

## Chapter 1

### A Short Contemporary History of Conflict Early Warning

*Charting a short history of the conflict early warning field is not easy. The field draws heavily on work in many sectors (early warning for natural disasters for example), and has benefited from thinking, research and advocacy by numerous individuals and organisations. This chapter seeks to explain initial thinking behind conflict early warning and looks at its emergence on the international policy agenda. It outlines the evolution of operational early warning systems after the end of the Cold War and particularly after the Rwandan genocide in 1994. It reviews the initial debates among implementing organisations and discusses the evolution of different tools and methods (e.g. conflict assessment and analysis of state fragility) and of individual operational early warning systems. The chapter concludes with a review of the main points of criticism and challenges with which proponents of conflict early warning need to engage*

Conflict early warning was conceived as a means of protecting and preserving life. The field has evolved significantly since its initial conceptualisation, with important contributions from many individuals and organisations over the years. Early warning has been integrated into the policies of many governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations and agencies. Both the concept of early warning and individual systems have been subject to numerous reviews and debates. Many different tools and methodologies have been developed. We have witnessed the rise (and fall) of a number of different early warning systems. However, can we say today that we are in a position to prevent another Rwandan genocide? We cannot. Conflict early warning faces response challenges similar to those it faced 15 years ago. And there are new challenges on the horizon. Our ability to protect and preserve life in the face of war remains weak as Darfur, DR Congo and Iraq show all too clearly

### **From the first thinkers to policy integration**

Conceptualisation of early warning as applied to violent conflict gained momentum as early as the 1970s and early 80s. As explained by Rupesinghe (1989), thinkers such as J. David Singer (Singer and Wallace, 1979) applied forecasting to war and Israel Charney (Charney and Charney, 1982) explored the application of early warning to genocide prevention. Specific international proposals for an early warning system were made by the Special Rapporteur, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan in his report on Massive Exodus and Human Rights delivered to the UN Economic and Social Council Commission on Human Rights on 31 December 1981 (Rupesinghe, 1989). In 1987, the UN set up the Office for the Research and Collection of Information (ORCI) to develop an early warning system dedicated to monitoring and analysing global trends.

However, the initial drivers of early warning at an international level were humanitarian agencies (UNHCR, UNDHA and others) spurred by the need for accurate and timely predictions of refugee flows to enable effective contingency planning. Establishment of the first conflict prevention NGOs, such as International Alert in 1985, and their advocacy for early warning also pushed thinking forward internationally.

The end of the Cold War had a positive impact on the international framework for conflict prevention, enabling among other things sustained co-operation on conflict management, including conflict prevention in the UN Security Council. At the same time, the end of the Cold War had both negative and positive impacts on the evolution of conflict environments in various parts of the world. In some areas it contributed to an easing of tension and the end of long-running conflicts. In others it triggered new

conflicts and transformed old ones into new kinds of armed struggles. International policy makers were forced to focus on new intra-state conflicts in the Horn of Africa, West Africa, the Balkans and elsewhere.

These developments were behind the June 1992 report to the Security Council of the United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, “An Agenda for Peace, Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking, and Peace-Keeping”. In it, he laid out aims for UN engagement, the first being “to seek to identify at the earliest possible stage situations that could produce conflict and to try through diplomacy to remove the sources of danger before violence erupts.” “Preventive steps”, the report also said, “must be based upon timely and accurate knowledge of the facts. Beyond this, an understanding of developments and global trends, based on sound analysis, is required. And the willingness to take appropriate preventive action is essential” (United Nations, 1992). At a regional level, policy integration moved a step closer to implementation in June 1992 with the formal initiation by the OAU of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, a unit for conflict early warning in Africa (Cilliers, 2005), though it took some time for this to develop into anything very effective.

The failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide in 1994 underlined the weaknesses of regional and international mechanisms for early warning of and response to mass violence. The multi-government evaluation of the international response to the Rwandan genocide concluded that “pieces of information were available that, if put together and analyzed, would have permitted policy-makers to draw the conclusion that both political assassinations and genocide might occur” (Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996). These conclusions and the critical questions raised in the report – why were the signals that were sent ignored, and why were they not translated into effective conflict management? – spurred several international policy initiatives.

- The *OECD DAC Guidelines on Conflict, Peace, and Development Co-operation* (1997) specified the importance of conflict early warning in catalysing early response. The *Guidelines* highlighted the need to support networks with early warning, monitoring and analytical capabilities.
- The Final Report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997) stressed the need for early warning, stating that “the circumstances that give rise to violent conflict can usually be foreseen. This was certainly true of violence in Bosnia in 1992 and in Rwanda in 1994.” The Final Report also underlined the need for

local solutions to violent conflict and the need for early international responses to support these.

