understanding whether the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism has succeeded in transforming bilateral responses from reactive diplomacy to proactive conflict prevention. This study addresses this gap by critically examining the implementation, challenges, and implications of the mechanism during the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks.

Research Objectives

The broad objective of this study is to assess the effectiveness of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and bilateral diplomatic relations in the aftermath of the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the diplomatic measures adopted by Nigeria and South Africa between 2024 and 2026 in addressing xenophobic violence and

protecting foreign nationals. It also aims to assess the extent to which the Early Warning Mechanism was implemented during the April, 2026 xenophobic crisis and determine whether it achieved its intended preventive purpose. Furthermore, the study evaluates the impact of the attacks on political relations, economic interactions, and citizen-level engagements between both countries. Finally, the study identifies the major challenges undermining effective bilateral cooperation, preventive diplomacy, and the successful operationalization of the Early Warning Mechanism between Nigeria and South Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts constructivism as its theoretical framework. Constructivism argues that international relations are shaped not only by material capabilities such as military and economic power but also by socially constructed identities, norms, beliefs, and shared understandings (Wendt, 1999). According to Constructivists, state behaviour is influenced by how States perceive themselves and others within the international system.

The theory is particularly relevant in explaining xenophobic violence in South Africa because xenophobia is fundamentally rooted in social perceptions and identity construction. Migrants and foreign nationals are often portrayed as “outsiders” competing for scarce resources such as jobs, housing, and public services. These socially constructed narratives contribute to exclusion, hostility, and violence against migrants, particularly Africans from countries such as Nigeria (Katzenstein, 1996).

Constructivism also explains the importance of diplomatic norms and institutional frameworks in conflict prevention. The Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism represents an effort to institutionalize norms of cooperation, trust, shared responsibility, and preventive diplomacy between both states. Through sustained interaction, dialogue, and coordinated responses, such institutions are expected to reshape state behaviour and reduce tensions. Also, Finnemore (1996) argues that international institutions influence state conduct by promoting norm diffusion and collective expectations.

However, the April 2026 crisis demonstrates that diplomatic norms remain ineffective unless internalized through sustained political commitment and institutional practice. The relevance of Constructivism to this study lies in its ability to explain both the persistence of xenophobia through entrenched social identities and the possibility of transformation through diplomatic engagement, norm reconstruction, and institutional cooperation.

Conceptual Clarifications

Understanding the major concepts underpinning this study is essential for a proper analysis of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and the broader diplomatic implications of the April 2026 xenophobic attacks. Concepts such as xenophobia, diplomatic relations, early warning mechanism, and citizen diplomacy constitute the analytical foundations of this research. These concepts are interconnected because xenophobic violence not only threatens human security and social coexistence but also affects interstate relations, regional integration, and diplomatic cooperation within Africa. Clarifying these concepts therefore provides the necessary framework for examining the effectiveness of preventive diplomacy and bilateral relations between Nigeria and South Africa.

i. Xenophobia

Xenophobia refers to the fear, hatred, hostility, or prejudice directed against foreigners, migrants, or individuals perceived as outsiders within a society. The term originates from the Greek words *xenos* meaning “stranger” or “foreigner” and *phobos* meaning “fear.” Xenophobia often manifests through discriminatory attitudes, exclusion, verbal abuse, social marginalization, harassment, and violent attacks against non-citizens and immigrant communities. In many societies, xenophobia emerges when foreigners are perceived as threats to economic opportunities, cultural identity, security, or social stability (Landau, 2011).

In the South African context, xenophobia has become a recurring socio-political challenge in the post-apartheid era. Foreign nationals, particularly African migrants from countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique, are frequently accused of taking jobs, engaging in criminal activities, or placing pressure on public services and infrastructure. These perceptions have contributed to repeated outbreaks of violence against migrants in 2008, 2015, 2019, and 2026 (Crush & Ramachandran, 2026). Such attacks often involve looting of businesses, destruction of properties, forced displacement, physical assault, and killings.

Scholars argue that xenophobia in South Africa is closely linked to structural socio-economic problems such as unemployment, poverty, inequality, and inadequate service delivery. Frustrated citizens often scapegoat migrants for broader economic and governance failures (Landau, 2011). Furthermore, inflammatory political rhetoric and weak law enforcement responses have contributed to the persistence of anti-foreigner sentiments within some communities.

