

Options for civil society engagement in regional conflict early warning and response



Kristel Maasen, April 2007¹

Over the past decades a multitude of early warning and early response mechanisms has come into existence. Many mechanisms were set up in the context of disaster preparedness, but a number were established specifically for the purpose of preventing violence in conflict situations. As violent conflict is devastating on all levels and has both direct and indirect lasting consequences, it is essential to increase efforts to timely identify emerging conflicts and prevent their degradation into violence.

A variety of actors - international and regional intergovernmental organisations, governments, academic institutions, and international and domestic non-governmental organisations - have developed mechanisms that support conflict early warning and early response. If one general lesson can be learned from these efforts, it is that the design of early warning and response (EWER) mechanisms should start from considering what is needed to generate early response rather than assuming that warning the right people will automatically lead to early response.

Civil society organisations have a number of qualities that can contribute to generating effective early response. Already, civil society organisations are frequently seen to engage in early warning and response with success, even if often unsystematically, on a small scale and without adequate resources. This paper provides input to a debate on the possible roles of local civil society organisations within more comprehensive and systematic early warning and response mechanisms. Although its conclusions can also be applied to (sub)national-level mechanisms, the examples provided here refer mostly to supra-national EWER mechanisms.

An evolving field

Since the 1950s efforts have been made to develop early warning and response mechanisms for the prevention of violent conflicts. Rupesinghe identifies three generations.² First generation early warning mechanisms generate timely information on emerging conflicts with the purpose to inform Western policy-makers and are located in the US or in Europe, making mainly use of secondary sources. A second generation of early warning uses field monitors to collect data in the conflict regions and thereby generates more detailed analysis. The third generation implies more of a change of paradigm, as those systems are entirely located in the conflict regions, integrate response mechanisms, and engage regional and national stakeholders.

The field of early warning and early response is still evolving. New thinking and pioneering work is driven by the fact that in many cases, despite the presence of excellent forewarning and analysis, response has been forthcoming too late or not at all. Two directions that are

¹ Kristel Maasen is coordinator for Early Warning and Early Response at the European Centre for Conflict Prevention, the international secretariat of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC). Comments are welcome at k.maasen@conflict-prevention.net or kristel.maasen@gmail.com. GPPAC is a partnership of civil society organisations around the world, organised through 15 regional networks. GPPAC works towards a fundamental change of approach towards conflict: a shift from reaction to prevention.

² Foundation for Co-Existence (2005, p.3).

explored to overcome this ultimate failure are designing mechanisms to be better geared to political and bureaucratic decision-making procedures and to rely to a greater extent on civil society for early response actions.

Civil society organisations and early warning and response

While for a long time conflict intervention has been considered the domain of governments, informed by their own (intelligence) systems and sometimes complemented by analysis from international NGOs (such as the International Crisis Group and swisspeace's FAST) and academic institutions, there is growing interest in the potential role of civil society in conflict management as well as in conflict prevention. In the context of early warning and early response, this interest is driven by the hope that some of the key obstacles to early response can be overcome by the engagement of civil society organisations and the local population.

A number of arguments 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".³ 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.⁴

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.

³ Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (2006, p. 36).

⁴ 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.

While the potential of civil society in early warning and response is clear and supported by successful examples (although hardly documented), there is also plenty of scepticism. Some of the scepticism is connected to general criticism towards civil society organisations, such as the contention that many organisations are in fact donor-driven and not as closely connected to communities, and therefore may not be particularly interested in taking up the ('additional') task of trying to prevent violence. Other reasons for scepticism are found in the reality that many civil society organisations are reluctant to take the risk of 'meddling' in conflict situations or that they don't have the capacity to design meaningful responses to the complexities of the situation. Support, however, can be provided and one can get far with local knowledge, common sense and a drive to learn from failure. Therefore, as is the case with decision-makers, much comes down to "willingness" or more precisely, the motivation of individuals to contribute to the prevention of violence within their communities.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that there are indeed a number of inherent limitations to civil society engagement. 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. Also, 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. Civil society organisations are also vulnerable and their involvement in conflict situations is risky. Most of these limitations point to why interaction with state actors in one way or another is often seen as highly desirable even if frequently difficult.

