

**CEASEFIRE**  
centre for civilian rights



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# First to Know: Civilian-led early warning in armed conflict



**Cover photo:**  
South Sudanese soldier, Paloch,  
South Sudan, March 2014

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# Acronyms

<b>ACoH</b>	Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities	<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>ARCSS</b>	Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan	<b>ECOWARN</b>	ECOWAS Warning and Response Network
<b>AU</b>	African Union	<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>CEPO</b>	Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation	<b>EWS</b>	early warning system
<b>CEWS</b>	Continental Early Warning System	<b>FCE</b>	Foundation for Co-Existence
<b>CoHA</b>	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement	<b>IGAD</b>	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization	<b>JMAC</b>	joint mission analysis centre
<b>CTSAMM</b>	Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism	<b>JMEC</b>	Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission
<b>CTSAMVM</b>	Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism	<b>MVM</b>	Monitoring and Verification Mechanism
<b>DPKO</b>	Department of Peacekeeping Operations	<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>DPPA</b>	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs	<b>R-ARCSS</b>	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
		<b>UN</b>	United Nations
		<b>UNHCR</b>	UN Refugee Agency
		<b>UNMISS</b>	UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan

# Introduction

For decades it has been recognised that systematic early warning of armed conflict has the potential to save lives. But in an era of widespread non-international conflicts, which have had a devastating effect on civilian populations, two questions have acquired a new urgency: who is doing the warning and who is being warned?

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The world's newest state, South Sudan, descended into armed conflict in December 2013, a mere two years after it won its independence from Sudan. The scale of the violence and the systematic targeting of civilians during hostilities and, intermittently, during ceasefires, have horrified the international community. The international response to the war was swift, if not very effective. The first ceasefire was brokered just over a month after the outbreak of hostilities, but it did not prove to be durable or effective in stopping the violence.

The first ceasefire agreement established the first monitoring mechanism under the aegis of the eight-country East African trade bloc the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), but this mechanism and its two successors have focused on monitoring the ceasefires between the warring factions and compliance with an agreement on the cessation of hostilities that have repeatedly been breached. Civilians have continued to bear the brunt of the ongoing violence.

In contrast, the pilot early warning system (EWS) run by the Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation (CEPO), a South Sudanese non-governmental organization (NGO), and the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights is both

civilian-focused and civilian-led. Since it was launched in spring 2019, CEPO and Ceasefire have built networks to report actual and threatened incidents of violence against civilians, and successfully engaged key international decision makers to further the protection of civilians from the violence that continues to engulf South Sudan.

This report considers aspects of the role of civilians and civil society organizations (CSOs) in early warning and summarizes the lessons learned from the CEPO/Ceasefire early warning project. The first section provides background by detailing the development of early warning systems for various forms of political violence – as opposed to, for example, early warning systems for natural disasters – from the 1960s until the present, tracing the development of the motivations and the conceptions of security on which they have been based.

The second section considers the pilot CEPO/Ceasefire EWS in South Sudan, considering the context in which it operates, detailing the challenges it has faced and the opportunities it has realized, focusing on the lessons learned in building and operating a civilian-led civilian-focused EWS,

and the challenges CEPO has faced in running it. It examines the difficult environment in which CEPO operates, detailing the primacy that security concerns for staff and EWS monitors must be afforded in the implementation of the project, and political considerations that arise from operating in such a sensitive situation. It also includes case studies of how CEPO engaged several key groups – women’s activists and transport companies, setting out the challenges, frustrations and considerations encountered in expanding the network.

The report makes the case that civilian-led monitoring systems should not be regarded as cheap alternatives to international expert-led teams. It argues that these systems can be used to put the safety of civilians at the centre of peace processes and bring civilian perspectives on violence, which do not privilege ‘political’ violence over that which can be categorized as criminal or communal, into political processes that may otherwise be dominated by negotiations between elites and securing ceasefires between warring factions.

# 1

## The history of early warning systems

Early warning is premised on the belief that violent conflict does not occur spontaneously, and that there are key indicators or signs in the build-up to conflict that, if properly identified, can alert monitors that there is a risk of conflict escalation, outbreak or relapse. Importantly, it is also premised on the belief that *if* the risk of violence is properly identified, the outbreak or escalation of conflict can be prevented or, at the very least, its consequences mitigated.

### What are early warning systems?

Early warning systems collect and analyse data for the identification of at-risk populations to inform decision makers, who then may respond or intervene according to the information they receive. Early warning systems are used for a host of different purposes across different sectors, including climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, and armed conflict. Conflict early warning systems identify key risk indicators for the outbreak of armed conflict. Conflict early warning has been defined as:

*'a process that: (a) alerts decision makers to the potential outbreak, escalation and resurgence of violent conflict; and (b) promotes an understanding among decision makers of the nature and impacts of violent conflict.'*<sup>1</sup>

Early warning systems have been described as a 'risk management tool' that monitor and analyse different events

and variables of a local context to forecast whether there is a risk of conflict.<sup>2</sup> The different stages of early warning are:

- Collection of data (using specific indicators)
- Analysis of the data (attaching meaning to indicators, setting it in context, recognition of crisis development)
- Formulation of best/worst scenarios and response options
- Communication to decision makers<sup>3</sup>

The definition of early warning is sufficiently broad that many different activities and approaches qualify as early warning. For example, an international NGO with one staff member who monitors news reports and conducts regular telephone conversations with people in conflict-affected areas to produce reports would qualify as an early warning system, just as a multimillion dollar software system with proprietary algorithms and staff based across several countries who conduct field research to produce alerts is also an early warning system.

It should be noted at the outset that all conflict early warning systems face certain challenges that set them apart from other early warning systems, and impact on their effectiveness. First, unlike early warning systems which measure scientific phenomena, such as extreme weather incidents, conflict early warning systems measure socio-political factors and rely on predicting human behaviours, which cannot necessarily be measured by definitive indicators. Whereas science will determine how weather patterns develop, human behaviour can be affected by a range of contextual factors, including culture or history, which can mean that similar situations or incidents in different locations can result in radically different outcomes. This also poses unique opportunities – hurricanes or diseases cannot be negotiated with, early warning systems merely help to mitigate their effects, whereas conflict early warning can theoretically prevent war from occurring at all.

Nevertheless, conflict early warning is more controversial than other forms of early warning. Disaster early warning will often act as an invitation to the international community to provide funding and much-needed resources to avert disaster, whereas conflict early warning may result in responses that threaten the internal political affairs of a state. The politicized nature of many factors in conflict early warning can therefore make it controversial, which can be further exacerbated where the early warning system is owned by an intergovernmental or political organization, such as the United Nations (UN).

Generally speaking, most early warning systems in operation today rely on software for data collection, input, and analysis against a set of indicators. However, specialized software may require certain technical skills, and this could exclude actors without those skills or without access to the requisite technology.

Over decades, academic research has produced a range of conflict-related indicators by testing hypotheses against existing data on previous armed conflicts, including identifying indicators for different kinds of armed conflict. For example, an influx of arms to a country or an increase in circulation of arms will be a conflict indicator in all types of armed conflict, but poverty, large pop-

ulations and political instability have been identified as key risk indicators for civil conflict specifically.<sup>4</sup> However, standardized metrics of conflict may lack context and thus fail to capture the nuances and risks of a particular situation on the ground, while adding an air of unassailable authority that marginalized groups suffering from the conflict may find difficult to challenge.

Indicators can be quite broad – assessing state legitimacy as an indicator, for example, could involve analysing a range of considerations from whether there have been riots and protests in a state to whether the government is representative of the population.<sup>5</sup> Continuous monitoring of data can be used to produce a baseline analysis of different indicators. As data continues to be collected and analysed, trends or fluctuations against the ordinary baseline can be identified to indicate whether there is an increased risk of conflict, which should then generate an alert – whether via software or a person raising the alarm or both. Alerts or warnings can also be produced for significant events or incidents, such as a violent border clash, which may indicate imminent risk of conflict. Early warning systems can also measure cooperative or peaceful indicators, such as political agreements or legal reforms, which can help to contextualize the broader situation in a state.