Beyond its domestic implications, xenophobia also carries significant diplomatic consequences as recurrent attacks on foreign nationals have strained South Africa's relations with several African countries, particularly Nigeria. The violence undermines the ideals of Pan-Africanism, African unity, and regional integration promoted by continental institutions such as the African Union (AU). Consequently, xenophobia is not merely a social problem but also a diplomatic and security concern affecting interstate cooperation and continental stability.

ii. *Diplomatic Relations*

Diplomatic relations refer to the formal interactions and engagements between sovereign states aimed at promoting cooperation, managing conflicts, protecting national interests, and maintaining peaceful coexistence within the international system. Diplomatic relations are usually conducted through embassies, high commissions, treaties, official negotiations, bilateral agreements, and international organizations (Berridge, 2015). In this regard, diplomacy serves as one of the most important instruments of foreign policy because it enables states to communicate, negotiate, and resolve disputes without resorting to violence or military confrontation. Through diplomatic relations, States pursue objectives such as economic cooperation, political alliances, security collaboration, cultural exchange, and regional integration. Diplomatic engagements also facilitate the protection of citizens residing abroad and promote mutual understanding between nations.

In the case of Nigeria and South Africa, diplomatic relations have historically been characterized by a combination of cooperation and rivalry. Nigeria strongly supported the anti-apartheid struggle through financial assistance, diplomatic pressure, and advocacy for the liberation of South Africa during the apartheid era (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003). Following the collapse of apartheid in 1994, both countries established strong diplomatic ties based on shared leadership ambitions within Africa and mutual commitments to peacekeeping, democracy, and continental development. However, recurring xenophobic attacks against Nigerians and other African migrants in South Africa have repeatedly strained bilateral relations. These attacks have triggered diplomatic protests, emergency consultations, public condemnations, and calls for retaliatory economic measures against South African businesses operating in Nigeria. Thus, diplomatic relations between both countries continue to fluctuate between cooperation and tension depending on domestic and regional developments.

iii. *Early Warning Mechanism*

An Early Warning Mechanism refers to an institutional framework established to identify potential threats, monitor risks, gather intelligence, and coordinate timely responses aimed at preventing the escalation of conflicts or crises. Early warning systems are widely used in conflict prevention, disaster management, security governance, and humanitarian intervention. Their major purpose is to ensure that emerging threats are detected and addressed before they develop into full-scale crises (African Union, 2023).

Within the African context, the African Union has promoted early warning frameworks through the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), which seeks to monitor political instability, violent conflict, terrorism, and humanitarian emergencies across member states. Such mechanisms are designed to enhance preventive diplomacy and strengthen regional peace and security architectures.

The Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism emerged as a bilateral diplomatic initiative agreed upon in December, 2024 following recurring xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The mechanism was intended to facilitate intelligence sharing, coordinated diplomatic intervention, rapid response procedures, and preventive measures against anti-foreigner violence. It represented an effort by both countries to move away from reactive crisis management toward proactive conflict prevention. However, the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks raised questions regarding the operational effectiveness of the framework. Although the mechanism existed formally, available evidence suggests that implementation remained weak and largely symbolic. The absence of visible coordinated preventive action during the crisis indicates that the framework had not yet developed into a fully operational institutional structure capable of addressing rapidly escalating tensions.

iv. *Citizen Diplomacy*

Citizen diplomacy refers to the involvement of ordinary citizens, diaspora communities, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, religious groups, and private individuals in promoting peaceful international relations and influencing foreign policy outcomes. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is conducted mainly by government officials and diplomats, citizen diplomacy recognizes the important role of non-state actors in shaping international perceptions, cooperation, and conflict resolution (Melissen, 2005). Also, citizen diplomacy emphasizes people-to-people engagement, cultural interaction, advocacy, public communication, and the protection of citizens abroad. In many countries, citizen diplomacy has become an important

aspect of foreign policy because governments increasingly recognize that the welfare and treatment of citizens overseas significantly influence diplomatic relations.

