

Expanding Prevention: Capitalising on the Power of Early Warning and Early Response Systems

Virtual Discussion | 8 September 2022

Summary Note

Introduction

Early Warning and Early Response Systems (EWERS) are an important tool within the spectrum of actions for conflict prevention, management and resolution at the national level. They consist of two interrelated mechanisms. First, early warning mechanisms are designed to alert decision makers to the potential outbreak, escalation, and resurgence of violent conflict. Second, early response mechanisms are designed to improve decision makers' understanding of the impacts of violent conflict and coordinate their efforts to reduce the potential for conflict. Together, EWERS create a strategy that allows state and local state actors to identify and analyse conflict trends, alert decision makers to conflict risk, and inform decision making and responses that prevent violent conflict.

There are several benefits to EWERS as they work to reduce opportunities for violent conflict. EWERS can prevent the extreme hardships that conflict inflicts on individuals, communities, and countries. For example, this work minimises conflict victims, human rights violations, and the economic and environmental issues that arise from conflicts. Additionally, implementing EWERS is far less costly than intervening to stop conflict. Further, EWERS bridges the work of local actors and national governments to facilitate inclusive responses. Lastly, they are institutionalised and sustainable infrastructures for peace that the government can feasibly rely on.

There are four key aspects of successful EWERS: timely reactions, anticipation capacity, reaction capacity, and institutional and governmental infrastructure. These EWERS features should be a main priority when designing future systems and adapting existing ones.

As part of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict's (GPPAC)'s learning month, a session on early warning and early response systems (EWERS) focused on hearing from EWERS experts on what it takes to establish such infrastructures successfully. GPPAC's involvement in a variety of EWERS provided a solid ground for learning and exchange. This conversation allowed participants from diverse regions of the world to consider how to engage in EWERS practices in their own contexts and provided an opportunity for partners already engaged in EWERS to learn from other partners on how to strengthen their own work.

The following key elements of effective EWERS emerged during the learning session:

- **EWERS require a strong, multi-stakeholder and inclusive governance structure.**

Political will is necessary to implement strong EWERS. Politicians do not have a high incentive to support such mechanisms given that a lack of prevention systems is not a problem visible to the public. Further, limited capacities often limit the recognition of the value that such systems can bring to the national prevention efforts. However, in Southern Africa, the EWERS have recently started getting political traction due to an increase in civil conflicts throughout the region. The examples in West Africa also demonstrate that political will is not an immediate process and requires piloting in

a few relevant contexts before the national governments can see the value of this work and open themselves to the idea of establishing EWERS in their context and regionally.

Further, governments alone cannot establish successful EWERS. Local actors, grassroots organisations, civil society organisations, regional institutions, national organisations, and international organisations are all partners that support a successful EWERS. Among representatives of EWERS in the MENA and South Africa, the critical role of the grassroots organisations was specifically highlighted. Additionally, the African Union utilises umbrella structures to coordinate a variety of EWERS in the continent.

Civil society and local peacebuilding networks often play the role of collecting and analysing data, while national governments and regional organisations take leadership in facilitating needed responses. However, models where local peacebuilders support the process of seeking solutions should further be expanded within the current EWERS due to their expertise and knowledge on the ground.

- **EWERS are best operationalised when supported by peacebuilding networks.**

Most EWERS in Africa operate with the support of formal and informal networks. In West Africa, that Network is the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). In Southern Africa, the Southern Africa's Partnership for the Prevention of Conflict (SAPPC). In East Africa, it is the Eastern Africa Civil Society Network. In the Middle East and North Africa region, informal groups of organisations came together as a network.

Peacebuilding networks offer an effective structure for EWERS. These networks use their existing systematic and institutionalised infrastructures and access to collect constructive data. They then analyse the trends and present their findings with recommendations to decision-makers who take leadership over EWERS. Moreover, through their networks, local peacebuilders can engage broader groups into peacebuilding, bringing in various perspectives and expertise. Currently, local peacebuilders work to integrate climate risks into EWERS. Finally, they have agreed upon and inclusive priorities for joint action. Therefore, it is easier to manage relationships with a wide group of actors through coordinated networks.

