

Early warning and early response – what do we mean?

Defining early warning and early response

Early warning and early response (EWER) for the prevention of violent conflicts has been defined in different wordings and nuances. A selection of definitions:

EARLY WARNING

▪ *The systematic collection and analysis of information coming from areas of crises for the purpose of: a) anticipating the escalation of violent conflict; b) the development of strategic responses to these crises; and c) the presentation of options to critical actors for purposes of decision-making and preventive action.*¹

“It is important not to look at warning and response as separate actions, but as two sides of one coin. While early response is the goal, early warning is a tool to achieve it. Therefore, the value of early warning lies in the response capacity.”⁵

▪ *Any initiative that focuses on systematic data collection, analysis and/or formulation of recommendations, including risk assessment and information sharing. Also, six core mechanisms of early warning systems are listed: data collection, data analysis, assessment for warning or identification of different scenarios, formulation of action proposals, transmission of recommendations, and assessment of early response.*²

EARLY RESPONSE

▪ *Early response will refer to any initiative that occurs in the latent stages of a perceived potential armed conflict with the aim of reduction, resolution or transformation.*³

▪ *Processes of consultation, policy making, planning, and action to reduce or avoid armed conflict. These processes include: i) diplomatic/political; ii) military/security; iii) humanitarian; and iv) development/economic activity.*⁴

How does early warning and early response (EWER) differ from...

...analytical journalism or academic writing on emerging conflicts?

In the field of early warning, a conflict situation is monitored and analysed systematically and over a longer period of time than usually is the case in journalism and academic work. Moreover, an early warning message is clearly aimed at generating action through response-oriented analysis and formulation of response options.

...intelligence gathering and analysis?

Early warning and response differs from intelligence in several ways. Intelligence tends to focus on state security only, which may leave certain human security aspects unaddressed or even violated – these are often detected by early warning and early response mechanisms. Also, early warning and response mechanisms display a greater level of openness about methods of data collection and analysis. Further, the mechanism itself and/or its intended public usually involves state and

non-state actors alike. This is based on the underlying thought that it is beneficial to combine the strengths of various stakeholders in preventing violence.

...structural conflict prevention?

Optimally, early response includes both operational action, such as mediation, and structural preventive action, such as poverty reduction and enhancement of the conflict-carrying capacity of the political and social system. However, due to the need for urgent de-escalation of tensions, early response often focuses on operational action. This includes conflict prevention tools that may not be sufficient to resolve the situation in the long term, but contribute to an immediate de-escalation of tensions and violence.

In the toolkit

We look at early warning and early response from the perspective of civil society engagement. This means that the focus will be on a variety of mechanisms, tools and activities that are suitable for the context and capacity of civil society organisations.

Early warning in the toolkit stands for response-oriented warning, in the sense that we consider early warning as a tool (or a set of tools) for achieving early response in relation to concrete and specified conflict situations with violence (potential). Other tools that can be instrumental for generating early response, but not necessarily confined to 'early warning' will also be discussed.

A GPPAC expert meeting held in April 2006 approached early warning and response from a civil society perspective. Some findings:

- Scientific, 'objective' and apolitical evidence of impending conflict is a myth, nor does a faultless capacity to forecast conflict and crisis exist. The best which can be achieved is a 'good enough' analysis which enables timely prevention;
- There is no single 'correct' method in warning/ response strategy; instead, a variety of practices make the field diverse and context-specific. The task is not to unify the methodology, but to build an empirical theory from practice.⁶

Early response in the toolkit is mainly focused on tools for operational preventive action that can contribute to de-escalate tensions or diminish violence in the short term.

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 (password: gafThf83) and check out other already published texts. Comments or questions are welcome at ewer@conflict-prevention.net.

¹ PIOOM, "Thesaurus and glossary of early warning and conflict prevention terms", Abridged version, by Alex P. Schmid, edited for the Forum on Early Warning and Early Response, 1998.

² Austin Alexander, "Early warning and the field: a cargo cult science?", Berghof handbook for conflict transformation, Berghof research center for constructive conflict management, Berlin, 2003. http://www.berghof-handbook.net/uploads/download/austin_handbook.pdf.

³ Austin Alexander, 2003.

⁴ PIOOM, 1998.

⁵ Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, issue paper "Early warning and early response: conceptual and empirical dilemmas", written by Anna Matveeva, ECCP, 2006, p. 30.

http://www.gppac.org/documents/GPPAC/Research/Issue_papers_2006_-_2007/_1_Early_Warning_Early_Response.pdf

⁶ Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, 2006, p. 9.