

## Comparative advantages and challenges of civil society engagement in early warning and early response

### Comparative advantages

A number of grounds for civil society engagement in early warning and response have been brought to the table, many of which were listed in the GPPAC issue paper “Early warning and early response: conceptual and empirical dilemmas”.<sup>1</sup> Arguments can be summarised as follows:

**Micro-level access** - Civil society organisations (CSOs) have access to the micro-level, which enables them to pick up warning signals at a very early stage, where a range of options for encouraging non-violent conflict management are still present. CSOs can also intervene effectively through local knowledge and being able to work directly with the local stakeholders.

**Incentive to act** - Regional and international organisations or foreign governments are far away from the place of emerging conflict and will usually react when the situation has erupted into a level of violence that cannot longer be ignored. That is often far past the stage where we can speak of prevention. The same may apply to state structures in centralised political systems. As CSOs are part of the communities they work in, they are more inclined to attempt to improve the conflict situation and carry the inherent risk.

**Flexibility** - CSOs are not paralysed by complex decision-making procedures and can thus respond with higher speed and adjust their strategies to a changing conflict situation. CSOs can act independently and work with certain issues that may be too sensitive for national and international policy-makers. The civil society context also encourages networking with many individuals and organisations.

**Response instruments** - CSOs can bring in response instruments that may be less available to governments or intergovernmental organisations or comparatively little used, such as community mediation and dispelling of rumours. CSOs can mobilise public opinion for the purpose of influencing decision-makers to deploy response instruments.<sup>2</sup>

“In many ‘real life’ circumstances early warning lies in capturing the local, often obscure trends and picking up tensions which are not apparent to outsiders. Only local respondents can evaluate the significance of these clues, as they have an insight into a community life and would know what is culturally or symbolically meaningful.”<sup>5</sup>

“The lack of attention to the possibilities of CSO involvement in early warning is to say the least a missed opportunity, as on the ground, political will (by many considered the most important obstacle in early warning and response) is not so much an issue”.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, due to the instruments CSOs have at their disposal for violence prevention (contrary to governmental actors, CSOs cannot use coercion), a learning and capacity-building element comes along with their activities as they need to persuade people. One could imagine that civil society-based early response takes place at an earlier stage where violence is limited and multiple instruments still can be deployed, is more adequate because locally appropriate, and contributes to long-term behavioural change in how people deal with conflict.

“The inclusion of non-governmental organisations is particularly important when the focus is on durable solutions and not quick political exercises.”<sup>7</sup>

## Challenges

The grounds for promoting civil society engagement in early warning and early response are clear. Nevertheless, there are also a number of challenges:

**Mandate** - Preconditions for effective and long-term engagement in early warning and early response are that the organisation is committed to reorient towards working in a more analytical and rigorous way than it may be used to and consistently strives to use a non-biased multi-perspective approach. This may prove challenging, and especially the latter may not be compatible with other roles the organisation would like to see itself taking up.

**Donor-orientation or project-driven** - Many civil society organisations are oriented towards their donors and in reality not as closely connected to the community level. Organisations may also not be particularly interested in taking up the 'additional' task of trying to prevent violence.

**Lack of capacity** - Of course not all civil society organisations have the organisational and personal capacity to design and implement meaningful responses to the complexities of the situation.

**Limited coverage** - Individual civil society organisations usually don't have the geographic and multi-sectoral coverage to monitor and influence all relevant aspects of a conflict situation in a long term and systematic way. Networking is certainly a viable possibility as some examples show, but brings along its own challenges.

**No coercive or decision-making power** - Civil society organisations do not by themselves have the decision-making power or mandate to change the political or economic systems underlying conflicts and their management. Further, they cannot use coercion and while coercive actions should be avoided where possible, sometimes there is no other option to limit violence.

**Reluctance to take risks** - As in other types of organisation, people are often reluctant to take the risk of 'meddling' in conflict situations.

**Vulnerability** - Civil society organisations are usually in a relatively vulnerable position and their involvement in conflict situations can be risky.

Many of these challenges can be overcome through capacity-building, networking and/or collaboration with governmental actors. Nevertheless, much depends on the inner strength and passion of individual persons to contribute to the prevention of violence within their communities.

## Conclusion

Despite the many challenges, the *potential* assets of civil society organisations give grounds to believe that their engagement **may help to overcome some of the key obstacles to early response**. The **added value** of civil society engagement in **early warning** is related to its access to the micro-level, understanding of the local context and nuances, its capability to tap into networks of individuals and organisations with diverse information and interpretations, its ability to use informal ways of collecting information, and expertise in a variety of response options. In **early response**, civil society organisations can act more flexibly, are not limited by political sensitivities or hierarchical structures, can build on informal networks, may be more trusted in the communities, and are in a position to use alternative tools of conflict prevention. Civil society organisations may also play a facilitating or mediating role, since governmental actors are often party in a conflict. Although there are many successful cases of civil society engagement in early warning and early response, these have hardly been documented. Therefore, more research and publication of successful

stories need to be undertaken to show the real contributions and role of civil society organisations in this field.

When an organisation believes that contributing to early warning and response is an adequate way to accomplish its mission, given the regional and organisational context, one can distinguish several broad **options for engagement**. One option is that a civil society organisation on its own or in consortium with others establishes and owns a mechanism. For reasons mentioned above, efforts are often made to involve or influence governmental actors or intergovernmental organisations, particularly for early response. Another option is that the governmental and civil society organisation(s) collaborate, for example on the basis of a protocol, or that civil society organisations are involved in certain components of a government or intergovernmental organisation-owned mechanism. Collaboration or involvement of civil society organisations could include participation in early response or be limited to a role in early warning.

**An example of collaboration**

The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) has been involved in the development of an effective regional early warning and early response system since 1998. The initial success of this initiative attracted the attention of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The two organisations are currently collaborating to institutionalise this tool and to identify and monitor context-specific conflict and peace indicators for analysis, with preventive aims. As a result, the West Africa Early Warning and Early Response Network (WARN), as part of its overall strategy, is developing community, national and (sub)regional structures for early detection, early warning and response, through training and systematic information sharing, and is also developing preventive instruments to share with partners, stakeholders and policymakers. WANEP's experience is an example of interaction and collaboration between governmental and intergovernmental institutions and CSOs dedicated to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

*This text is part of a process of experience sharing among practitioners facilitated by the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, and resulting in a toolkit of ideas, lessons learned from global experience and references. You can follow and participate in the process through [gppac.pbwiki.com](http://gppac.pbwiki.com) (password: [gafThf83](#)) and check out other already published texts. Comments or questions are welcome at [ewer@conflict-prevention.net](mailto:ewer@conflict-prevention.net).*

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<sup>1</sup> Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, Issue paper: "Early warning and early response: conceptual and empirical dilemmas", written by Matveeva Anna, European Centre for Conflict Prevention, 2006, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> The possibility to hold certain decision-makers who don't take up their responsibility or act inappropriately accountable before public opinion is a powerful instrument that brings new incentives into play. Similarly, people who try to compromise or mediate can be encouraged by acknowledging them publicly.

<sup>4</sup> Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (2006), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (2006), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, "Early warning and response: state of the art in a community of practice", report expert meeting April 2006, unpublished, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Schmeidl Susanne, "Early warning and integrated response development", in: Romanian Journal of Political Science 1(2): 4-50, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Lund Michael, "Preventive diplomacy for Macedonia, 1992-1999: From containment to national building", 2000, p. 207.