- The *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* (United Nations, 2000), commonly known as the “Brahimi Report”, placed early warning within the broader framework of UN peacekeeping, stating that “without such a capacity, the Secretariat will remain a reactive institution, unable to get ahead of daily events...”. The proposed Information and Strategic Analysis Secretariat (EISAS) was to consolidate the existing DPKO Situation Centre with other policy planning offices but it was never implemented due to member state sensitivities.
- The “Brahimi Report” was followed by several policy papers issued by donor governments. The United Kingdom’s 2000 White Paper on International Development, for example, called for the implementation of the “Brahimi Report” within 12 months, and spelled out the UK government’s strategy for greater cohesion in its own engagement on conflict prevention. This included the establishment of the Global and Africa Conflict Prevention Pools (United Kingdom Government, 2000).
- At a sub-regional level, IGAD heads of state issued the *Khartoum Declaration* in 2000, stating, “We endorse the establishment of a mechanism in the IGAD sub-region for prevention, management, and resolution of intra-state and inter-state conflicts, and direct the Executive Secretary to prepare a draft protocol on the establishment of the Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) for consideration by the assembly at its next meeting” (IGAD, 2000).
- The UN Secretary General’s *Prevention of Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary General* in 2001 stressed the need for the Secretariat’s Department of Political Affairs to strengthen its capacity to carry out conflict analysis in countries prone to or affected by conflict. It stated that the “timely application of preventive diplomacy has been recognised by the General Assembly as the most desirable and efficient means for easing tensions before they result in conflict” (United Nations, 2001).
- The European Commission’s *Communication from the Commission on Conflict Prevention* in 2001 included statements on the link between early warning and various Commission and Council instruments, stating that “A capacity for troubleshooting depends crucially on the existence of a proper EU early warning mechanism,

not only to alert EU decision making and operational centres to an imminent crisis but also to study its causes and possible consequences and identify the most appropriate response” (European Commission, 2001).

## **The initial debates**

The period immediately after the genocide in Rwanda saw the establishment of several early warning initiatives in the academic and NGO community, including the establishment of the Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER),<sup>1</sup> the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP),<sup>2</sup> the Network for Ethnological Monitoring and Early Warning (EAWARN), and the Early Recognition and Analysis of Tensions (FAST), an initiative of swisspeace. The initial debates among operational groups involved in early warning of conflict were focused on the purpose of early warning, the differences between conflict early warning and traditional intelligence work, gender considerations, the constituency and ownership of early warning systems, paradigms, and the link between warning and response.

### ***The purpose of early warning***

There were two strands to the debates on the purpose of early warning among operational agencies. On the one hand, some argued that early warning should serve as a tool to predict the outbreak, escalation, or resurgence of violent conflict. According to this school of thought, early warning analysis as an exercise should also be kept separately from advocacy efforts on response. Such a separation was seen as necessary to ensure that early warning analysis did not lose rigour because of a need to promote one response option or another. In other words, it was deemed important that early warning analysis not be politicised.

The other argument countered this by saying that simply predicting or providing analysis on whether violence will erupt (and lives will be lost) in a given area was not in the interests of the populations living there. Rather, early warning should be linked to strong response mechanisms and advocacy efforts at national, regional, and international levels *to save lives*. This was much in the spirit of the recommendations of the Rwanda Joint Evaluation.

### ***Early warning versus traditional intelligence***

The risks of conflating early warning with traditional intelligence work were a key concern as systems became operational. What distinguished the work of an early warning system from that of an intelligence agency? Maintaining a well-defined and well-publicised distinction became critical for any early warning system present in areas affected by violent conflict. Perceptions that intelligence gathering and early warning were one and the same could also greatly undermine the security of personnel and their ability to operate.

The distinction was derived from the roots of conflict early warning. As Adelman (2006) explains, early warning systems “followed the pattern of climate and humanitarian-based early warning systems in adopting a global perspective and not looking at potential or actual violence from the perspective of the threat to one’s own state. Further, early warning relied primarily upon open sources in adopting a non state-centred approach to conflict management.” The reliance on open source information is important. The pursuit of multi-stakeholder solutions to conflict means that there is a dependence on transparent methods of collecting and sharing of information (Cilliers, 2005). The key issue that settled the debate on what makes early warning distinct from intelligence is the former’s exclusive use of open source information, analysis that is shared across groups, systems that do not serve state interests but the interests of peace, and the multiple stakeholders involved in the process of early warning and response.

