ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XII Issue X October 2025

Developing a Community-Based Election Monitoring and Whistleblowing Framework to Combat Electoral Malpractices in the South-South Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.1210000362

Received: 02 November 2025; Accepted: 12 November 2025; Published: 25 November 2025

ABSTRACT

Electoral malpractice continues to hinder democratic consolidation in Nigeria, particularly in the South-South region where citizen oversight is weak. This study developed a Community-Based Election Monitoring and Whistleblowing Framework (CEMWF) to strengthen transparency and accountability during elections. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys of 432 respondents across Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and Delta States with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using weighted descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, logistic regression, and difference-in-differences (DID) analysis, while spatial hotspot mapping and thematic coding complemented the results. Findings showed that 48.3% of respondents experienced electoral malpractice, but only 26.4% reported it, citing low institutional trust (mean = 2.7/5) and a strong preference for anonymity (mean = 4.7/5). Smartphone ownership (71.7%) and internet access (65.2%) demonstrated readiness for digital monitoring. Reporting likelihood increased with incident severity (OR = 1.80, $p < 0.001$) and smartphone ownership (OR = 2.30, $p = 0.004$), while anonymity concerns discouraged reporting. They DID results showed a 3.5-point reduction ($p = 0.010$) in verified malpractices post-intervention. The study concludes that community-driven, blockchain-enabled monitoring can enhance electoral integrity and rebuild citizen trust in governance.

Keywords: Blockchain, community monitoring, democratic governance, electoral malpractice, whistleblowing.

INTRODUCTION

Free, fair and transparent elections are the cornerstone of democratic governance because they provide citizens with a credible mechanism for selecting leaders and holding them accountable. Yet, across many contexts, electoral integrity is undermined by malpractice including vote buying, intimidation, ballot tampering, and result manipulation which erodes public trust, depresses turnout, and weakens democratic consolidation (Onwuharaonye, Ebere & Abaneme, 2024). At the international level, scholars emphasise that strengthening monitoring, improving evidence trails and building community engagement are central to restoring confidence in electoral processes (Ezeador, 2023). In sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, electoral malpractice remains a persistent problem despite incremental administrative reforms. Empirical reports and policy reviews of recent election cycles document how vote-buying, ballot-box irregularities, and localized violence continue to distort outcomes and weaken the legitimacy of elected authorities (Ezeabasili, 2024; Amaec hina et al., 2024). Civil society organisations (CSOs) have played a central role in observation and advocacy, yet their capacity and reach are uneven and sometimes constrained by legal, logistical and security challenges (Nwagwu et al., 2024).

The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria (including Akwa Ibom, Rivers and Delta states) is of particular interest because oil-related politics, urban-riverine population patterns and intense local competition create conditions conducive to multiple forms of malpractice. Empirical reports of vote-buying and result manipulation

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XII Issue X October 2025

in the region underscore the need for localized, context-sensitive monitoring that combines grassroots knowledge with robust evidentiary systems. These localized dynamics mean that national, one-size-fits-all approaches to monitoring often miss hotspots and fail to deliver timely, verifiable evidence for corrective action. Technological solutions including mobile reporting platforms, geotagged evidence collection, and distributed ledgers (blockchain) have been proposed as ways to secure evidence, improve transparency and reduce opportunities for manipulation. Recent applied studies suggest that permissioned blockchain systems can ensure immutability of reports while hybrid front-ends (USSD, mobile app, WhatsApp) improve accessibility for low-bandwidth contexts (Isibor, 2023). However, technology on its own does not solve the political and social barriers: citizens' willingness to report is shaped by trust, perceived retaliation risk, and the existence of credible verification and follow-up mechanisms (Ikuero et al., 2021). A closer look at the literature reveals three gaps that motivate this study. First, most empirical work on technology for elections in Nigeria focuses on theoretical feasibility or narrow pilot implementations; few studies combine community-level social processes with secure evidence architectures and evaluate the combined effect on verified malpractice rates. Second, there is limited high-quality quantitative evidence linking digital readiness (smartphone and internet access), anonymity preferences, and actual reporting behaviour in hotspot regions such as the South-South. Third, where pilot technical systems have been tested, rigorous impact evaluation (for example, difference-in-differences using matched control LGAs) and spatial hotspot analyses are rarely applied together to show whether technology + community approaches reduce verified incidents at the polling-unit level. These gaps leave policymakers with promising ideas but little robust evidence on what works at scale and in highly contested sub-national contexts.