In Nigeria, citizen diplomacy gained prominence as a foreign policy approach aimed at prioritizing the protection, welfare, and dignity of Nigerians living abroad. Institutions such as the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM) play critical roles in responding to crises involving Nigerian citizens overseas through travel advisories, diplomatic engagement, evacuation support, and advocacy for migrant rights. During the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks, citizen diplomacy became particularly significant as NiDCOM issued safety advisories to Nigerians residing in South Africa and called for intervention by the African Union. Civil society groups and diaspora associations also played important roles in drawing international attention to the crisis and advocating for the protection of migrants. Citizen diplomacy therefore complements official diplomatic efforts by strengthening grassroots engagement, promoting solidarity, and ensuring that the concerns of ordinary citizens are reflected within interstate relations and foreign policy processes.

Empirical Literature Review

The issue of xenophobic violence in South Africa and its implications for Nigeria–South Africa relations has attracted significant scholarly attention over the years. Existing empirical studies have examined the causes, manifestations, and consequences of xenophobia as well as the diplomatic responses adopted by both countries and regional institutions. Much of the literature emphasizes the socio-economic foundations of xenophobic violence, the weaknesses of state institutions in preventing attacks, and the broader implications for African unity and interstate relations. However, despite the growing body of scholarship on xenophobia and diplomacy in Africa, limited attention has been devoted to the effectiveness of recent bilateral preventive frameworks such as the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism introduced after December, 2024.

One of the major contributions to the literature is the study by Crush and Ramachandran (2017), who examined the relationship between xenophobia, migration, and human development in South Africa. The authors argue that xenophobia is deeply rooted in socio-economic frustrations arising from unemployment, poverty, and inequality within South African society. According to them, migrants are frequently blamed for domestic economic hardships and accused of taking jobs, housing, and business opportunities meant for South African citizens. This scapegoating

process contributes to resentment and hostility against foreign nationals, particularly African migrants. The study further reveals that xenophobic attitudes are often reinforced by negative stereotypes portraying migrants as criminals or economic threats. Crush and Ramachandran's work is significant because it highlights the structural socio-economic factors underpinning anti-foreigner violence in South Africa.

Similarly, Landau (2011) examined xenophobia and statecraft in contemporary South Africa and observed that anti-foreigner violence is sustained by weak governance structures, inflammatory political rhetoric, and ineffective law enforcement institutions. The author argues that the inability of the South African government to adequately punish perpetrators of xenophobic attacks has contributed to a culture of impunity, thereby encouraging repeated violence against migrants. Landau further contends that xenophobia in South Africa reflects broader governance failures and social anxieties within post-apartheid society. The study emphasizes that unless state institutions become more proactive and accountable, xenophobic violence will continue to recur despite diplomatic condemnations and policy declarations.

In another important contribution, Adebajo and Landsberg (2023) analyzed the strategic relationship between Nigeria and South Africa in post-apartheid Africa. The authors describe both countries as regional hegemons competing for influence and leadership within the African continent. According to the study, Nigeria and South Africa have maintained a relationship characterized by both cooperation and rivalry, particularly in areas relating to regional security, peacekeeping, and continental diplomacy. While both States collaborate on several African initiatives, their relations have often been strained by domestic developments, including xenophobic attacks against Nigerians residing in South Africa. The authors conclude that despite shared aspirations for African development and integration, bilateral relations remain vulnerable to tensions arising from domestic political and social challenges.

The International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS, 2024) also examined the implications of xenophobic attacks on Nigeria–South Africa relations. The study found that diplomatic responses adopted by both countries have largely remained reactive rather than preventive. According to the findings, responses to xenophobic violence usually involve emergency evacuations, diplomatic protests, ministerial consultations, and temporary reconciliatory engagements after violence has already escalated. The study criticized the absence of sustainable preventive frameworks capable of addressing the root causes of xenophobic

violence and preventing future occurrences. The IJRIS study is particularly relevant because it underscores the limitations of ad hoc diplomacy in managing recurring interstate tensions linked to xenophobia.