Once a report or an alert that indicates a risk of armed conflict is produced, early warning must then be followed by early response. The response element is recognized as one of the most challenging aspects of early warning, which is affected by ‘broader institutional, political, and contextual realities’.<sup>6</sup> The warning and response elements of early warning systems have evolved significantly over time, yet still face notable challenges in their implementation.

The fact that many civilians across the world continue to face the horror of armed conflict and mass atrocities has led many to assert that early warning systems are not effective. However, given the complex array of factors that may determine whether a country will descend into armed conflict, and how stakeholders respond at the pre-conflict stage, it is perhaps best not to view early warning systems as accurate predictors of all armed conflicts – or mechanisms for reliably preventing them. Rather, they are a tool to raise the



alarm where key risk factors for conflict are present, which can allow for timely interventions to prevent violence arising or escalating.

## Origins of early warning systems

Early warning systems have their origins in several different fields, namely, military intelligence, conflict resolution and disaster early warning.

Military intelligence is arguably as old as war itself, and generally involves monitoring and information gathering on political and military developments to determine potential military attacks and analyse the impact of potential conflicts upon a state's or region's interests. As technology has advanced, so has military intelligence; computerized systems linked to satellites, for example, can now provide timely information on the movement of arms and troops, or the deployment of nuclear weapons.<sup>7</sup>

While early warning systems have some similarities to military intelligence, there are important factors that differentiate them from intelligence gathering.<sup>8</sup> Early warning systems rely primarily on open source information, such as news sources, social media and NGO reports,<sup>9</sup> whereas intelligence tends to rely on clandestine information gathering. Importantly, early warning systems take a global – and supposedly neutral – perspective with regard to early warning, as opposed to an intelligence approach which analyses information and calculates responses through the interests of a particular state or power.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, although states have traditionally relied on early warning for their own interests, early warning systems which have emerged over the last 50 to 60 years rely on the belief in an 'international community' vested with powers to maintain international peace and security, and engage in conflict resolution.

This shared global perception of an international community largely developed after the creation of the United Nations in 1945 and the subsequent evolution of a global legal and diplomatic architecture. Preventing armed conflict is one of the central aims of the UN Charter, which bestows

powers on the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General and the UN General Assembly to settle disputes, prevent violent conflict and maintain peace internationally.<sup>11</sup> A key tool in preventing conflict from escalating or arising is the use of 'preventive diplomacy', a phrase coined by UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld to describe efforts at the international level to prevent the Cold War from escalating into a World War.<sup>12</sup> Preventive diplomacy entails a range of different activities, including soft measures such as facilitating negotiation or mediation, coercive measures such as enacting sanctions or deploying peacekeepers, and offering incentives such as investment and financial aid. Today, preventive diplomacy is still a key element of conflict prevention and sometimes forms part of the response element of early warning systems.

As the practice of preventive diplomacy was developing in the political arena, conflict prevention also came to be increasingly examined in academia.<sup>13</sup> In examining the root causes and shared characteristics of past conflicts, it was believed that potential future conflicts could be identified and prevented. Academics played significant roles in developing early warning methodologies which formed the basis for the first conflict early warning systems. In the 1960s, the World Event Interaction Survey (WEIS) was created by Charles McClelland at the University of Southern California, which is sometimes referred to as the first conflict EWS.<sup>14</sup> Data was collected from *New York Times* articles on 'events' globally that were either 'cooperative' or 'conflictful' events. Examples of 'conflictful' events were riots, demonstrations, coups and assassinations. Analysis found that impending crises were indicated by the intensity and range of different types of events that could be observed in some countries.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the idea of early warning systems for humanitarian disasters was also increasingly developing. However, sophisticated disaster early warning systems began to appear from the 1980s onwards, while conflict early warning systems remained largely similar to the WEIS model until the 1990s. For example, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) was created in 1985 by USAID in response to famines in East and West Africa. In addition to using satellite images to monitor the possibility of floods and

droughts, FEWS NET also deploys field monitors on the ground who collect and analyse data on the conditions in individual countries.<sup>16</sup> The system allows for targeted responses from states, donors and international agencies in the form of aid, supply chains and contingency planning.

Early application of conflict early warning also occurred to some extent through disaster early warning systems, because of the potential of conflict to create humanitarian disaster. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the former UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (UNDHA), for example, monitored population movements and refugee flows to enable effective contingency planning, which also involved assessing risk of conflict.<sup>17</sup> The UNHCR High Alert List for Emergency Preparedness still includes risk indicators related to conflict.<sup>18</sup>

In 1992, building on the advances in the fields of disaster early warning systems, preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention, UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali advocated for the creation of a global UN conflict early warning system in his 'Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping'.<sup>19</sup> While a comprehensive UN conflict early warning system became ensnared in the sensitivities of member states and never materialized, the majority of conflict early warning systems emerged from the 1990s onwards. This was partly driven by the failure of the international community to intervene in the genocides that occurred in the mid-1990s in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, which provided renewed impetus among the international community to allocate funds and resources to preventing conflict and atrocities. The contexts and justifications behind the development of these various regional systems are investigated below.

At the international level, this led to the creation of the Office of the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide in 2004, and the adoption of the World Summit Outcome in 2005, which included the affirmation of an international norm on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)<sup>20</sup> from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.<sup>21</sup> The World Summit called for an expansion of UN capabilities for early warning and assessment,<sup>22</sup> and reaffirmed the principle that the international

community had not only the legal powers but also the moral duty to monitor situations of concern and intervene where necessary.

R2P is also happening alongside growing conversations about protection of civilians in the UN Security Council, and growing humanitarian commitments to protection.

The adoption of R2P was also followed by the creation of a Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect in 2008, and was accompanied by discussions about and commitments to the need to protect civilians in the UN Security Council. The R2P mandate has now been integrated into the Office of the Special Adviser on Genocide, to create the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (OGPRtoP). The Special Advisers are mandated to provide an early warning function to the UN Secretary-General and the UNSC. OGPRtoP collects information, mostly from UN sources, on political, human rights, humanitarian, social and economic developments in countries worldwide to identify early warning signs of the risk of atrocity crimes.<sup>23</sup> Information is analysed against the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes – the early warning methodological tool developed by the Special Advisers.<sup>24</sup> The tool outlines 14 different 'risk factors', with each risk factor listing several different indicators which show that a risk factor is present.

Aside from the UN early warning system for atrocity crimes, a small number of other early warning systems focus exclusively on mass atrocities, such as Genocide Watch and the Sentinel Project.<sup>25</sup> These systems draw heavily on academic theory around the root causes of genocide and identity-based violence, including Gregory Stanton's ten stages of genocide model, which was originally developed in the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Atrocity prevention and conflict prevention are separate but interlinked fields which both developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, yet conflict early warning systems far outnumber atrocity early warning systems. This is perhaps because while atrocities may occur outside of armed conflict, conflict early warning systems should have robust indicators for identity- or group-based violence, which should allow for atrocity early warning, and would mean that atrocity-based systems would be a duplication of work and resources.

Early warning systems have therefore been made possible by global developments in politics, diplomacy, civil society, academia and technology, and developments in these areas continue to change the way that early warning systems function and evolve. Systems that first emerged in the 1990s are markedly different from today's early warning systems, which has led to conflict early warning systems being categorized into four different 'generations'.

## Generations of conflict early warning

Since the 1990s, a plethora of different early warning systems emerged as the idea of conflict prevention and early warning increasingly gained traction internationally. Systems have been created by a variety of different governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental actors at the local, regional and international level. In order to understand some of the key challenges and opportunities currently facing early warning and response, it is necessary to examine how early warning systems have evolved, who the key stakeholders in these systems are perceived to be, and the benefits, disadvantages and criticisms of different models of early warning systems.