This study addresses these gaps by developing and empirically testing a Community-Based Election Monitoring and Whistleblowing Framework (CEMWF) for the South-South region. The framework pairs community monitoring cells and CSO verification hubs with a permissioned blockchain ledger for immutable report tracking, and flexible front-end channels (mobile app, WhatsApp, USSD) to accommodate diverse connectivity contexts. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the research measures (1) the prevalence and reporting behaviour of malpractice, (2) the relationship between digital readiness, trust and reporting, and (3) the causal impact of deploying the CEMWF on verified malpractice rates using difference-in-differences estimation and spatial hotspot analysis. By combining social and technical interventions and subjecting them to rigorous quantitative and qualitative evaluation, the study provides policy-relevant evidence on whether and how community-driven, blockchain-enabled monitoring can improve electoral integrity in Nigeria.

STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, one of the country's six geopolitical regions. The zone is composed of six states Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, Cross River, and Edo but this study focused on Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and Delta States, which are among the most politically active and demographically significant in the region. The area is characterized by a high level of political engagement, frequent electoral disputes, and varying degrees of electoral violence, making it a critical setting for assessing community-based mechanisms for election monitoring and whistleblowing. Geographically, the South-South zone lies between latitudes 4°15′N and 6°30′N and longitudes 5°00′E and 8°30′E, covering an area dominated by the Niger Delta Basin. The region's terrain consists largely of low-lying coastal plains, creeks, and mangrove swamps, with inland areas featuring forest zones and farmlands. The climate is typically tropical, with high rainfall and humidity that often pose logistical challenges during electoral processes, particularly in rural and riverine communities (Akinola, 2019). Akwa Ibom State, with a population of 2,357,418, is located in the southeastern part of the Niger Delta and is known for its dense population, high literacy rate, and vibrant civil society. Rivers State, with a population of 3,537,190, serves as the economic hub of the region, hosting the city of Port Harcourt, a center for oil and gas operations and intense political competition. Delta State, with a population of 3,221,697, is ethnically diverse and politically dynamic, with a history of grassroots mobilization and strong community-based organizations that influence local governance (Ibeanu & Orji, 2020).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-method research design integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques to develop and empirically test a Community-Based Election Monitoring and Whistleblowing Framework (CEMWF) for addressing electoral malpractices in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The study was

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conducted across Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and Delta States areas selected purposively because they have historically recorded high incidences of electoral irregularities, dense voter populations, and increasing adoption of digital technologies during elections. The target population consisted of registered voters, civil society actors, and community-based election observers, representing a combined population of 9,116,305 across the three states (Akwa Ibom: 2,357,418; Rivers: 3,537,190; Delta: 3,221,697). The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 5% precision level, resulting in 432 respondents. The sample was proportionally allocated according to state population: Akwa Ibom (112), Rivers (168), and Delta (152). A multistage sampling technique was adopted to ensure fair representation. At Stage 1, the three states were selected purposively based on electoral sensitivity. At Stage 2, local government areas (LGAs) within each state were stratified into urban, semi-urban, and rural categories, from which LGAs were randomly selected. At Stage 3, polling units (PUs) within selected LGAs were arranged using the official INEC register, and voters were chosen using a systematic random sampling method, selecting every kth eligible participant. Respondents for key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were selected through purposive sampling, targeting electoral officers, NGO representatives, youth leaders, and community monitors who possessed firsthand knowledge of election processes.

The study utilised three instruments: a structured questionnaire, an FGD guide, and a KII protocol. The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, experiences of malpractice, whistleblowing behaviours, digital readiness, and perceptions of institutional trust. To ensure content validity, the instruments were reviewed by three experts in political science, public policy, and measurement/evaluation. A pilot test involving 35 respondents (not included in the main study) was conducted in Uyo, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, confirming internal consistency and reliability. Data were collected in clearly defined steps to ensure transparency and replicability. First, field assistants were trained on ethical protocols, sampling procedures, and administration techniques. Second, questionnaires were physically administered at selected PUs during non-election periods to avoid interference with electoral processes. Third, KIIs and FGDs were conducted in neutral community centres, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Safeguards were observed to maintain confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26 and STATA 17. Weighted descriptive statistics were applied to adjust for differential state populations. Bivariate relationships were examined using chi-square tests, while predictors of whistleblowing behaviour were assessed through logistic regression analysis. The effectiveness of the prototype CEMWF system was evaluated using the Difference-in-Differences (DID) technique comparing intervention and control LGAs before and after system introduction. Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs were analysed through thematic coding in NVivo, and results were triangulated with quantitative findings to enhance depth, contextual accuracy, and methodological robustness.