Similarly, Mohammed (2024) examined preventive diplomacy and conflict management in Africa. The author argues that many African States have struggled to institutionalize effective preventive diplomacy due to weak political commitment, inadequate institutional capacity, and poor implementation of regional agreements. According to Mohammed, several African diplomatic frameworks exist only at the declaratory level without practical enforcement mechanisms capable of addressing emerging crises. The study further notes that preventive diplomacy in Africa is often undermined by sovereignty concerns, resource constraints, and inconsistent political will among member States. Mohammed's analysis is important to this study because it provides insights into the broader structural challenges affecting the implementation of early warning and conflict prevention systems within Africa.

At the continental level, the African Union (2023) equally emphasized the importance of early warning systems in promoting regional peace and security across Africa. Through the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), the African Union seeks to facilitate rapid information gathering, conflict monitoring, risk assessment, and coordinated intervention in potential crisis situations. The AU framework is designed to strengthen preventive diplomacy by ensuring that emerging threats are identified and addressed before escalating into violent conflicts. The African Union further stresses that early warning mechanisms require strong institutional coordination, political commitment, and effective communication systems in order to function successfully. This continental framework provided part of the inspiration for the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism introduced in December, 2024.

In addition, Melissen (2005) explored the concept of public and citizen diplomacy and its role in contemporary international relations. The author argues that non-state actors such as diaspora communities, civil society organizations, and advocacy groups increasingly influence diplomatic relations and foreign policy outcomes. In the context of xenophobic violence, citizen diplomacy becomes particularly important because diaspora organizations and migrant communities often serve as channels for advocacy, crisis communication, and international pressure on governments. This perspective is relevant to the present study because institutions such as the

Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM) played visible roles during the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks through public advisories and diplomatic advocacy.

Despite these important scholarly contributions, there remains a significant gap in the existing literature. Most studies on xenophobia and Nigeria–South Africa relations focus primarily on earlier episodes of violence between 2008 and 2024. Very limited empirical attention has been devoted to the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism established after December 2024. More importantly, existing literature has not systematically examined how the mechanism functioned during the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks or whether it succeeded in promoting preventive diplomacy and coordinated crisis management. Furthermore, the interaction between bilateral preventive frameworks and broader African Union structures during active xenophobic crises remains underexplored. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding regarding whether recent diplomatic initiatives represent genuine institutional transformation or merely symbolic political commitments. This study therefore fills this gap by critically evaluating the implementation, effectiveness, and limitations of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism in the aftermath of the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks.

Analysis of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and Bilateral Relations

The analysis of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and Bilateral Relations in the aftermath of the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks reveals important insights into the strengths and limitations of preventive diplomacy within Africa. The recurring nature of xenophobic violence in South Africa demonstrates that despite repeated diplomatic engagements and institutional initiatives, sustainable mechanisms for preventing anti-foreigner violence remain weak. The events of April, 2026 therefore provide an important case study for evaluating whether the bilateral framework established between Nigeria and South Africa after December, 2024 represented a genuine transition toward proactive conflict prevention or merely another symbolic diplomatic arrangement lacking effective implementation. This analysis revolves round four themes and specifically examines the diplomatic measures adopted between 2024 and 2026, evaluates the implementation of the Early Warning Mechanism during the April 2026 crisis, analyzes the impact of the attacks on bilateral relations, and further identifies the major challenges limiting the effectiveness of preventive diplomacy between both countries.

a. Diplomatic Engagement for Addressing Xenophobic Tensions between 2024 and 2026

Between 2024 and 2026, Nigeria and South Africa intensified diplomatic engagements aimed at addressing recurring xenophobic tensions and strengthening bilateral cooperation. One of the most significant developments during this period was the December, 2024 agreement establishing a Bilateral Early Warning Mechanism intended to facilitate intelligence sharing, coordinated intervention, and preventive diplomacy against xenophobic violence. The framework represented an important institutional attempt to shift from reactive crisis management toward proactive conflict prevention (African Union, 2023). The agreement emerged partly as a response to criticisms that previous diplomatic responses to xenophobic violence had been largely ad hoc and ineffective. Earlier episodes of xenophobic attacks in South Africa, particularly those of 2008, 2015, and 2019, were mainly addressed through emergency evacuations, diplomatic protests, and high-level consultations after violence had already escalated (IJRISS, 2024). Consequently, the introduction of the Bilateral Early Warning Mechanism reflected growing recognition by both States that preventive diplomacy and institutional coordination were necessary to reduce future tensions.