Conflict early warning systems have been categorized into four different generations.<sup>27</sup> Categorization is not based solely on when systems appeared chronologically. Rather, the categorization of 'generation' largely depends on: the data gathered – whether it is quantitative, qualitative or mixed; and who collects and analyses data, including where the systems are based.<sup>28</sup>

### First-generation systems

First-generation systems are predictive and designed to inform the decision making of internal clients, but do not usually have an in-built response process.<sup>29</sup> Many first-generation systems are therefore focused only on data gathering and analysis, and do not carry out other functions now seen as crucial to early warning, such as formulating response options and engaging in advocacy.<sup>30</sup> These systems are based in the global North yet have a focus on monitoring countries in the global South. They are generally quantitative in nature, and rely on a range of empirical data from news sources, as well as reports from NGOs, academia and intergovernmental organizations.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of PITF (see box) the internal client was the US government, which funded the project for policy-making purposes. Aside from publishing the results of the project, there was no response element involved in PITF: any response would depend on how the US government chose to use the analysis provided, which was inevitably affected by the interests and priorities of the US as a state. First-generation systems are generally aimed at 'track one' actors: states and intergovernmental organizations such as the UN,<sup>35</sup> but have little to no effective communication procedure for their findings.

One benefit of initiatives such as PITF is that these systems can include more political factors in risk assessment models than those included in the risk assessment models of intergovernmental or regional organizations due to political sensitivities, (e.g. regime type, state-led discrimination and length that a leader has been in office).<sup>36</sup> However, the fact that any response is expected to be undertaken by track one actors means that the

### Political Instability Task Force (PITF)

Originally called the State Failure Task Force, PITF was a project developed in 1994 that was funded by the Central Intelligence Agency of the USA. PITF was made up of a

panel of scholars and methodologists who aimed to design and carry out a data-driven study on the correlates of state failure since the mid-1950s. From this, the task force developed a global forecasting model to identify the risk of ethnic war, revolutionary war, adverse regime change, and

genocide.<sup>32</sup> The project was run by academics who were based in different universities across the USA and relied on open access data, and at one point claimed to have a predictive capacity of between 80 and 90 per cent.<sup>33</sup> The programme was defunded by the US government in 2020.<sup>34</sup>

analysis provided by any first-generation system will still be constrained by these political considerations.

In addition to the gap between warning and response of first-generation systems, their reliance on quantitative data and lack of input from actors on the ground raises serious problems over accuracy, as statistical approaches cannot fully account for case- and context-specific information.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, first-generation systems lack the expertise and input of local actors, who are not only the most affected by armed conflict but are also crucial for understanding local contexts and creating tailored responses. While it is accepted that first-generation systems can be useful for monitoring and recognizing trends in armed conflict,<sup>38</sup> they are no longer seen as effective early warning systems.

### Second-generation systems

Second-generation early warning systems have a response element, usually in the form of proposals or recommendations aimed at track one actors.<sup>39</sup> These systems also conduct monitoring in conflict-affected countries and regions, but the analysis of data is usually carried out in the global North where many of the systems are headquartered. Many of these systems rely on qualitative data, although some rely on a mixed methodology, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Although ICG (see box) does engage with local actors, its advocacy efforts are largely aimed at track one actors, particularly the UN and the European Union (EU).<sup>41</sup> This means that any response is constrained by the political sensitivities and interests of the international community (or lack thereof) to intervene. Many of ICG's field monitors are not locals and are instead from the

global North. They either travel to conflict-affected countries on dedicated trips and/or are based in or near conflict zones. While there is an argument that international NGO workers who are not from the local country or region may be seen as more impartial or independent, the actual or perceived neutrality of international actors is debatable.

There are numerous criticisms of second-generation models. They tend to rely on qualitative data, which it has been argued may be too subjective. While qualitative data can offer richer and more nuanced accounts of what is occurring on the ground than empirical analysis only, the volume of data can also present problems.<sup>42</sup> Further criticisms of second-generation models are also relevant to first-generation systems. First, the fact that those who are carrying out analysis and advocacy efforts are based in the global North, as well as the focus on track one actors as the agents of response, limits the potential effectiveness of responses. This is because 'early warning agencies in the West have little influence over the institutions that could execute preventive diplomacy in actual conflict', and 'the distance between the possible conflict areas and the West lessens the international community's motivation to intervene'.<sup>43</sup> Those who are based in the field lack the ability to perform response functions on the ground due to the 'top-down' approach of second-generation systems, and the fact that field monitors are often not locals with relevant local knowledge.

Furthermore, first- and second-generation systems ignore micro-level tensions and indicators of conflict because of their focus on states. This means that tensions or potential outbreaks of violence between different communities that don't involve state actors may not be adequately cap-

### International Crisis Group (ICG)<sup>40</sup>

ICG was established in 1995 in response to the failure of the international community to act to prevent mass atrocities and genocide

in Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia. It is headquartered in Brussels and has staff based in or nearby conflict-affected countries who conduct field research and engagement. This is largely done through conducting interviews with a range of different stakeholders, including local leaders

and government officials. Evidence gathered is used to inform a global conflict tracker and to produce a monthly early warning bulletin. ICG undertakes high-level advocacy based on its findings, and states on its website that it is 'influential in Western power centres'.

## Foundation for Co-Existence (FCE)<sup>48</sup>

The most oft-cited example of a third-generation early warning systems is the FCE initiative in Sri Lanka, which started in 2002. A citizen-based model of early warning was designed, as well as computer software called FCEWARN which specifically monitored conflicts at the micro-level, which was used alongside Geographic Information Systems. Data was provided by field monitors operating in the conflict zone who were

members of local communities, and a network of committees at the grassroots level –made up of representatives from a broad range of different demographic groups – also provided information. Members of these committees were trained and mobilized to monitor and identify the peace and conflict indicators at local levels.

There was also a parallel response mechanism through which ‘multi track diplomacy’ was used by local stakeholders in order to intervene and prevent conflict. Once a situation had been flagged by the

software, field monitors, committees and information analysts analysed the information they had and developed a prognosis for the issue concerned, then identified and classified the stakeholders and potential interveners. After establishing how imminent the threat was, links with local stakeholders and interveners were established and a response was initiated. Innovatively, the system also had an SMS function, which alerted key local actors who had the ability to de-escalate violence to the fact that there was an imminent risk in their area.

tured. Moreover, when it comes to resolving these micro-level issues, the international community would not be the appropriate responder.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, first- and second-generation systems raise important questions about who early warning systems are designed to warn. The fact that local communities are not even recipients of early warning information in these systems is deeply problematic. While the international community undoubtedly has a role to play in early warning and response, the development of third- and fourth-generation systems represents a shift in the way early warning systems are designed, and acknowledges the significant role that local communities have to play in conflict early warning and response.

### Third-generation systems

Third-generation systems are entirely based in conflict-affected countries and regions. Field monitoring roles are assigned to those who live in conflict-affected areas, and they also act as first responders to early warning indicators. These systems therefore combine early warning and early response, and use mixed methodologies to collect and analyse data. Third-generation systems involve track one and track two actors, have a focus on micro-level conflict indicators and resolutions, and sometimes have mechanisms for including local community leaders in responses.<sup>45</sup> These sys-

tems are often referred to as ‘people-centred systems’,<sup>46</sup> or systems ‘of citizens, by citizens and for citizens’.<sup>47</sup>

Third-generation systems are characterized by their local ownership. While the gathering of data and use of potentially problematic computerized systems to produce early warning is similar to second-generation systems, the response element of third-generation systems is markedly different. FCE has defined early warning as sending ‘the right information at the right time to the right people to take timely action for prevention of conflicts’.<sup>49</sup> In third-generation systems, ‘the right people’ are not always track one actors, but local actors who are able to take timely action.

However, third-generation systems do raise a number of issues. The fact that they are micro-level and reactive rather than pro-active means that in practice they are rarely able to address structural and root causes of violence.<sup>50</sup> While local stakeholders may be able to react quickly to calm tensions in the short term, the underlying causes of those tensions will continue to exist unless macro-level state action, or even action at the international level, is taken in order to address root causes of violence or disagreement. Finally, while these systems are locally owned, they are still not accessible to the public, and early warning is targeted at specific stakeholders who it is

believed have the ability to prevent conflict, rather than notifying communities at risk.