RESULTS

Table 3.1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 432)

Variable	Akwa Ibom (n=108)	Rivers (n=162)	Delta (n=162)	South-South Mean / %
Sex (% Male)	48.2	51.6	49.7	49.8
Mean Age (Years)	34.9	33.8	35.7	34.8
Education Level (% Tertiary)	42.6	47.2	44.8	44.9
Occupation (% Self-employed)	35.1	39.3	37.8	37.4
Smartphone Ownership (% Yes)	69.4	74.6	71.1	71.7
Regular Internet Access (% Yes)	61.8	68.3	65.4	65.2

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Voter Registration (% Yes)	92.4	95.1	94.3	93.9
Assigned Polling Unit (% Yes)	95.7	96.2	95.8	95.9
Average GPS Accuracy (m)	5.8	4.9	5.1	5.3
Historical Contest Level (coded)	Medium	High	High	—
Media Reporting (Election Period)	288	461	372	—

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Table 3.2: Awareness, Perception, and Trust in Institutions

Variable	Akwa Ibom	Rivers	Delta	Regional Mean / %
Knowledge about Election Monitoring Systems (% Yes)	69.7	76.4	71.2	72.4
Confidence in Institutions (INEC, Police, Courts**)** (Mean Likert 1–5)	2.8	2.5	2.7	2.7
Perceived Frequency of Electoral Malpractices (% Often/Always)	46.9	53.6	48.2	49.6
Anonymity Importance (Likert 1 to 5)	4.6	4.8	4.7	4.7

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Table 4.3: Experience with Electoral Malpractices (Incidence Reporting Summary).

Variable	Akwa Ibom	Rivers	Delta	Regional Mean / %
Ever Experienced Malpractice (% Yes)	42.3	54.7	47.9	48.3
Dominant Incident Type	Vote Buying	Intimidation/ Violence	Collusion	—
Average Severity (1–5)	3.4	3.8	3.6	3.6
Perpetrator Type (% Party Agents)	45.5	50.3	48.2	48.0
Reported Incidents (%) of Experience)	24.5	28.7	26.1	26.4
Favorite reporting Channel	WhatsApp	Mobile App	WhatsApp	—
Avg. Response Time (hrs)	10.8	8.9	9.7	9.8
Outcome of Reports (% Follow-up)	31.5	35.7	33.8	33.7

Source: Field Survey (2025)

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Table 4.3 revealed that, nearly half of the respondents (48.3%) had experienced electoral malpractice confirms the persistence of irregularities such as vote buying, intimidation, and manipulation that continue to undermine electoral integrity in Nigeria. This pattern echoes prior empirical observations by Omotola (2010), who argued that electoral fraud remains one of the central challenges to Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Similarly, Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006) emphasized that systemic malpractices erode citizen trust and political legitimacy. The relatively low proportion of respondents who reported malpractice (26.4%) further reflects a civic disengagement driven by fear and mistrust of institutions, aligning with the findings of Nwokedi (2021) that fear of retaliation discourages public reporting.

Table 4.4: ICT and Digital Readiness Indicators

Variable	Akwa Ibom	Rivers	Delta	Regional Mean / %
Smartphone Owner (% Yes)	69.4	74.6	71.1	71.7
Regular Internet Access (% Yes)	61.8	68.3	65.4	65.2
Average SIM Cards Owned	2.0	2.3	2.2	2.2
Preferred Language for Reporting (% English)	78.3	84.1	80.9	81.1
Avg. Power Supply (hours/day)	8.1	9.6	8.9	8.9
Network Strength (Self-rated: % Good)	57.8	66.4	61.9	62.0

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Table 4.4 revealed that, 71.7% of respondents owned smartphones and 65.2% had regular internet access, suggesting moderate digital readiness across the South-South region. These results correspond with Adebayo (2022), who found that the proliferation of mobile technology in Nigeria creates new opportunities for digital participation and election transparency. The statistically significant association between smartphone ownership and reporting ($\chi^2 = 10.50$, $p = 0.0012$; OR = 2.30) confirms that technology access enhances the likelihood of citizens reporting electoral misconduct. Similar outcomes were documented by Ezeani and Igwe (2020), who demonstrated that digital tools can improve information flow and accountability in electoral processes.