Models for the design of an early warning and response mechanism

The overall design of the EWER mechanism determines what can be expected of the efforts being undertaken. Therefore it is useful to consider a number of strategic choices and the consequences for the practice of early warning and early response that they entail. The model that is eventually chosen will influence what is necessary to make the mechanism work properly. It will influence elements such as adequate sources of information, type(s) of indicators, number of monitors, staff capacities and skills, communication lines, decision-making procedures, number and type of participating organisations, investments in training and lobby capacity, range of response tools, the associated costs, etc. Moreover, the selected model sets the framework for the opportunities and added value of civil society engagement.

Response external or integrated?

A first important question to be answered is whether to set up an early warning mechanism or a mechanism that also includes instruments and procedures for early response. In the first case, early warning information is provided to actors that subsequently are expected and encouraged to undertake an early response action on the basis of information and options for response provided. Often these actors have not been involved in the early warning process. In the second case, the mechanism pro-actively involves the actors who are able to undertake early response and optimally includes also procedures for early response. In view of the ever resounding criticism that (however much professionally implemented) early warning is seldom followed by rapid and effective response, many EWER proponents make a strong case for integrated response mechanisms.⁵ Such mechanisms,

⁵ See for example Schmeidl (2001). Collins (1996, p. 7) points out an important reason why the absence of integrated response mechanisms may lead to late or no response: "Few [existing] early warning systems are equipped with effective mechanisms for early action, resulting in *ad hoc* and largely reactive arrangements requiring their own costly (in political terms and in terms of time) negotiation even when action does follow." Note

however, usually involve a long process of consensus-building on a number of sensitive issues and reaching an overall agreement on a response procedure is not evident. Integrated response mechanisms benefit from the participation of different types of actors to implement a multi-faceted response strategy.⁶

Encouraging higher level or same level actors to respond?

This question is sometimes expressed in terms of vertical or horizontal “wiring” and comes down to who is intended to be the initiator of early response. Vertically wired mechanisms take the information collected locally to a higher level actor, for example (in the case of a conflict in a certain province) to a state department, regional and/or international intergovernmental organisation, or international NGO. Almost all known mechanisms are wired vertically and are subject to growing criticism of leaving the people who are affected and most motivated to improve the situation out of the loop. Horizontally wired mechanisms intend in the first place to involve the population, civil society organisations and government officials at the place of emerging conflict and support them in their efforts to avoid violence passively or actively.⁷

Preventing or enhancing preparedness?

Conflict early warning and early response mechanisms are usually geared towards prevention or mitigation of violence. The reasoning is that if it is known that there is a high possibility for emergence of violence and response strategies have been set out, then concerned stakeholders can do something so that the conflict comes to an end or continues with non-violent means. This however does not always work and if it does, often comes too late. Another strategy, which is increasingly being applied in disaster management, would be to put more effort in helping to prepare the people who are at risk.⁸ Contingency plans could be developed, people could be trained in mediation and negotiations with belligerents, communication lines activated, livelihoods may be reorganised, hiding places can be constructed, the community could try to take care of young unemployed people vulnerable to be mobilised, learning to use strategic non-violence methods, etc. At a national or regional level, preparedness could be worked on in terms of supporting the operational conflict-carrying capacity of the political and social system.

Centralised or decentralised structure?

Early warning and response mechanisms can be structured in a more centralised or a more decentralised way. The choice of an optimal structure cannot be seen apart from other strategic choices discussed before. Centralised mechanisms allow for more rigorous data analysis (including quantitative data and comparative analysis), are often more professionalised, may focus more attention to cross-border conflicts, and can elicit a more comprehensive response to conflicts from a regional perspective. Decentralised regional

that this does not imply that the same individuals that will be involved in early response should work on the analysis of the conflict situation and response options.