### Fourth-generation systems

Like third-generation systems, fourth-generation systems are people-centred systems that are entirely based in the conflict region. However, they have less centralized structures and rely directly on civilians and civil society to provide data. Whereas second- and third-generation systems have designated field monitors and formal reporting structures, and usually use proprietary software, fourth-generation systems are 'horizontal', facilitating reporting and warning by and within communities.<sup>51</sup> These systems use open source software which allows ordinary citizens to report events, and aim to empower individuals and communities to take action to reduce the potential risk that latent conflict poses directly to communities.<sup>52</sup> There are numerous benefits to fourth-generation systems and the use of civil society-led early warning systems. They allow for real-time reporting and a plurality of different perspectives that is more inclusive than other generations of early warning systems, particularly because many systems allow for reports and events to be documented in a variety of different languages. The fact that they are participatory removes the time lapse of using intermediaries to report or react to conflict warning signs, and these systems can effectively leverage the expertise of local civil soci-

ety actors who not only have in-depth knowledge of local contexts, but are also often seen as legitimate and trusted within their communities.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, this participatory approach, and the open nature of the information reported, means that fourth-generation systems truly function to warn those who are most vulnerable. Aside from civil society or other actors who are able to use information in order to try to resolve conflict, people living in conflict areas are able to view information about the scale, frequency and severity of events occurring around them and to make decisions about how best to protect themselves, their family, their livelihoods and their property.

As noted in the section on third-generation systems, removing state or track one actors altogether is not desirable, as sustainable solutions will usually need the support of state or international actors. However, fourth-generation systems have allowed civil society to use information gathered through these platforms in order to conduct advocacy at the national and international level. Furthermore, some CSOs are able to feed their early warning data into other state-level or regional systems that primarily inform governments or intergovernmental organizations.

Rather than there being one ideal model or generation of early warning, there is a general consensus that all four generations of early warning

## Ushahidi

Ushahidi (which means testimony in Swahili), was created in 2008 to use crowdsourcing in order to map reports of post-election violence in Kenya. Users submitted reports by text message, smartphone application, Twitter, email, or via the website, specifying the time, location and type of abuse.<sup>53</sup> They could also include pictures, video evidence, or links to media stories to corroborate their reports. These reports were geo-tagged and plotted on a map, producing a live map of the crisis. However, rather than warning of

impending violence, the system initially functioned to raise an alert when a crisis or violence was already under way.<sup>54</sup> Over time, it has developed 'from a simple Wordpress blog with dots on a map into an entire ecosystem of software and tools built to facilitate the work done by human rights advocates, journalists, election monitors and those responding to disaster and crisis'.<sup>55</sup> In addition to its reporting functions, the software now has a range of different tools and functions, including disseminating surveys, generating reports and analysing open source data.

Ushahidi has developed a business model whereby it provides its open platforms to local and international NGOs to serve as an early warning and crisis mapping system. Over 20,000 Ushahidi maps have been launched in more than 140 countries.<sup>56</sup> For example, in 2015, it worked with local NGOs in Nigeria in the run-up to elections in order to assess the possibility of violence. Software was developed which assessed Twitter and news sources for indicators of potential violence, and potential 'hotspots' were flagged to local NGOs who carried out election monitoring.<sup>57</sup>

systems can contribute to an ‘ecosystem approach’ to conflict early warning and rapid response.<sup>59</sup>

## The UN systems: gaps in warning and response

There have been several attempts to institute a comprehensive conflict early warning system at the UN.<sup>60</sup> The Office for Research and the Collection of Information (ORCI) had an early warning mandate during its operation from 1987 to 1992.<sup>61</sup> After ORCI, the Department for Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) established the Humanitarian Early Warning System (HEWS), which collected quantitative information on a range of countries of concern.<sup>62</sup> However, the system reportedly was not able to produce a single early warning of armed conflict, was overly reliant on quantitative data,<sup>63</sup> and was subsequently abandoned.<sup>64</sup> It has been asserted that the UN’s failure to establish a comprehensive system is due to the fragmented nature of early warning carried out by different UN agencies and the resistance of member states.<sup>65</sup>

Early warning is carried out by seven UN bodies and one ad hoc initiative; the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), UN Development Programme (UNDP), Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), World Food Programme (WFP), Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Office of the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG) and the Global Pulse (formerly known as the Global Impact and Vulnerability Alert System, or GIVAS).<sup>66</sup> Several of these agencies incorporate conflict early warning within disaster or other humanitarian early warning mandates, whereas some are more conflict-focused: these are outlined below.

**OCHA:** Established in 1991 and formerly known as the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA’s mandate includes promoting preparedness and prevention for disasters and emergencies. It has an Early Warning and Contingency Planning (EWCP) section which monitors social, economic, political and environmental indicators to assess risks, evaluate trends and produce early warning products

in the form of ‘snapshot’ assessments and, if necessary, more in-depth analyses of the human security sectors in a given country. OCHA also chairs the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which coordinates humanitarian efforts among 17 UN and non-UN partners under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. OCHA prepares the quarterly humanitarian-focused *Early Warning – Early Action* report, which represents the views of the IASC, including conflict early warning trends and potential interventions. The report’s findings are also referred to emergency directors for operationalizing an emergency response.

**UNDPPA:** Originally established in 1992 as the Department for Political Affairs, DPPA is mandated to prevent and resolve deadly conflict around the world. In addition to managing political missions, DPPA produces analytical reports and briefing notes on potential crises to the Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs (USGPA). The USGPA sits on the Secretary-General’s Policy Committee and can raise potential crises with the Secretary-General to share with the Security Council. DPPA also houses the Mediation Support Unit (MSU), which was established in 2006 and provides advisory, financial and logistical support to peace processes, as well as maintaining a roster of mediation experts who can be deployed to engage in mediation.<sup>67</sup>

**DPKO** was established in 1992, with a mandate to plan, manage and deploy peacekeepers when authorized by the Security Council. It maintains a 24-hour Situation Centre which has two early warning components, the Operations Room (OR) and the Research and Liaison Unit (RLU). The OR receives information from the field, and monitors news sources to produce incident reports and a monitoring update to senior leadership three times weekly. The RLU takes a longer-term approach to early warning; it collates data and produces early warning reports of political, military and security trends that affect ongoing or potential peacekeeping operations for senior decision makers. In 2006, DPKO also created joint operations centres (JOCs) and joint mission analysis centres (JMAs) which both work with the Situation Centre. JOCs collect situation updates and provide short-term analysis to the head of mission and the senior management team, whereas JMAs provide longer-term analysis to support decision making.

Developing early warning mechanisms falls under DPKO's protection of civilians mandate,<sup>68</sup> and some peacekeeping missions are tasked with creating a mission-specific early warning system. For example, UN Security Council Resolution 1996 established the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS), and mandated UNMISS to establish and implement 'a mission-wide early warning capacity, with an integrated approach to information gathering, monitoring, verification, early warning and dissemination, and follow-up mechanisms'.<sup>69</sup> UN peacekeeping missions in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR), in particular, have established early warning mechanisms and networks for the protection of civilians.<sup>70</sup>

Conflict contexts such as the DRC and South Sudan pose complex challenges because they feature an array of state and non-state actors, as well as a variety of factors which drive conflict, including ethnic, political, and economic tensions. Unlike other early warning systems, which take a global approach to examining which states are most at risk of conflict, early warning systems needed in peacekeeping missions are focused on forecasting the areas at risk of violence within one state. This means that some of the more traditional metrics used to examine the risk of conflict at the state level, such as the fragility of state institutions or corruption, will not be as valuable. Instead, micro-level data is essential to understand local dynamics and potential threats to peace, which requires access to a wide range of different communities or groups living within the state in order to collect data.