### ***Gender sensitivity***

Initial work on operational early warning benefited significantly from concurrent initiatives on gender and peacebuilding. The work in those areas carried out by organisations such as UNIFEM, International Alert and swisspeace highlighted the need for gender sensitivity in early warning. In particular, a system that does *not* adopt a gender-sensitive approach:

- May overlook indicators of conflict and peace that are rooted in negative gender relations.
- May formulate response recommendations that inadvertently are harmful to women or detrimental to harmonious gender relations.
- May overlook important female actors and stakeholders, along with capacities for peace and violence.

For an excellent review of these issues, see Schmeidl and Piza-Lopez, 2002.

### *Constituency and ownership*

In providing recommendations for response, those working in early warning were quickly faced with the question of “whose peace” they promoted. What interests, some would ask, are promoted in recommendations of organisations like International Crisis Group (ICG) or FEWER? What constituency is represented?

The question of constituency was and remains closely related to the question of legitimacy, particularly for southern civil society groups. Issuing recommendations for response as an external expert group is very different from doing so as a civil society network from a conflict-affected region. The question of constituency is also closely related to the question of ownership. Locally defined solutions, some groups argue, are more sustainable, as local ownership is a prerequisite for sustainability.

The constituency debate is in turn related to whether early warning systems perpetuate an interventionist paradigm, an issue discussed below.

### *Paradigm challenges*

The paradigm within which conflict early warning was initially conceived was challenged in several ways by civil society groups working on conflict management in conflict-affected regions. They pointed out that:

- Most early warning systems would extract information from conflict areas and use this to inform interventions by northern governments (Barrs, 2006).
- International responses generally were plagued by inconsistency, lack of co-ordination and political bias, aside from generally being reactive and “late”.
- A state-centric focus in conflict management does not reflect an understanding of the role played by civil society organisations in situations where the state has failed.
- An external, interventionist, and state-centric approach in early warning fuels disjointed and top-down responses in situations that require integrated and multilevel action.

These arguments were reinforced by academic research on conflict management (see for example Smith, 2003) and also gained traction among some donor agencies (e.g. USAID and agencies in Germany, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and later Norway and the United Kingdom). Funding was given to regionally based early warning systems led by local

organisations such as WANEP’s WARN, or regional bodies such as IGAD’s CEWARN.

### *The warning-response link*

The 1996 Rwanda Joint Evaluation provided important insights into the shortcomings of governmental and multilateral interventions in violent conflict. It highlighted late, uncoordinated and contradictory engagement, as well as a range of political, institutional and individual failings and errors on the part of decision makers. All these shortcomings remain present in contemporary international responses to violent conflicts.

With the call by the “Brahimi Report” for greater coherence in conflict management, efforts to promote more streamlined and integrated responses to conflict picked up momentum. In the donor community, the OECD/DAC forum pushed forward good practice in policy and programming. Some donor governments launched important joined-up government approaches, including the UK government’s Global and Africa Conflict Prevention Pools (CPP). In the NGO sector, there were several other initiatives (see Box 1.1). However, the link between warning and response has remained weak, as evidenced in the Kenya and Chad crises in 2007 and 2008. A more detailed discussion of the link between warning and response follows in Chapter 3.

#### **Box 1.1. Integrated responses to conflict**

FEWER, WANEP, EastWest Institute, and the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre launched in 2001 a roundtable process that brought state and non-state (local, national and international) decision makers together to formulate joint response strategies to early warnings. The initiative was piloted in Georgia (Javakheti) and Guinea-Conakry, and later replicated in other early warning systems (EAWARN, WARN, FAST, etc.).

### **From tools to systems**

A critical question in conflict early warning, especially in the early days, was what methodologies are best suited to predict violent conflict and/or better understand its nature. Much research was done in the 1990s by American academics in particular, to develop (mostly quantitative) methods of analysis. Initiatives such as Minorities at Risk, Global Events Data Systems (GEDS), Protocol for the Analysis of Nonviolent Direct Action



(PANDA), and others developed a strong empirical base for theories of violent conflict and advanced significantly on the coding (automated and manual) of information.<sup>3</sup> Work also started towards the end of the 1990s on several qualitative conflict analysis methods (e.g. the early methodology by The Fund for Peace, FEWER, USAID, World Bank, and DFID) that linked conflict analysis with stakeholder analysis and later, peace analysis (e.g. capacities for peace, peace indicators, conflict carrying capacities).