⁶ A multi-faceted approach to violence prevention may include for example changing government policies, supporting risk-affected population in vulnerability reduction, deploying police for protection, facilitating collaboration between diverse stakeholders on solving the problem that lead to conflict, applying public pressure, using force against armed rebels, etc. Depending also on the context, some of these tools can be more effectively wielded by state actors, while civil society organisations or a regional intergovernmental organisation may have comparative advantages using other tools.

⁷ Barrs (2006, p.1) writes that “perhaps ninety-nine percent of what we read about conflict early warning refers to regional or international mechanisms. They are egocentric in that they are primarily built by outsiders to be used by outsiders”. In this respect, Schmeidl (2001) for example recommends to “build capacities on the ground, so that preventive action does not have to come from the outside. Local and regional solutions are often most feasible and durable.” Other experts point to supporting and sharing existing indigenous coping mechanisms which are often quite effective.

⁸ In the field of conflict prevention this is supported by the understanding that conflict and even occasional violence are a fact of life, and that what matters is the ability of communities as well as the political and social system to regulate and transform conflicts. Meier (2006, p. 11) cites Bankoff who says that what is required is to “find the proper balance between the need for external assistance and the capacity of local people to deal with the situation”.

EWER mechanisms often place the core of analysis and response at the national level, although this could also be at sub-national level. They tend to be more adjusted to the context, can often pick up more detailed and particular signals, and allow for more rapid and flexible response at (sub)national level, but may also easily fragment, be less prominent and undertake isolated actions. A step further from a decentralised mechanism (that is still conceptualised as one controllable system) is networking between a number of organisations and/or departments that may or may not have their own mechanisms and regularly communicate and collaborate when opportunities arise.⁹

Determining the scope

Preceding the design of the early warning and response mechanism, the scope in terms of types of conflict, geographic coverage and timeliness of the early warning and response need to be defined and agreed upon. Definitions of which events can be considered as conflicts will differ from actor to actor and region to region, as well as opinions on which types of conflicts should be included within the mechanism.¹⁰ Some regional EWER mechanisms have chosen to select certain areas where they focus efforts. Others attempt to cover the whole territory. The desired timeliness of “early” warning and response – from the first signs of disagreement until the first casualties, also contributes to setting the framework for the design of the early warning and response mechanism.

Additional considerations

Regional conditions evidently play a large role in the design of a regional conflict early warning and response mechanism. These include among others available resources in terms of funding, capacity, and interest. Also the availability of public information, the extent to which security of early warning monitors can be guaranteed, the political situation and sensitivities will have an influence as well as which early warning and response initiatives are already being undertaken.

Options for civil society engagement

There are many examples of conflict situations where civil society organisations have played a role in both early warning and early response, using a variety of tools. 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.

When the organisation does believe 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

⁹ Ivanov (1997, p. 33) describes the characteristics of networks with formal structure (‘pyramid’ paradigm) and networks with informal structure (‘web’ paradigm) and finds that the first type is more suitable for indicators-based academic monitoring while the latter type tends to be more conducive for rapid reaction – he proposes a combination as a way forward. Meier (2007, p. 36) cites Ibarra: “Action that is both innovative and critical usually requires joint activation of prescribed [top-down] and emergent [bottom-up] networks”. Meier adds that “this means that top-down systems should increasingly be judged on their empowerment of local systems”. New thinking on the advantages of networking in the field is inspired by research into the paradigm of systems thinking that is taking us a step away from the thought that it is possible and desirable to plan and control human activity in order to reach outcomes that have been set out from the start. Meier (2006, p. 15) makes the case that the complexity of crises situations requires a matching complexity of early response, which calls for a model that operates at an appropriate scale and in a decentralised manner.

¹⁰ CEWARN for example decided to work on pastoral conflicts in a number of border areas as that is the highest common denominator national governments in Central and East Africa wanted to work together on within an early warning and response mechanism. If sufficient trust can be built and resources allow, CEWARN may gradually increase the scope of types of conflict.

organisation on its own or in consortium with others establishes and owns a mechanism (see also examples in annex). For reasons mentioned above, efforts will often be made to involve or influence regional intergovernmental organisation and/or government actors, particularly for early response. Another option is that the regional intergovernmental organisation and civil society organisation(s) collaborate, for example on the basis of a protocol (such as WANEP-ECOWAS), or that civil society organisations are involved in certain components of a regional 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.