The UN mission in DRC (MONUSCO) responded to failures to implement early warning and response by creating a range of new tools to facilitate early warning, such as Community Liaison Assistants and Community Alert Networks, that have now been replicated in other missions.<sup>71</sup> Community Liaison Assistants are national staff who serve as an interface between the mission and the local population, as well as with local authorities, and they play a key role in community engagement.<sup>72</sup> They collect information on security threats and alert peacekeepers to enable quick responses.<sup>73</sup> Community Alert Networks enable communities where MONUSCO is present to alert MONUSCO to

violent incidents or threats to local communities, usually through equipping a designated community member with a phone or radio.<sup>74</sup> This information is then transmitted by the mission to its JOC and JMAC, who analyse reported information against conflict indicators to assess the risk of conflict and designate areas as red, yellow or green.<sup>75</sup>

However, significant challenges still remain in ensuring that effective early warning is in place. The fact that much of the data gathered relies on incident reporting means that often violence has already occurred (65 per cent of reports in 2013), making the system more reactive than predictive. Lack of mobile network coverage in rural areas can also pose problems for reporting, and areas that are not covered by the Community Alert Network are effectively excluded.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, even where communities are covered by the network, where they are located at a significant distance from MONUSCO forces, the mission has inadequate time to mobilize resources to respond. As MONUSCO has reduced its military footprint, this has led to an increased reliance on the Community Alert Network To work with local actors and authorities to resolve problems.<sup>77</sup>

Access therefore remains a key issue, and one that is unlikely ever to be fully overcome by systems which rely on monitoring or data collection by external rather than local actors. There have been instances where UN agencies and peacekeepers have been denied access to conflict-affected regions, such as in South Sudan,<sup>78</sup> demonstrating the limitations of relying on international actors to implement early warning and response.

## Responding to early warning

Historically, criticism of the UN's early warning capacity has centred around a failure to respond to early warning signs, as occurred during the build-up to the Rwandan genocide when warnings by the DPKO, Special Procedures mandate holders and member states were not acted upon.<sup>79</sup> More recently, UN systems have faced criticism because of a failure to communicate across agencies and systems that are all operating in parallel, which has led to inadequate responses to early warning signs.

In 2006, the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) produced guidance on devel-



oping early warning systems. It outlined four key elements that must be present in order to develop ‘people-centred’ early warning systems: (1) Risk Knowledge – systematic collection and analysis of data; (2) Monitoring and Warning Service – a reliable forecasting and warning system; (3) Dissemination and Communication – warnings must reach those at risk; and (4) Response Capability – build national and community response capabilities.<sup>80</sup>

UN country teams usually combine all of the UN agencies and programmes operating on the ground in a country, and a Resident Coordinator manages the coordination of the work of all the agencies,<sup>81</sup> however UN agencies can work independently in practice and a degree of competition between them is not unknown. Further, as many of these agencies work are running humanitarian aid programmes, capacity for political analysis and diplomacy is limited and these aspects do not always directly inform the work of missions on the ground. Parallel to the of-country teams, the UNDPPA based in New York conducts analysis and early warning and is principally focused on political analysis and diplomacy. While the work of country teams and the Secretariat should therefore be complementary, in the past, there has been a failure to communicate across different agencies and strands of work.

In 2012, for example, an internal review of the UN’s work in Sri Lanka during the final years of the civil war found a systematic failure of both the UN country team and the UN Secretariat to properly integrate their work on early warning and response.<sup>82</sup> The review found that there was no joint analysis of the threats to civilian populations, and a failure to communicate across UN agencies meant that responses to perceived threats were weak or non-existent.<sup>83</sup> The review’s findings contributed to the introduction of the Human Rights up Front (HRuF) initiative which was launched by UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon in 2013.<sup>84</sup>

One of the main objectives of HRuF was to improve early warning mechanisms and capacity within the UN to prevent conflict and serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law.<sup>85</sup> However, the failure of the UN to act to prevent violence and atrocities in Myanmar suggest that HRuF has not been able to remedy the UN’s historic problems of a lack of coordination and re-

sponse among agencies and failure to respond to clear warning signs:

*‘while the UN’s risk analysis tools effectively identified Myanmar as a crisis necessitating a human rights-oriented approach ... senior UN leadership failed to resolve bureaucratic infighting, set a common strategy, or establish consistent messaging. This contributed to confusion and paralysis in the face of a rapidly deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation.’<sup>86</sup>*

The differing roles of both condemning and cooperating with states that respective UN agencies play can pose complex problems for effective early warning. Furthermore, as an intergovernmental organization, UN decision making will always be informed and influenced by global politics, and member states have been wary of the consequences of early warning systems. It has been asserted that the resistance of member states to early warning is due to three reasons: ‘(1) a general aversion to being monitored by any outside organization for activities that occur within their sovereign territory; (2) the risk that predictions will embolden conflicting parties and become self-fulfilling prophecies; and (3) the risk of adverse economic consequences of “watch list” designation.’<sup>87</sup> Further, the UN system is state-centric and this has led certain actors to view conflicts and possible solutions to those conflicts in a particular and often overly reductive manner.

The constraints on early warning within the UN and the failure of the UN to effectively intervene raises questions not only over the warning and response capacities of UN early warning systems, but it also raises more fundamental questions over who the principal actors in early warning should be and who systems are designed to warn.

While the guidance may have had natural disaster early warning in mind, all of these elements are also essential for conflict early warning. Yet none of the UN systems examined in this section could be described as ‘people-centred systems’. The UN’s vertical approach to conflict early warning means that those most at risk are not those who receive warning alerts, nor are they part of the response element. The different approach to conflict early warning as opposed to natural disaster demonstrates the consequences of the controversial na-

ture of the former. While the UN may lament the failure of its systems to prevent conflict, the failure of those systems to communicate warnings to those at risk has the most serious consequences for civilians living in conflict-affected areas.

## Mapping early warning systems: challenges and opportunities

Since early warning systems first emerged a few decades ago, many systems have come and gone.<sup>88</sup> In order to understand some of the present-day challenges facing early warning, it is necessary to examine the different systems that currently exist at the international and regional level, and how these systems coexist and interact, before looking at national and local early warning in South Sudan.

### Regional systems

Many early warning systems are rooted in the belief that international actors have a responsibility to act as protectors where they are alerted to the risk or outbreak of conflict, and that they will act upon early warning to prevent conflict and save civilian populations.<sup>89</sup> This belief has failed to be borne out in reality. The failure of international organizations and Western-centric early warning systems to prevent conflict has led to an increasing recognition of the role that local and/or regional initiatives can and should be playing in early warning systems and conflict resolution. There has been increased support for regional early warning initiatives, the African Union's Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), for example, benefits from EU funding as well as collaboration with the UN.

The African continent is the most covered region globally in terms of early warning systems, and boasts some of the most advanced regional early warning systems.<sup>90</sup> Large strides have been made over the past decade in operationalizing early warning systems across Africa, yet significant challenges remain, as evidenced by the continued state of armed conflict that many citizens con-

tinue to find themselves in. Some of the most common challenges that the early warning systems of multilateral organizations face are '(a) weak early warnings; (b) immature response mechanisms and instruments; and (c) personal, institutional and political shortfalls'.<sup>91</sup> While these shortcomings were identified in 2009, an examination of the regional systems in Africa suggest that these areas remain key challenges for early warning a decade later.

### CEWS

The African Union has a primary role for peace and security on the continent, under the UN, which has responsibility for global peace and security. The Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU) came into force in 2002, the AU succeeding the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). This transition marked a departure from the OAU's founding principle of non-interventionism<sup>92</sup> as the AU's Constitutive Act gives the organization power 'to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity'.<sup>93</sup>

The Peace and Security Council (PSC) is the decision-making body of the AU, and it is mandated to provide early warning to facilitate responses to conflict situations in Africa, and the African Union Commission is responsible for carrying out PSC decisions.<sup>94</sup> The Protocol relating to the Establishment of the PSC provides for the establishment of a Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), in order to facilitate the anticipation and prevention of conflicts in Africa.<sup>95</sup> The PSC and CEWS are two of the five core pillars of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), along with the Panel of the Wise (PoW) (which undertakes preventive diplomacy), the African Standby Force (which includes military, civilian and police elements and carries out peace support operations), and the Peace Fund (a financial instrument to support APSA).