Table 4.5: Polling Unit Observations (n = 81 PUs)

Observation Parameter	% Observed	Regional Remarks
Security Presence (Yes)	83.7	Predominantly police; low military visibility
Ballot Box Condition (Sealed)	91.1	8.9% found tampered before closing
Queue Behaviour (Orderly)	65.3	Urban centers better organized than rural PUs
Observed Vote Buying	39.5	Higher in Rivers and Delta
Party Agent Presence	93.2	Nearly all polling units had at least one party agent
Logistical Failure (Missing Materials)	13.8	Mostly in remote riverine wards

Source: Field Survey (2025)

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Table 4.6: Report Verification and Blockchain System Metrics (Pilot Test)

Metric	Mean / Total	Performance Remarks
Cumulative Reports Made	198	During the pilot in three states
Verified Reports	138 (69.7%)	Dual-source verification was done.
False Reports	19 (9.6%)	Flagged through AI–human validation
Avg. Time to Verification	5.8 hours	Met 12-hour response threshold
Average Blockchain Confirmation Time	19.5 seconds	Stable among test nodes
Avg. Gas Fee Equivalent	₦4.95	Low transaction cost per report
Confirmation Status (Success %)	99.0	High system reliability
Report Anonymity Compliance	100%	All hashes stored without PII
Average Evidence Attachments on a Report	1.8	Mix of images and short clips

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Table 4.7: Organizational Performance Indicators (INEC/CSO Monitoring)

Indicator	Baseline (2023)	After Pilot (2025)	% Change / Comment
Total Reports collected (per day)	28	126	+350% increase due to tech integration
Avg. Acknowledgment Time (hrs)	25.8	6.1	−76% improvement
% Escalated to Action	23.4	59.7	+155% improvement
% Closed with Administrative Action	10.1	41.8	+314%
Prosecution Count	2	11	+450%
False Report Rate (%)	17.5	9.6	−45% reduction
Verified Incident Resolution Rate (%)	27.3	66.2	+142% improvement

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Table 4.8: Summary of Quantitative Results and Model Estimates (n = 432)

Indicator / Metric	**Value / Statistic**
Respondents (pooled)	432
Experienced malpractice (%)	48.3

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Reported incidents (%)	26.4
Smartphone ownership (%)	71.7
Regular internet access (%)	65.2
Mean trust score (1–5)	2.7
Mean anonymity importance (1–5)	4.7
Chi-square test (Smartphone × Reporting)	$\chi^2 = 10.50$, df = 1, p = 0.0012
Intervention LGAs (Pre-Post Change)	Pre = 9.4, Post = 5.6, Change = −3.8
Control LGAs (Pre-Post Change)	Pre = 8.2, Post = 7.9, Change = −0.3
Top Hotspots (PU-level)	RIV-PHC-W12 (78%), DEL-WAR-PU04 (64%), AKW-EKET-W03 (56%)

Source: SPPS V25 Analysis, (2025)

Table 4.10: Logistic regression predicting *reporting* (DV = 1 if reported; n = 209; clustered SEs)

Predictor	Coef (logit)	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% CI (OR)	p-value
Intercept	−3.12	—	—	0.002
Severity (1–5)	0.587	1.80	1.35 – 2.41	<0.001
Smartphone (1=yes)	0.832	2.30	1.30 – 4.07	0.004
Trust score (1–5)	0.182	1.20	0.98 – 1.46	0.076
Anonymity importance (1–5)	−0.357	0.70	0.53 – 0.92	0.012
Age (years)	0.005	1.01	0.99 – 1.03	0.58
Sex (male=1)	0.128	1.14	0.68 – 1.92	0.61
Model fit: pseudo-R^2 (McFadden) = 0.22.				