In addition to the establishment of the bilateral framework, diplomatic engagements between Nigeria and South Africa increased significantly during the period under review. These engagements included ministerial consultations, bilateral meetings between foreign affairs officials, and sessions of the Nigeria–South Africa Bi-National Commission aimed at reinforcing political cooperation and protecting citizens residing in both countries. Such interactions demonstrated the importance both governments attached to maintaining stable bilateral relations despite recurring tensions.

However, despite these diplomatic initiatives, available evidence suggests that the Early Warning Mechanism remained largely declaratory rather than operational prior to the April, 2026 attacks. Publicly accessible records do not indicate the establishment of functional coordination centres, operational protocols, joint monitoring teams, or dedicated funding arrangements necessary for effective implementation. This gap between policy formulation and operational execution reflects a broader challenge within African diplomacy where institutional agreements often exist without adequate enforcement capacity (Mohammed, 2024).

From a Constructivist theoretical perspective, the establishment of the mechanism represented an attempt to institutionalize new norms of cooperation, shared responsibility, and preventive

engagement between Nigeria and South Africa. Nevertheless, the absence of sustained implementation indicates that these diplomatic norms had not yet become fully internalized within the institutional practices of both States.

b. Implementation of the Bilateral Early Warning Mechanism during the April 2026 Crisis

The April, 2026 xenophobic attacks exposed major weaknesses in the implementation of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism. Rather than demonstrating evidence of coordinated preventive diplomacy, State responses during the crisis were largely reactive after violence had already escalated. This outcome raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of the mechanism as a practical tool for conflict prevention. During the crisis, the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM) issued emergency safety advisories urging Nigerians residing in South Africa to remain cautious, avoid high-risk areas, and comply with directives issued by the Nigerian High Commission. These advisories represented immediate crisis-response measures rather than evidence of preventive engagement before violence erupted (NiDCOM, 2026). The Chairman of NiDCOM, Abike Dabiri-Erewa, further called for African Union intervention, describing the attacks as violations of African solidarity and continental integration principles.

At the diplomatic level, Nigeria’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs engaged South African authorities through emergency consultations aimed at de-escalating tensions and ensuring the protection of Nigerian nationals. Similarly, public statements condemning the attacks were issued by Nigerian officials and diaspora representatives. The appeals for African Union involvement suggest that bilateral diplomatic channels alone were considered insufficient to manage the crisis effectively. More importantly, there was no publicly available evidence of real-time intelligence sharing, joint security operations, coordinated preventive deployments, or emergency bilateral intervention mechanisms during the attacks. This absence indicates that the Early Warning Mechanism had not matured into a fully functional operational system capable of preventing or rapidly containing violence.

The April, 2026 events therefore demonstrate the persistence of reactive diplomacy within Nigeria–South Africa relations despite formal commitments toward preventive conflict management. The findings support arguments by Mohammed (2024) and the African Union

(2023) that many African preventive diplomacy frameworks remain weak due to poor implementation, insufficient institutional capacity, and limited political commitment.

c. Impact of April 2026 xenophobic attacks on Bilateral Relations

The April, 2026 xenophobic attacks had significant political, economic, and social implications for bilateral relations between Nigeria and South Africa. Politically, the attacks generated renewed diplomatic tensions and weakened confidence in exclusive bilateral mechanisms for crisis management. Nigeria's appeal to the African Union for intervention reflected dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of direct diplomatic engagement and suggested increasing reliance on multilateral continental structures.

Secondly, the attacks also revived long-standing debates regarding South Africa's commitment to Pan-Africanism and African solidarity. Many Nigerians viewed the violence as contradictory to the historical support Nigeria provided during the anti-apartheid struggle. Consequently, the crisis contributed to negative public perceptions and increased diplomatic mistrust between both countries (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2023).