The fragile states agenda emerged later from a convergence of thinking on links between: human security and peacebuilding; state effectiveness and development performance; and underdevelopment and insecurity. The 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the view that fragile states are likely to generate (or fail to manage effectively) global security threats catalysed this already emerging international agenda (Cammack *et al.*, 2006).

Several initiatives have been launched to develop indices and lists of fragile states. Intended to guide aid prioritisation, these include DFID's proxy list of fragile states, George Mason University's State Fragility Index, The Fund for Peace "Failed States Index", the "Peace and Conflict Instability Ledger" of the University of Maryland, Carleton University's Country Indicators for Foreign Policy Project, the Brookings Institution's Index of State Weakness, and the work of the Center for Global Development.

Other groups have sought to develop guidelines for planning and programming in fragile states. Planning and programming methodologies have been prepared by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), DFID, the Netherlands Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and the UK government's Cabinet Office. What has remained a challenge is the absence of a comprehensive and measurable definition of state fragility. The field is too young to define what constitutes good practice in these indices and methods. A more detail discussion of the fragile states agenda follows in Chapter 2.

Work on conflict early warning systems took place in parallel with the development of new methods of conflict analysis. Some government agencies, such as the German Ministry for Development Co-operation (BMZ), developed indicator checklists (also used by the European Commission) that initially were to be completed by embassy staff (now they are completed by external experts and reviewed internally) in countries seen as being at risk of violent conflict. Among the multilaterals, the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities set up several local early warning networks (e.g. Macedonia) to provide it with relevant information and analysis (see Case Study 1 in Chapter 2).

In addition, there was work on the development of advanced systems in the non-governmental sector. Agencies such as EAWARN, WANEP, the Africa Peace Forum (APFO) and later swisspeace/FAST, set up networks of local monitors and linked these to other sources of information, trained analysts in different methods of analysis, established formats and protocols for reporting and communication, and found targeted and broad-based channels for dissemination.

Around 2001-02, a broad-based consensus emerged that a “good” early warning system was one that: (a) is based “close to the ground” or has strong field-based networks of monitors; (b) uses multiple sources of information and both qualitative and quantitative analytical methods; (c) capitalises on appropriate communication and information technology; (d) provides regular reports and updates on conflict dynamics to key national and international stakeholders; and (e) has a strong link to responders or response mechanisms.

This understanding of good practice in early warning systems fed into the development of several inter-governmental initiatives, including the IGAD’s CEWARN and ECOWAS’s ECOWARN (2003-04). Beyond this good practice, some systems (e.g. CEWARN, WARN, and the Programme on Human Security and Co-Existence) started combining early warning and early response into one system (discussed further below). This was a key characteristic of the newer systems.

## **First, second and third generation systems**

It is possible to chart the evolution of early warning systems in generations according to their location, organisation and purpose. Different generational systems meet different demands, institutional needs and mandates – which means that all serve important current needs.

- First generation systems of conflict early warning (mid- to late 1990s until today) are largely headquarter-based. They draw information from different sources and analyse it using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods. Examples include the early form of the ICG (before regional offices were established), the GEDS research project, the conflict indicators model used by the European Commission, and the current German BMZ indicator-based system.
- Second generation systems (early 2000 onwards) have a stronger link to the field. Often incorporating networks of monitors operating in conflict areas, they analyse data using qualitative and quantitative

methods, prepare a range of different reporting products, and often either provide recommendations or bring decision makers together to plan responses. Examples include the contemporary systems of ICG, EAWARN, and FAST.

- Third generation systems (2003 until today) are based in conflict areas. Organised along lines similar to second generation systems, they have stronger response links. Often, early warning information is used to de-escalate situations (*e.g.* by dispelling rumours. Field monitors also often serve as “first” responders to signs of violence. Networks of local/national responders are part of the system. Examples include the Programme on Human Security and Co-Existence in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka (Foundation for Coexistence), FEWER-Eurasia, WARN, ECOWARN, CEWARN, and some corporate systems established by multinationals in conflict-affected regions.<sup>4</sup>

A more detailed discussion of these systems (categorised into governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental systems) follows in the next chapter.

## Analytical conclusions

Conflict early warning as a field of conflict prevention is today undergoing significant (and appropriate) scrutiny. What value does it have for conflict prevention as a whole? Do investments in early warning yield better results than investments in other preventive projects? Have early warning efforts helped prevent violent conflict? And perhaps most importantly, are we in a better position today to prevent the loss of life on the scale seen during the 1994 Rwandan genocide?