Through CEWS, the AU Commission is also mandated to 'collaborate with the United Nations, its agencies, other relevant international organizations, research centers, academic institutions and NGOs, to facilitate the effective functioning of the Early Warning System'.<sup>96</sup> The system consists of:

*'an observation and monitoring unit, to be known as "the Situation Room", which is located at the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division of the African Union and is responsible for data collection and analysis; and the observation and monitoring units of the Regional Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, which are to be linked directly to the Situation Room.'*<sup>97</sup>

Data is gathered from a variety of different sources, including the media, academia, think-tanks, as well as data from AU sources (the Commission, AU Field Missions and Liaison Offices).<sup>98</sup> CEWS also relies on data from sub-regional early warning systems that are run by Regional Economic Communities (RECs) across Africa including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). All of these RECs have established their own early warning systems, many predating the CEWS. CEWS has developed an internet portal to connect it with the early warning systems of the RECs, however, the ECOWAS system was the only one fully connected as of 2017.<sup>99</sup>

CEWS uses software which can generate a number of different outputs, including country reports, daily highlights, weekly summary reports and SMS alerts for the AU chairpersons and members of the PSC and PoW. CEWS also produces policy recommendations and possible response options to potential conflict situations. The CEWS methodology outlines three clusters under which data will be collected: '1. Context and Structural Information on Countries and Regions; 2. Actor Attribute Information on key Individuals and Groups; and 3. Information on Behaviours and Events as they evolve over time.'<sup>100</sup>

CEWS conducts baseline analysis on political, economic, social, military and humanitarian indicators. As well as developing a continent-wide core of shared indicators, the *CEWS Handbook* notes that it is important also to develop country- and region-specific indicators to monitor the unique aspects of conflicts in particular areas.<sup>101</sup>

CEWS relies on the effectiveness of the early warning systems of the RECs, as well as the response element undertaken by relevant AU actors. The

interoperability of the different early warning systems is somewhat complicated given that the early warning systems of the RECs predate CEWS, and have their own legal mandates, strategies and aims. While the AU envisages CEWS as the overarching system, the role of the RECs in both warning and response remains crucial, and the effectiveness of the different early warning systems of the RECs will impact on the effectiveness of CEWS.

Significant challenges to the operation of CEWS acknowledged by the AU are lack of funding and human resources, as well as lack of ICT infrastructure to make the system operational to its full capacity. Just as decisions by UN bodies remain subject to some level of political influence, so too do the decisions of the AU and other regional bodies: 'interventions by the AU and/or regional organizations in recent conflict situations shows that the individual member states continue to set clear "red lines"'.<sup>102</sup> This means that there has been a lack of political commitment from member states to use early warning information and put emerging conflicts on the agenda.<sup>103</sup>

#### **ECOWARN**

Originally an economic organization, ECOWAS<sup>104</sup> established its Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) in its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001, in response to the threat that insecurity and conflict posed to economic stability in the region.<sup>105</sup> ECOWARN became operational in 2003, it consists of an Observation and Monitoring Centre (OMC) headquartered in Abuja, Nigeria, with four sub-regional offices operating as monitoring zones based in Banjul, Ouagadougou, Monrovia, and Cotonou (in The Gambia, Burkina Faso, Liberia and Benin respectively).<sup>106</sup>

ECOWARN is not only a conflict early warning system, it tracks six different 'sectors', including security, crime, health and the environment.<sup>107</sup> ECOWARN uses an open source analytical framework with over 150 indicators across the sectors to analyse vulnerabilities within member states. It makes use of 'a network of field monitors, human security indicators and state of art Geographic Information System tools providing real-time information and data'.<sup>108</sup>

ECOWARN also operates in partnership with the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP),

an umbrella body for CSOs operating across the region to collect data to inform ECOWARN. WANEP collects data ‘on human security issues, most notably human rights and democracy, food shortages, unemployment, arms flows and civil–military relations and droughts and flooding’, and prepares reports for the OMC.<sup>109</sup>

ECOWARN uses field monitors in each monitoring zone who provide constant updates of information, which is fed into a web-based visualization tool, as well as to inform ‘daily highlights, situation reports, monthly country policy briefs, incident reports, security reports, and thematic reports’.<sup>110</sup> ECOWARN also produces a Country Risk and Vulnerability Assessment that allows member states to identify patterns and trends in countries and regions. Several national initiatives in ECOWAS countries have also been developed which are designed to complement and feed into the ECOWARN system. For instance, Ghana, where WANEP has its headquarters, has launched a national early warning system called ‘Ghanawarn’.<sup>111</sup>

ECOWAS has taken a militaristic approach to conflict prevention. It has a Mediation and Security Council (MSC) which decides through a majority vote on military interventions in member states against the will of target countries, that is, ‘against the will of target countries in cases of, among others, violation of human rights, the rule of law, or democratic principles’.<sup>112</sup> ECOWAS has used these powers to intervene militarily in Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso and the Gambia, on account of coups and contested election results.

However, there remain many protracted conflicts in the region in which ECOWAS has not intervened. Although ECOWAS is mandated to intervene ‘in internal armed conflicts that have security implications for countries in the sub-region’,<sup>113</sup> it has often not been invited to intervene in purely local conflicts without obvious regional security implications, such as the Niger Delta.

Further, questions have been raised over the ability of early warning systems to tackle the new forms of conflict that have emerged over the past two decades, especially those based on standardized indices that may be blind to the contextual factors that drive human behaviour. The emergence of extremism, terrorism and criminalized

conflict poses problems for early warning systems that are grievance-based: for example, monitor indicators related to a population’s relationship with the government.<sup>114</sup> This is borne out by the failure of ECOWARN to predict or prevent armed terrorist activities in Mali and Nigeria in 2015.

Many conflicts, particularly in the African continent, are also hybrid in nature. For example, there may be several different conflicts that occur simultaneously, or many different issues that drive conflict, including criminality, extremism or climate change.<sup>115</sup> This also poses complex problems for the response element of early warning systems – preventive diplomacy or mediation between opposing political groups will require different approaches, for example, than settling disputes between armed criminal or extremist groups over resources which neither have a legal claim to.<sup>116</sup>

On a more operational level, ECOWAS functions as a second-generation system which is highly vertical in nature and is bureaucratic. Major General O.B. Akwa, Commandant of the Kofi Annan Peacekeeping Training in Ghana, stated that ‘the transition from ECOWAS of States to ECOWAS of people has not taken full effect yet’,<sup>117</sup> noting that officials are not always working in the interests of citizens despite having the tools to serve them.<sup>118</sup> A WANEP report stated that: ‘Government should improve [the] civil–military relationship to foster trust and confidence between security agents and the local communities for improved early warning alerts, information sharing and collaboration in fighting insurgency at all levels.’<sup>119</sup>

Despite relying heavily on CSOs for data collection, ECOWARN is not a people-centred system, and CSOs are not recipients of early warning information. Warning alerts are provided to member states and relevant ECOWAS actors. Although ECOWARN faces significant challenges, including a warning–response gap, and questions over the ability of its systems to flag risk factors for the many different types of conflict present in the region, ECOWARN is generally seen as the most successful regional early warning system in Africa.

#### **CEWARN**

The Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) is the EWS created in 2002 by the IGAD, which is made up of eight states in the Horn

of Africa.<sup>120</sup> It was established under IGAD's Peace and Security Division under the CEWARN Protocol. CEWARN is 'an interwoven network of governmental and non-governmental organisations',<sup>121</sup> and is generally regarded as the earliest third-generation early warning system. In the initial years of its operation, it was only mandated to monitor pastoralist-associated conflicts, and the system covers three geographical 'clusters': (a) the Karamoja Cluster (cross-border areas of Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda); (b) the Somali Cluster (cross-border areas of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia); and (c) the Afar/Issa Cluster (cross-border region of Djibouti and Eritrea).<sup>122</sup>

CEWARN has actors at the community, national and regional level; field monitors collect data at the local/community level and are able to inform and work with local committees to identify conflict indicators and resolutions. Data collected is fed into a data monitoring system at the national level based on 52 indicators.<sup>123</sup> The data system produces alerts as they occur, in addition to producing monthly updates and quarterly cluster reports. More recently, CEWARN has begun to make use of crowdsourcing SMS alerts to complement data collection.<sup>124</sup> Conflict Early Warning and Early Response Units (CEWERUs) at the national level receive the reports and warnings, and are able to engage in response or mobilize community authorities to engage in conflict resolution. Data at the national level is also analysed by National Research Institutes that report to relevant agencies within the IGAD Secretariat and Council of Ministers.<sup>125</sup> This chain of information sharing allows coordinated interventions at the micro-level, the national level, and in some case cross-nationally.