As mentioned before, 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.

When opting for a particular model for the design of the early warning and early response mechanism, it becomes at the same time more clear which can be the added value of civil society engagement in it. In certain models the qualities of civil society organisations can be made far better use of and may even be vital to actualise the end one has in view. Conversely, one could consider the qualities and tools of those keen to engage in early warning and early response and design a mechanism that makes optimal use of these traits. This is valid too, as no single model can realistically hope to be equally good at all the tasks at hand.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a concise look at models and options for designing a regional early warning and response mechanism, as well as the potential role(s) and added value of civil society organisations in such a mechanism. Prior to the design of the EWER mechanism, a number of choices need to be made related to the regional context, priorities of the stakeholders, available resources and determined purpose of the early warning and response mechanism.

We have set out indicating that the design of an early warning and early response mechanism should be guided by “what is needed to generate early response?”. This can be complemented with two other questions, namely “how do we envision early response?” and “who should be involved to increase the chance that such response will be undertaken?”. Regarding the last question, it is clear from the above that civil society organisations may well be a significant part of the answer.

On a final note and despite the focus on design in this paper, we need to realise that at the end of the day even the most brilliantly designed EWER mechanisms require the involvement of individuals with the inner strength and passion to protect their fellow human beings from violence and contribute to human security.

Short literature list:

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ANNEX:

Regional early warning and response mechanisms in which civil society organisations play a role

Interest in a regional level early warning and early response mechanism has materialised in several parts of the world, often with support from external funding agencies and international expertise. So far this has mostly been the case on the African continent, where the frequent failure of the international community to intervene on time in numerous large-scale conflicts is evident, and in the Commonwealth of Independent States, where it was feared that the collapse of the Soviet Union would lead to the outbreak of civil wars. A number of existing regional mechanisms include civil society engagement in early warning and/or early response, or are entirely civil society-based but with aspirations of mobilising other actors as well.

Table 1: Some regional early warning/response mechanisms in which civil society organisations play a role.

	Implementing institution	Early warning	Early response	Structure	Role of civil society
ECOWARN (West Africa) www.ecowarn.org	ECOWAS (RIGO*) and WANEP (CSO*) on the basis of a protocol between partners Note: WANEP, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, is based in Ghana and also is GPPAC Regional Secretariat.	<i>Products:</i> Online Field Situation Reports, Incident Reports and interactive trends analysis. <i>Data:</i> quantitative and qualitative.	ECOWAS has a number of response tools at its disposal that are connected to the ECOWARN system and provisions are made to establish more. WANEP can respond at local level through its other programmes. Also other actors are encouraged.	Country and zonal offices composed of WANEP and ECOWAS staff collect data from a network of CSO monitors. From these data situation reports are produced which are forwarded to a special unit at ECOWAS and at WANEP and further studied for developing response options (parallel structures).	Field based monitoring is done by civil society organisations. Collaboration with ECOWAS on analysis and formulating response activities. Providing a civil society insight in the final reports at ECOWAS. Potential role in government-developed response initiatives is foreseen.
EAWARN (Commonwealth of Independent States) www.eawarn.org	Network of CSOs and research centers	<i>Products:</i> 1) CIS: bi-monthly bulletins and annual reports, that are sent to CIS state institutions, CSOs and research centers; also specialised research reports, 2) Privilshki district (RU): monthly reports covering each province. <i>Data:</i> qualitative.	Focused on ethnic policy monitoring and analysis, no integrated early response.	Loose network of researchers per country who make analytical contributions and develop recommendations, in Privilshki district one research per province/republic.	All aspects of monitoring, analysing and warning.
CEWARN (Eastern Africa) www.cewarn.org	IGAD (RIGO) and governments, with degree of involvement of CSOs	<i>Products:</i> Baseline Reports followed by Country Updates every four months, Alerts, Situation Briefs, Regional Cluster Reports and Annual Risk Assessments. <i>Data:</i> qualitative and quantitative	Expected that IGAD and individual governments will respond among others through national units which are part of the mechanism.	The CEWARN unit coordinates information and analysis flows from the national research institutes. The products are passed on to national units as well as to IGAD bodies. So far no integrated response component.	Contracted national research institutes and other civil society organisations contribute to collection and analysis of field data, they also help national units to formulate response options. Potential role in government-developed response initiatives is foreseen.