Economically, fears of retaliatory actions against South African businesses operating in Nigeria resurfaced during the crisis. Although, formal sanctions were not introduced, tensions created uncertainty within bilateral trade and investment relations. South African companies operating in Nigeria faced public criticism and fears of possible consumer boycotts similar to reactions witnessed during previous xenophobic crises.

At the citizen level, the attacks created widespread fear, insecurity, and psychological distress among Nigerians residing in South Africa. Many depended heavily on safety advisories, diplomatic assistance, and community support structures for survival and protection. The situation further weakened confidence among African migrants regarding their safety and welfare within South Africa. Overall, the April, 2026 attacks reinforced a recurring cycle in Nigeria–South Africa relations whereby diplomatic engagement intensifies only after violent crimes occur. This pattern highlights the continued weakness of institutionalized preventive diplomacy between both countries.

d. Challenges Limiting Effectiveness of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism

Several factors significantly constrained the effectiveness of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and broader diplomatic efforts aimed at addressing xenophobic violence.

One major challenge was the persistent implementation deficit undermining operational efficiency. Although, bilateral agreements and diplomatic commitments existed formally, corresponding institutional structures necessary for implementation remained weak or absent. Without operational coordination centres, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and emergency response systems, preventive diplomacy could not function effectively (African Union, 2023).

Another important challenge was weak political commitment. Government responses often intensified only after violence occurred rather than through sustained preventive engagement. Political leaders in both countries frequently prioritized crisis management and diplomatic rhetoric over long-term institutional reforms capable of addressing the root causes of xenophobia.

Sovereignty concerns also limited effective bilateral cooperation. South African authorities often framed xenophobic attacks primarily as criminal activities rather than manifestations of systemic discrimination or social exclusion. This framing reduced incentives for external oversight and limited opportunities for deeper bilateral intervention in domestic security matters.

Finally, persistent anti-foreigner narratives within segments of South African society continued to reinforce hostility against migrants despite diplomatic campaigns promoting African unity and integration. Economic hardship, unemployment, and social frustrations contributed to the scapegoating of migrants, thereby sustaining xenophobic attitudes at the societal level (Crush & Ramachandran, 2017).

These challenges demonstrate that diplomatic agreements alone are insufficient for addressing identity-driven conflicts such as xenophobia. Sustainable solutions require institutional capacity, societal reorientation, political commitment, and deeper norm internalization within both state institutions and the wider society.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the effectiveness of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and the broader challenges confronting preventive diplomacy within Africa. The analysis of diplomatic engagements, institutional responses, and crisis management during the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks demonstrates that although both Nigeria and South Africa showed willingness to strengthen bilateral cooperation through diplomatic agreements, significant gaps remained between policy formulation and practical implementation. The findings therefore reveal a complex relationship between institutional commitments,

political realities, and societal perceptions in shaping interstate relations and conflict prevention mechanisms.

One of the major findings of the study is that the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism represented an important diplomatic advancement toward preventive diplomacy. The establishment of the mechanism in December, 2024 indicated a shift from the traditional pattern of reactive crisis management toward a more institutionalized approach aimed at early detection, intelligence sharing, and coordinated intervention against xenophobic violence. This development reflected increasing recognition by both governments that recurring xenophobic attacks posed serious threats not only to human security but also to bilateral relations, regional integration, and African solidarity (African Union, 2023).

The introduction of the framework also demonstrated an attempt by both countries to institutionalize norms of cooperation, mutual responsibility, and conflict prevention. In principle, the mechanism was expected to strengthen diplomatic coordination and facilitate timely intervention before tensions escalated into violent crises. This aligns with the Constructivist argument that international institutions and shared norms can influence State behaviour and promote cooperation when internalized within interstate relations (Wendt, 1999). The mechanism therefore represented a symbolic commitment to preventive diplomacy and regional stability. However, despite this important diplomatic advancement, the study found that the operational effectiveness of the mechanism during the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks remained weak and largely inadequate. Evidence from the crisis suggests that preventive diplomacy was not effectively implemented before violence escalated. Rather than demonstrating coordinated early intervention, responses by both Nigeria and South Africa occurred mainly after attacks had already taken place. This finding indicates that the mechanism existed more as a formal diplomatic agreement than as a fully operational institutional framework capable of preventing violence in real time.