Critics point to inaccurate predictions, failure to foresee important events and inadequate linking of operational responses to early warning (Matveeva, 2006). Indeed, since the majority of early warning systems typically draw on open source information, this suggests that they cannot capture information about the plans of conflicting parties that determine when and where violence is to escalate. It is also often argued that a good analysis of conflict ultimately boils down to simple personal judgement and that the “bells and whistles” (graphs, local information networks, etc.) of some early warning systems add little value. Furthermore, from a donor perspective, the visible impacts of early warning are often seen as meagre and therefore less appealing than other interventions such as disarmament and security sector reform, which appear to have more obvious benefits. Indeed, at times early warning analyses can provide donor officials with

political headaches, by being alarmist or offensive to other governments, or by advocating responses that are not feasible.

Proponents of conflict early warning say that it basically serves the same function today as it has for centuries in other fields: it helps decision makers and other stakeholders anticipate developments and understand the nature and dynamics of different situations (Lavoix, 2007). In its contemporary form, and at a minimum, conflict early warning contributes to the evidence base of conflict prevention decision making. Beyond that, a good early warning system (along with its information sources and analytical tools) helps anticipate trends in violent conflict situations. Those systems that have strong links to response, it is argued, provide options for conflict management and prevention, and forums for joint problem definition, response planning among different actors, and local responses to escalating situations.

However, despite advances made in policy integration, tools, methodologies and systems, we are now only marginally (if at all) in a better position to prevent situations of mass violence. Early response remains elusive and, of course, driven by political, institutional and operational considerations. Additional perspectives on these issues will be given throughout this paper. The final chapter revisits the value of conflict early warning and draws conclusions.

## Notes

1. A global network of NGOs, United Nations agencies, and academic institutions focused on response-oriented early warning that was launched in 1997.
2. A West African network of civil society organisations working on conflict prevention and later early warning, established in 1997.
3. “Coding” here refers to the categorisation of information under different indicator headings.
4. Due to confidentiality issues, these third generation systems cannot be described here.

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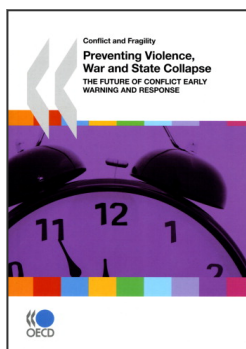
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## List of Abbreviations

ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific
APFO	Africa Peace Forum
AU	African Union
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Germany)
CDA Inc.	Collaborative Learning Projects
CEWARN	Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism
CEWERU	Conflict Early Warning and Early Response Unit
CEWS	Continental Early Warning System
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CIFP	Country Indicators for Foreign Policy
CPDC	Conflict Peace and Development Co-operation Network
CPP	Conflict Prevention Pool
CPR Network	Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Network
DFAIT	Department for Foreign Affairs and International Trade (Canada)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
EAWARN	Network for Ethnological Monitoring and Early Warning
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWARN	ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network
ECOWAS	Economic Community Of West African States
EDF	European Development Fund
EISAS	Information and Strategic Analysis Secretariat
EU	European Union
EUSITCEN	European Union Situation Centre
FAST	Early Recognition and Analysis of Tensions
FCE	Foundation for Coexistence
FEWER	Forum on Early Warning and Early Response
FEWER-Africa	Forum on Early Warning and Early Response-Africa
FEWER-Eurasia	Forum on Early Warning and Early Response-Eurasia
FSG	Fragile States Group
GCPP	Global Conflict Prevention Pool
GEDS	Global Events Data System

GIGAS	German Institute for Global Area Studies
GTZ	<i>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit</i>
HMT	Her Majesty's Treasury
ICG	International Crisis Group
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority on Development
IGO	Inter-governmental organisation
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
KEDS	Kansas Events Data System
LICUS	Low Income Countries Under Stress
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MARAC	Mécanisme d'alerte rapide de l'Afrique centrale
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OAU	Organisation of African Unity (now AU)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PANDA	Protocol for the Analysis of Nonviolent Direct Action
PCIA	Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment
PITF	Political Instability Task Force
PPEWU	Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit (EU)
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAP	<i>Système d'Alerte Précoce</i> (France)
START	Stabilisation and Reconstruction Task Force (Canada)
UN	United Nations
UNDHA	United Nations Department for Humanitarian Affairs (now UNOCHA)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDPA	United Nations Department for Political Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNIFEM	United Nations Fund for Women
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VRA	Virtual Research Associates
WANEP	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
WARN	West Africa Early Warning and Response Network



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