FEWER Eurasia (Russia and Caucasus) www.fewer-international.org	Network of CSOs closely linked to the FAST system of SwissPeace (INGO*)	<i>Products:</i> semi-annual FAST Updates (short analytical reports), based upon daily monitoring by Local Information Networks (LIN), Special Updates and Analytical Frameworks. <i>Data:</i> qualitative and quantitative.	Unknown.	LINs collect information, which is analyzed by FAST's international experts. FAST Updates are publicly available from the website. Development organisations and government actors may request more specialised analytical reports and studies.	Civil society engagement is mainly limited to monitoring.
African Security Analysis Program http://www.iss.co.za/Res/Asap/Aewp/aewpl.html	Institute for Security Studies (CSO).	<i>Products:</i> Situation reports, occasional papers, monographs, daily briefings, updated maps, comprehensive reports on policy options, research proposals. Real-time situation room. <i>Data:</i> qualitative. Since cooperation with FAST, also quantitative data.	Briefings are organised for interested decision-makers and products are passed to relevant actors in concerned countries who are expected to respond on the basis of analysis and policy options provided.	Specialists at ISS permanently analyse 11 countries on the basis of open sources and provide policy options to decision-makers in Africa and internationally.	All aspects of monitoring, analysing and warning.
FEWER Africa www.fewer-international.org	FEWER Africa and partner CSOs	<i>Products:</i> annual 'baseline' situation and risk assessments, regular early warning reports, and policy briefs. <i>Data:</i> quantitative and qualitative.	Multi-actor strategic planning exercises, and on-going policy outreach and policy briefing meetings with policy-makers and other stakeholders are expected to lead to response. FEWER also supports the Africa Initiative Programme in DRC.	Partner CSOs collect information, which is analysed by FEWER Africa. FEWER Africa also initiates activities to encourage early response by other actors. This can be on the basis of urgent early warnings or of windows of opportunity for peace-building.	All aspects of monitoring, analysing and warning. Also taking the initiative for activities to encourage early response by other actors.
Regional Centre for Conflict Prevention www.rccd-iiid.org	RCCP (research institute)	<i>Products:</i> Country Conflict Profiles and Conflict Profiles. Updates every 6 months. <i>Data:</i> qualitative and quantitative	Set up in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. No response component to date.	RCCP collects, analyses and distributes reports including policy options.	Besides using other research institutes, regional CSOs and independent experts as sources of information, no involvement of CSOs and little attention to its potential role.

* RIGO: Regional intergovernmental organisation; CSO: Civil society organisation; INGO: International non-governmental organisation.

In other regions, efforts are being undertaken to establish an early warning and early response mechanism. For example, the Regional Coordination of Economic and Social Research (CRIES), a non-profit research centre based in Argentina and GPPAC Regional Secretariat, has recently published a Spanish language report entitled "Warning and early response in Latin America and the Caribbean: methodological considerations for a program oriented at civil society" which serves as an input for further development of an early warning and early response mechanism in the region. GPPAC members in the Pacific, South Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East also aim to participate in the establishment and enhancement of early warning and early response on a regional level. Further it is worth mentioning two national level civil society-led efforts that partially integrate early response tools, namely "Early warning and rapid response" of the Foundation for Co-Existence in Sri Lanka and "Early warning for violence prevention" of the Foundation for Tolerance International in Kyrgyzstan.