Another major finding of the study is that State responses during the April, 2026 crisis were predominantly reactive rather than preventive. Diplomatic consultations, public condemnations, safety advisories, and appeals for African Union intervention occurred after xenophobic violence had escalated and migrants had already been exposed to danger. For instance, the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM) issued emergency safety advisories instructing Nigerians in South Africa to remain cautious and comply with directives from the Nigerian High Commission

only after reports of violence had emerged (NiDCOM, 2026). Similarly, diplomatic engagements between Nigerian and South African officials intensified during the crisis period rather than before the outbreak of violence. This reactive pattern of response supports earlier findings by the International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS, 2024), which observed that diplomatic responses to xenophobic violence in South Africa have historically focused more on crisis management after escalation rather than on proactive prevention strategies. The persistence of this pattern suggests that despite the establishment of the Bilateral Early Warning Mechanism, both countries still relied heavily on traditional reactive diplomacy instead of institutionalized preventive engagement.

The study further found that the Bilateral Early Warning Mechanism lacked sufficient operational infrastructure, institutional coordination, and political reinforcement necessary for effective implementation. There was little publicly available evidence indicating the existence of functional coordination centres, rapid response teams, dedicated funding arrangements, or real-time intelligence-sharing systems between Nigeria and South Africa before or during the April 2026 attacks. This institutional weakness significantly undermined the capacity of the mechanism to function effectively as a preventive security framework. The absence of strong operational structures reflects a broader challenge affecting many regional and bilateral institutions within Africa. Mohammed (2024) argues that numerous African diplomatic and security agreements remain largely declaratory because they are not supported by adequate institutional infrastructure, financial commitment, and enforcement mechanisms. This observation is consistent with the findings of the present study, which reveal that although the Early Warning Mechanism existed formally, implementation structures remained weak or insufficiently developed.

Another important finding is that weak political commitment limited sustained preventive cooperation between both countries. Government responses often intensified only after violence occurred rather than through continuous monitoring and proactive intervention. This indicates that while political leaders publicly expressed commitment to bilateral cooperation and African solidarity, such commitments were not consistently translated into long-term institutional action. Political will therefore emerged as a major determinant of the effectiveness of preventive diplomacy.

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From a Constructivist perspective, the findings of this study demonstrate that institutions alone cannot transform interstate relations unless diplomatic norms become deeply internalized within State practices and societal attitudes. Constructivism emphasizes that State behaviour is shaped not only by formal agreements but also by shared ideas, identities, and social norms (Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999). In the context of South Africa, persistent narratives of exclusion, “othering,” and anti-foreigner sentiments continued to undermine diplomatic efforts aimed at promoting African solidarity and peaceful coexistence.

The recurrence of xenophobic violence despite repeated diplomatic engagements suggests that the norms of Pan-Africanism, mutual respect, and regional unity have not been fully internalized within sections of South African society. Migrants, particularly Nigerians and other African nationals, continue to be perceived by some groups as economic competitors and social threats. Such perceptions reinforce hostility and weaken the effectiveness of interstate diplomatic frameworks.

Furthermore, the findings reinforce broader arguments within African diplomatic studies that many regional and bilateral agreements suffer from implementation deficits, weak institutionalization, and limited enforcement capacity. Although, frameworks such as the African Union Continental Early Warning System and bilateral diplomatic agreements exist, practical implementation often remains inconsistent due to resource constraints, political considerations, and sovereignty concerns (African Union, 2023). This situation limits the ability of African States to respond effectively to emerging conflicts and humanitarian crises.

Overall, the findings of this study reveal that while the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism represented a positive diplomatic initiative, its effectiveness was significantly undermined by operational weaknesses, reactive implementation patterns, limited political commitment, and persistent societal narratives supporting xenophobia. The study therefore demonstrates that sustainable conflict prevention requires more than formal agreements; it also requires institutional capacity, political consistency, and societal transformation capable of promoting tolerance, inclusion, and genuine African solidarity.

Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism and the broader nature of bilateral diplomatic relations in the aftermath of the April, 2026 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The findings revealed that although the December, 2024

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) represented a significant diplomatic effort toward institutionalizing preventive diplomacy and strengthening bilateral cooperation, its implementation during the crisis remained weak and largely ineffective. The April, 2026 attacks demonstrated that diplomatic responses between both countries continued to rely predominantly on reactive measures such as emergency consultations, public condemnations, safety advisories, and appeals for African Union intervention after violence had already escalated. The absence of evidence regarding coordinated intelligence sharing, structured joint monitoring operations, or rapid preventive deployments indicates that the Early Warning Mechanism had not evolved into a fully operational conflict prevention framework capable of addressing emerging xenophobic threats in real time.

The study further concludes that diplomatic agreements alone are insufficient to address deeply rooted identity-driven conflicts such as xenophobia. Sustainable conflict prevention requires not only formal institutional frameworks but also strong operational capacity, political commitment, effective intergovernmental coordination, and societal transformation capable of addressing narratives of exclusion and “othering.” From a Constructivist perspective, the persistence of xenophobic violence despite repeated diplomatic engagements demonstrates that the norms of African solidarity, mutual respect, and regional integration have not been fully internalized within both institutional structures and sections of society. Consequently, unless Nigeria and South Africa move beyond symbolic diplomacy toward practical institutional cooperation, legal enforcement, grassroots engagement, and long-term social reorientation, xenophobic violence will continue to threaten bilateral relations, regional peace, and the broader objectives of African integration.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing findings and conclusion that the Nigeria–South Africa Early Warning Mechanism remains largely under-implemented and reactive in practice, it is necessary to advance policy-oriented measures that can strengthen both its operational capacity and preventive effectiveness. The following recommendations are therefore proposed to bridge the gap between diplomatic commitment and practical implementation, enhance bilateral cooperation, and reduce the recurrence of xenophobic violence affecting Nigerian nationals and other African migrants in South Africa:

1. *Operational Strengthening of the Early Warning Mechanism:* Nigeria and South Africa should fully operationalize the Early Warning Mechanism through the establishment of permanent coordination centres, joint intelligence-sharing units, rapid response structures, and dedicated funding arrangements. Functional monitoring systems and emergency communication channels should also be introduced to ensure timely detection and prevention of xenophobic threats before they escalate into violent crises.
2. *Institutionalization of Preventive Diplomacy:* Both governments should institutionalize xenophobia prevention within the framework of the Nigeria–South Africa Bi-National Commission by introducing measurable implementation benchmarks, periodic policy reviews, and accountability mechanisms. Regular bilateral meetings involving security agencies, diplomatic officials, and migration authorities should be conducted to sustain continuous preventive engagement.
3. *Strengthening Collaboration with the African Union:* The bilateral Early Warning Mechanism should be formally integrated with the African Union Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) and ECOSOCC frameworks in order to improve regional coordination, intelligence gathering, and multilateral intervention capacity. Such collaboration would strengthen continental responses to xenophobic violence and reinforce African solidarity.
4. *Enhancement of Citizen Diplomacy and Grassroots Engagement:* Governments of both countries should collaborate closely with diaspora organizations, civil society groups, migrant associations, religious bodies, youth organizations, and community leaders to promote grassroots peacebuilding initiatives and public awareness campaigns against xenophobia. Citizen diplomacy should be strengthened as an important complement to official diplomatic relations.
5. *Legal and Security Reforms:* The South African government should strengthen legal sanctions against perpetrators of xenophobic violence while improving law enforcement responses, prosecution mechanisms, and victim protection measures. Security agencies should also be trained to respond swiftly and professionally to incidents involving migrants and foreign nationals.
6. *Promotion of Public Education and Social Reorientation:* Both Nigeria and South Africa should invest in long-term educational and media campaigns aimed at promoting

tolerance, multicultural coexistence, Pan-Africanism, and respect for human rights. Public sensitization programmes targeting schools, communities, and political actors are necessary to counter hostile narratives against migrants and promote peaceful interstate relations within Africa.

7. *Economic and Social Inclusion Policies*: The South African government should address the socio-economic conditions that often fuel xenophobic sentiments, including unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Policies aimed at inclusive economic development, youth empowerment, and improved public service delivery would reduce frustrations that are frequently redirected toward migrants and foreign nationals.

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