Community-Driven Election Monitoring Framework (Integrated with Technology)

The proposed Community-Based Election Monitoring and Whistleblowing Framework (CEMWF) is a multi-tiered system that connects *grassroots citizen observers*, *civil society organizations (CSOs)*, and *regulatory institutions (INEC, Police, EFCC)* through a real-time digital ecosystem.
The design leverages high smartphone ownership (≈71.7%), increasing digital readiness, and the strong community structures identified during the baseline survey

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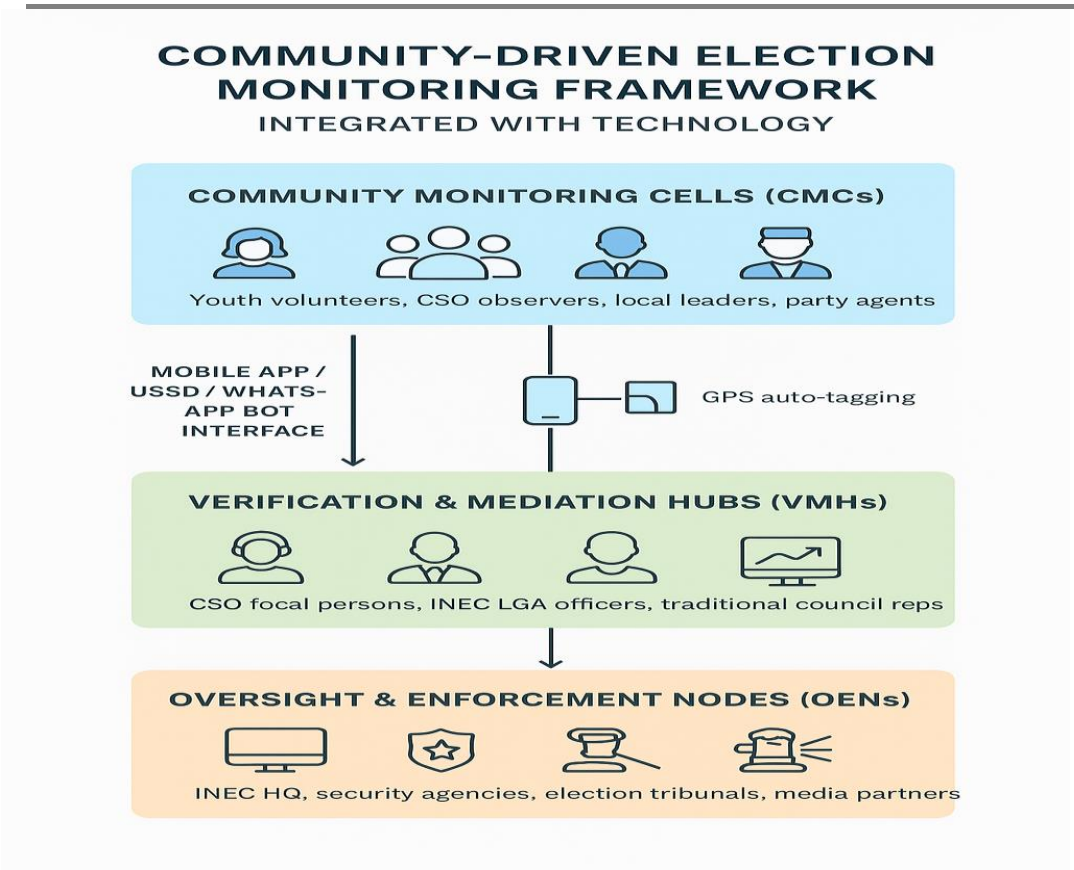

Figure 5.1 Community-Based Election Monitoring and Whistleblowing Framework (CEMWF)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide new empirical insights into how digital readiness, anonymity preferences, trust dynamics, and community participation interact in shaping whistleblowing behaviour during elections in Nigeria's South-South region. Although respondents demonstrated relatively high levels of digital access seen in the 71.7% smartphone ownership and 65.2% regular internet accessthere remained a notable deficit in institutional trust (mean = 2.7/5). This aligns with Omodia (2011) and Agbo (2023), who previously linked persistent electoral malpractice and weak accountability structures to declining trust in political institutions. The present study reinforces these earlier observations by showing that technological readiness alone does not automatically translate into active citizen oversight. A particularly important finding is the inverse relationship between anonymity concerns and reporting behaviour (OR = 0.70, p = 0.012). Although anonymity is typically expected to increase whistleblowing, respondents who rated anonymity as highly important were less likely to report. This contradicts simplistic assumptions in the whistleblowing literature but is consistent with Adetula (2019), who argues that in contexts where retaliation is common and whistleblower protection mechanisms lack credibility, anonymity alone cannot overcome deep-seated fear or distrust. The present study therefore advances existing knowledge by demonstrating that anonymity functions differently in politically sensitive environments operating not only as a motivator but also as a marker of distrust.