- **EWERS must be rooted in localised indicators.**

Indicators include qualitative and quantitative trends and observations that alert EWERS. Indicators vary regionally, nationally, and even from a locality to locality. Each context should rely on a diverse set of indicators relevant to their particular contexts. Indicators of a violent political conflict in a country would be different from indicators of climate-related violence, so EWERS indicators should be identified for varied potential conflicts. Each context will then have its own indicators, depending on the type of conditions that makes this context prone to conflict. At the same time, indicators must be comprehensive enough to predict the type of violence that does not fall within established categories, to react properly to health crises, environmental threats and other shocks.

While a variety of organisations can come together to analyse indicators, this process should be led by local peacebuilders who hold knowledge of their communities and can better identify signs of conflict. For example, the main indicator of conflict in Kaabong, Uganda is increased tree cutting because it alerts the community that the fences surrounding the crowds during times of unrest are being reinforced. This knowledge is niche to its location, but a key indicator for early conflict warning. Thus, while EWERS can be implemented through the collaboration of peacebuilders working on different regional and global scales, local peacebuilders are at the centre of creating inclusive indicators through their knowledge of context-specific drivers of instability.

The efforts to determine and define what impact means at the local level need to be rooted in community-led determination of impact. For this, inclusive indicators need to be developed on the basis of context-specific drivers of instability and sources of resilience, in consultation with local communities. Non-indicator-based (qualitative) monitoring and evaluation methodologies could also be further tested and explored in EWERS.

In order to effectively use indicators, EWERS must establish methods for strong quality indicator analysis. Some EWERS direct their analysis outside of the locality where the data is collected, in others the data analysis takes place internally, depending on the capacity and agreement among EWERS' governance structures.

- **EWERS inspires a variety of funding structures.**

Successful EWERS require sustainable funding. Adequately financing EWERS looks different for every region, depending on availability of funds, capacities and political realities.

This funding usually comes from the national government as well as voluntary contributions of external donors and regional organisations, as well as funding raised by peacebuilding networks for their every-day operations. Splitting available funds between community monitors and coordinating institutions has been a successful format for balancing voices within EWERS and ensuring the quality of delivery.

Volunteerism is another EWERS source networks rely on. This resource also bypasses political differences, as well as at the earliest stages of EWER. Lebanon provides an example of successful early responses led by goodwill. Lebanon's leaders met when there was fear of civil war in the country, and although strong EWERS were not in place, they relied on the commitment of leaders to produce a group declaration after a full day of negotiations. The declaration steered the country towards dialogue rather than violent conflict. Goodwill is a start for EWERS, but its sustainability relies on informal volunteerism rather than official networks which can lead to less institutional engagement and only short-term success.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion, the following recommendations have been identified for the establishment and support of effective EWERS:

- Due to institutional hurdles like political will and funding, establishing strong EWERS worldwide does not happen overnight. **Patience is required to develop relationships with the government** that should lead on EWERS, with the support of networks.
- **Sufficient capacity of regional peacebuilding networks** is required to adequately support EWERS. These capacities are both analytical and coordinating. Regional networks connect government mechanisms and nonstate actors with established EWERS objectives. Increasing these capacities empowers grassroots organisations to play a larger role in EWERS while looping larger networks into the process.
- **Local peacebuilders must have the space** to outline localised and specific signs of conflict, as well as to contribute to decision-making. In order to implement strong EWERS globally, peacebuilders should be present in all localities.
- **Sustainable resourcing** is required to establish new and sustain old EWERS. These resources should go towards capacity building with local, national, and international peacebuilders and allow for critical EWERS components like data collection and analysis. It is essential to meet this challenge because the resources required for EWERS are much lower than the financial and social tolls that violent conflicts bring.