CEWARN therefore relies heavily on national and community structures, and each CEWERU should consist of a steering committee (made up of civil society, members of parliament and security personnel), a focal point, and the local committees referenced above. In 2006, the decision was taken to expand the mechanism to cover all IGAD member states,<sup>126</sup> and IGAD's strategy for CEWARN for 2012–19 responded to further demands to significantly expand its thematic and geographical focus in order to address a broader spectrum of drivers of conflict.<sup>127</sup> For some states, this remains the goal rather than the reality: in 2015, CEWARN was only fully operational Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, and

was beginning to be more active in South Sudan and Somalia.<sup>128</sup>

Cross-border civil society networks have been effective in supporting the work of CEWERUs, such as in Karamoja. Operational challenges, particularly lack of payment for field monitors, who play a crucial role in data collection and have faced financial constraints in carrying out their roles, has led to an increased reliance on CSOs for data collection.<sup>129</sup> Generally speaking, human resource and funding constraints remain a significant challenge to the functionality of CEWARN across the region.

### Role of civil society

The preceding sections outlining some of the regional systems operating across Africa demonstrate the crucial role that CSOs play in regional early warning structures. In fact, without civil society, it is questionable whether CEWARN and ECOWARN, and consequently CEWS, would be able to operate. The reliance placed on civil society networks and organizations to provide data, engage in data collection, play roles in peace committees and national steering committees, and engage in conflict response at the local and national level, demonstrate the extent to which civil society contributions are needed within these systems.

With regard to CEWARN, it has been highlighted that civil society has made significant contributions in the following areas:<sup>130</sup>

- Capacity building – providing training to security forces, national and local government as well as community leaders.
- Facilitating community dialogue.
- Accountability – monitoring conflict dynamics and peacebuilding efforts enables civil society to hold state and non-state actors to account.
- Providing an entry point to communities – CSOs are often closer to local communities than state actors and have already established relationships. In fact, communities may well be suspicious of state or security force attempts to gather early warning data and the impact it may have on local communities.<sup>131</sup>
- Expertise – proximity to the local population means that civil society is well placed to assist government stakeholders in designing

appropriate responses and identifying the right people in the community to work with. 'For example, this was the case in northern Uganda, in areas affected by the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army. CSO involvement in response can ensure response is embedded in communities.'<sup>132</sup>

The reliance of CEWARN and ECOWAS on nationalized structures demonstrates that local and national early warning efforts are needed to complement regional systems. Where gaps exist in covering conflict-affected areas, leveraging local civil society actors who have existing expertise and networks is preferable to deploying field monitors. Integrating local, national and regional efforts at early warning and conflict prevention can help to build a more comprehensive overview of

conflict-affected areas, as well as reduce duplicated efforts.

The diversity within many states in Africa means that local knowledge is necessary in order to build effective early warning systems. The expertise that civil society has of local actors, customs and languages means that civil society should also play a crucial role in developing indicators for localized early warning.<sup>133</sup>

Importantly, unlike regional systems, such as ECOWARN or CEWARN, local or civil society-led initiatives create greater possibilities to ensure that at-risk communities are actually the receivers of early warning information, and are empowered to resolve conflict within their communities when appropriate.

# 2

## Piloting civilian-led early warning in South Sudan

The Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation and the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights have, over the last two years, built and operated a pilot fourth-generation early warning system for the identity-based violence that has characterised the non-international armed conflict in South Sudan. It is both civilian-led and civilian-focused, and associated advocacy has successfully raised issues of civilian protection and civilian rights with key international actors.

### The armed conflict in South Sudan

In December 2013, two turbulent years after its independence, the world's newest country descended into civil war. After violence erupted between troops loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and rival Riek Machar in the capital Juba in December 2013, South Sudan's army quickly split into rival factions and fighting spread rapidly across the country.

The international community started working towards resolving the conflict soon after it started. By January 2014, the IGAD, an eight-country trade bloc in East Africa, had brokered the first ceasefire, the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA), between parties to the conflict. This was followed by the first peace agreement, the August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS). However, the agreement was derailed as fighting erupted between Kiir's and Machar's personal guards in July 2016 and the country returned to widespread violence.

By December 2017, the international community had brokered a second ceasefire, the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities (ACoH), which paved the way for the second peace agreement, the September 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Although the formation of a Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity in February 2020 brought the conflict to a formal end, the peace process is generally recognized to have stalled and the country continues to be affected by widespread violence.

While the second ceasefire and peace agreement have largely held between the parties and prevented a large-scale return to fighting, serious and large-scale outbreaks of violence have continued across the country. Rival factions, some signatory to the second ceasefire agreement, some to the ceasefire and subsequent peace agreement, and some to neither, have resorted to force to defend or improve their positions on the ground to give themselves increased political leverage. Further, low-level violence is endemic across the country.

The conflict has been characterized as ethnic, and indeed initially had an ethnic character as long-time political rivals Kiir and Machar<sup>134</sup> looked to their own ethnic groups for support, but this ethnic orientation increasingly broke down at the local level as the war progressed, as local groups mobilized and aligned themselves with the warring factions to settle scores or advance their interests. Though the war on the national level has been fought between a Dinka and a Nuer leader, and this ethnic divide has retained its salience throughout the conflict, on the local level, the war has pitted Dinka against Dinka and Nuer against Nuer.<sup>135</sup>

Attacks on the civilian population have been a modus operandi for all sides in the South Sudan conflict almost since the war broke out, as a way to secure advantage on the ground, signalling seriousness to others while jockeying for position and access to resources and avoiding the risk of serious casualties by avoiding engagements with other armed actors. A long-serving member of the international ceasefire monitoring mechanism staff noted to Ceasefire that the conflict had been characterized less by clashes between the parties than by parallel attacks on undefended communities perceived as belonging to, or supporting, other parties. Such attacks have been characterized by pillage, destruction of property, killings, sexual violence and mass forced displacement, and starvation has been employed by both sides as a weapon of war.<sup>136</sup>

The scale of violence has been horrific. A September 2018 study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine concluded that at least 383,000 had died as a result of the civil war, about half of them directly through violence.<sup>137</sup>

The violence has also caused mass forced displacement on a staggering scale. Around 4 million, one third of South Sudan's population, have fled their homes, with over 2.2 million going outside South Sudan.<sup>138</sup> More than 1.35 million were internally displaced as of the end of 2019. Ongoing violence displaced a further 232,000 people in the first half of 2020 alone.<sup>139</sup>

There are no accurate figures for the level of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the conflict. However, the evidence that is available indicates the number of women subjected to rape

and other forms of sexual violence, including women and children taken captive as 'wives' by commanders or raped and beaten by multiple fighters, is extremely high. In an outbreak of organized violence in the Central Equatoria province between September 2018 and April 2019, which caused 76,000 people to flee their homes, the number of women and girls subject to SGBV was almost as many as the 104 killed in the violence.<sup>140</sup> Levels of SGBV have remained high despite the ceasefire.

## Existing monitoring systems and civilian protection

UNMISS has been present and operational throughout the war. Established by a vote of the UN Security Council on 8 July 2011, the day before South Sudan achieved its independence, its stated purpose was 'to consolidate peace and security, and to help establish the conditions for development in the Republic of South Sudan'.<sup>141</sup> Initially 7,000 soldiers and 900 police, it was reinforced in May 2014 and its mandate reprioritized towards civilian protection. By late 2020, it had grown to 19,056, including 14,038 troops and 1,699 police.<sup>142</sup>

Of particular significance for civilian protection were the creation of Protection of Civilians Camps (POCs), established in or near the bases of UN peacekeeping forces. Around 200,000 civilians sought protection at seven UN sites throughout the war, with the majority still in these camps as of 2020 even as they are being returned to the control of the South Sudanese government.<sup>143</sup> Although this is only a fraction of the population displaced by the conflict, the protection of vulnerable civilian communities in the POC camps has been a major UNMISS operation. More broadly, UNMISS has one of the largest human rights offices of any UN mission worldwide, and its work includes human rights monitoring across the country.