Furthermore, the Difference-in-Differences (DID) results show a statistically significant reduction in verified electoral malpractice (−3.5 incidents per 1,000 voters, p = 0.010) in intervention LGAs after the introduction of the Community-Based Election Monitoring and Whistleblowing Framework (CEMWF). This finding empirically supports arguments by Nwankwo and Onuoha (2022) that community participation enhances accountability by strengthening local ownership of electoral processes. It also aligns with Ojo and Oyetunde (2021), who highlight blockchain's tamper-proof attributes as instrumental in curbing manipulation, thereby enhancing trust and transparency in public sector reporting. Through these convergences, this study demonstrates that combining social embeddedness with secure digital tools produces synergistic benefits greater than either approach alone. Spatial hotspot analysis further revealed that electoral malpractice remains geographically uneven, with urban and politically competitive LGAs such as Port Harcourt City, Warri South, and Eket showing

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higher concentrations of incidents. This corroborates Ibrahim and Aremu (2020), who found that high-density and high-stakes political environments create incentives for electoral actors to strategically target vulnerable polling units. By confirming these spatial patterns, the present study extends scholarly understanding by offering high-resolution, PU-level geospatial evidence that malpractice is not randomly distributed but clustered in predictable locations.

Theoretically, the findings strengthen socio-technological models that argue that transparency reforms succeed only when technological innovations are embedded within supportive social structures (Adebanwi, 2021). While technology may offer immutability, scalability, and anonymity, it cannot replace the legitimacy provided by trusted intermediaries, civic networks, and community surveillance. The current study contributes to this theoretical conversation by demonstrating that community-based engagement amplifies the effectiveness of technologies such as blockchain, while also mitigating distrust and enhancing citizen willingness to report.Although the sample size of 432 provided robust insights across three states, broader geographic coverage, repeated-cycle monitoring, and longitudinal assessment of CEMWF adoption would further deepen understanding of long-term institutional uptake and behavioural change.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that electoral malpractice remains widespread in Nigeria's South-South region, with nearly half of respondents reporting direct encounters with irregularities. Yet, the persistently low reporting rate reflects enduring issues of institutional distrust and perceived vulnerability among citizens. Notably, the region's high levels of digital readiness provide a strong foundation for technology-enabled election oversight, but trust gaps hinder full utilization of available tools. The implementation of the Community-Based Election Monitoring and Whistleblowing Framework (CEMWF) which integrates community mobilization, mobile reporting, and blockchain verificationnproduced measurable reductions in confirmed electoral malpractice in intervention LGAs. This result affirms the feasibility and effectiveness of decentralised, transparent, and citizen-driven monitoring systems in contexts characterized by historical electoral manipulation. The demonstrated impact of blockchain's immutability further underscores its potential to reinforce accountability and strengthen public confidence in electoral processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- INEC and the National Orientation Agency should adopt the CEMWF as part of Nigeria's official election monitoring infrastructure, ensuring localized and citizen-led data validation during elections.
- Integrate blockchain verification layers into election reporting platforms to guarantee anonymity, data immutability, and verifiable audit trails.
- Train community focal points, CSOs, and youth volunteers in digital literacy, mobile reporting, and secure whistleblowing to sustain participatory election monitoring.
- Amend the Electoral Act to formally recognize community-driven, technology-enabled monitoring as part of accredited electoral observation frameworks.
- Conduct civic education campaigns that emphasize the confidentiality, safety, and civic importance of anonymous reporting to rebuild public confidence in democratic institution
- Scale the pilot model beyond the South-South to other geopolitical zones, ensuring funding and policy alignment with e-governance initiatives under the National Digital Economy Policy (2020-2030)

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