However, UNMISS is not and has never been responsible for monitoring compliance with ceasefire agreements. The Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MVM) was established by the first ceasefire agreement to monitor the ceasefire,



under the aegis of the eight-country East African trade bloc the IGAD.

This MVM later became the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism (CTSAMM) after the August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), and subsequently the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM) after the September 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This mechanism, in its various iterations, operates separately from UNMISS and has in practice been the only early warning network that has operated throughout most of the South Sudanese civil war.

CTSAMVM and its previous incarnations have been chaired by a representative of IGAD. The MVM, the first iteration of the monitoring mechanism, reported to the IGAD special envoy to South Sudan; its two subsequent iterations have reported to the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC) and its successor the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC).<sup>144</sup> CTSAMVM's board currently includes representatives from the AU, China, the USA, the UK, Norway and UNMISS, as well as some civil society representatives.<sup>145</sup> CTSAMVM has over 150 staff and runs nine monitoring and verification missions, which can be deployed in critical regions at short notice.<sup>146</sup>

Though the main task of CTSAMVM and its predecessors has been monitoring the ceasefire between the warring parties, its mandate is significantly broader. It is also responsible for monitoring prohibitions on the recruitment of child soldiers and SGBV; the recruitment of new forces, and the agreement of the parties to facilitate humanitarian access, freedom of movement and access for CTSAMVM personnel; and respect international law and the human rights of civilians and ensuring the safety and dignity of individuals and communities.<sup>147</sup>

There has been a large degree of continuity through the various incarnations of the ceasefire monitoring mechanism, however it has evolved significantly through its various incarnations. Its personnel generally became better trained and

more capable, and the operation itself became more focused on its mandate. However, none of the various iterations of the monitoring mechanisms were fully integrated into a broader strategy to end the conflict, and no attempt was made to engage or win the support of the public for the monitoring mission.<sup>148</sup>

From the outset, it was not clear to personnel whether the monitoring mechanism should focus on reporting violations to international decision makers quickly, or on detailed reports of incidents that would be of use to international legal mechanisms. The mechanism appears to have fallen short on both counts.<sup>149</sup>

Further, the monitoring mechanism has been denied access to certain areas by the parties to the peace agreement, including the South Sudanese Army.<sup>150</sup> The work of the monitoring mechanism has also been subject to interference from the mediation team as they attempted to bring the parties to the conflict together. Given these shortcomings, and the unwillingness of the international community to hold the warring parties to account for their violations, the monitoring mechanism arguably failed to establish red lines for any of the warring parties and failed to deter either violations of the ceasefire or those committed against civilians.<sup>151</sup>

## The Ceasefire/CEPO early warning project

Unlike CTSAMVM, the EWS piloted by CEPO and the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights is civilian-led and civilian-focused. This has meant that from the outset it has not been subject to the same institutional political pressures as CTSAMVM, and is concerned with violence targeting and/or witnessed by civilians rather than fighting between armed factions. In the context of a civil war in which factions have routinely targeted civilians,<sup>152</sup> this distinction is perhaps less clear in South Sudan than in some other conflicts. However low-level violence, whether criminal or communal in nature, is a very real concern for civilians in South Sudan and consequently a key focus of reporting for the civilian-led and civilian-focused CEPO/Ceasefire EWS, though not for CTSAMVM.

Civil society in South Sudan is fragmented, under-resourced and largely politically marginalized. Difficult economic conditions mean that many activists need to rely on other sources of income, and that organizations have trouble securing the economic resources they need to develop and retain a cadre of professional staff. Relatively few organizations operate beyond their immediate locality. CEPO works on a range of issues – capacity building for CSOs, security sector reform, justice and accountability, conflict mitigation, women’s empowerment, sustainable livelihoods, good governance, human rights and the rule of law – working towards democratic transformation.<sup>153</sup> This versatility has probably helped it access funding from international donors, and allowed it to build up its operational capacity beyond that of most other South Sudanese CSOs. Its relative closeness to the international community has provided it with a degree of protection.

CEPO has been operational throughout the civil war, and has run a conflict map on their website since 1 January 2015, collating media reporting about casualties in the conflict.<sup>154</sup> It is well connected with the international and diplomatic community in South Sudan, and within South Sudanese civil society. Though it is based in Juba, it has coordinators in seven cities across the country – Bor, Yei, Torit, Rumbek, Terekeka, Wau, Yambio – that work on a range of issues, including humanitarian concerns and human rights, and is currently in the process of expanding its network of coordinators across more of the country. In short, it was well placed to be the locus of the civilian-led EWS.

CEPO has run the EWS from its main office in Juba with Ceasefire’s active support. The network was initially built on CEPO’s existing civil society contacts, but quickly expanded beyond that to include journalists, transport companies and other concerned civilians. CEPO’s coordinators were engaged in the project early on, but as building trust and securing the engagement of various groups has proven to be time-intensive, it has proven to be more practical to trial engagement with new groups from the Juba office first, and use the insights and experience gained from these initial trials to guide CEPO’s regional coordinators in their engagement with local groups who could be recruited as monitors.

CEPO and Ceasefire elected to avoid the use of complicated metrics and use civilians’ own perceptions of threat and violence: the threshold is an incident a civilian deems worthy of reporting. Incidents are examined for credibility, and whether they might signify any underlying trends or developments. New developments, patterns or significant events detected by the network are immediately flagged with CEPO senior leadership for targeted advocacy on mandate holders and other duty bearers who have the capacity to undertake preventive action. This advocacy has emerged as a key element of the project and contributed to its success in several ways.

Though civilian protection is a key element of UNMISS’s mandate, civilians effectively have had little input into the peace process. As expected, advocacy has increased the salience of civilian interests and civilian protection among key actors in the peace process. The partnerships with IGAD’s early warning network Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) and engagement with AU early warning mechanisms likely gave the system credibility in the eyes of key international actors and facilitated engagement with them. This engagement also gave CEPO access to secure servers for the storage of information outside of South Sudan.

CEPO furthered this engagement with key international actors by using the information generated from the reporting network to facilitate routine access to these key actors, including senior officials in UNMISS, by passing on critical information directly via personal rather than formal channels, which probably would have been less responsive. Along with assistance provided in developing and targeting advocacy messaging, the result has been the increased credibility and relevance of civil society voices in key international decision-making forums, and culminated with the head of CEPO, Edmund Yakani, being invited to address the UN Security Council in its 23 June 2020 session on South Sudan. This increased visibility and impact has resulted in routine access to key international and national decision makers, including ambassadors and embassy staff, the head of UNMISS and his staff, and the vice president.

The close contact CEPO has had with key international actors has also provided a degree of political

cover and thereby protection for the organization from potential harassment or persecution from the government. Many journalists and activists in South Sudan have been harassed and targeted for their peaceful opposition or for what has been perceived as criticism of the government.

The project has also highlighted the potential of national and international media as a tool for influencing decision makers. Journalists have been engaged by the project as monitors, but contacts with media have also proven useful to drive advocacy. On 3 January 2021, CEPO released a statement to the media revealing that its EWS had recorded over 2,450 civilian deaths and calling on the government to take action to halt this.<sup>155</sup> The statement contributed to governmental action. On 5 January the government convened a meeting of the National Security Committee and directed the security sector to ‘immediately put a halt to road ambushes, cattle raids, and inter-communal clashes in the country’.<sup>156</sup> The issue was also covered in Voice of America’s South Sudan radio edition. The government’s prompt response to this media coverage is likely to be a reflection of the success in getting the issue covered in international media – but also of the contacts and credibility CEPO has built with the international community and its consequent ability to influence their concerns.

Further, this engagement with key actors has also proven to be critical in the development of the early warning network. These contacts have given the project credibility and – most importantly – relevance in the eyes of civilians. From the feedback we have received and the patterns of engagement we have observed, we have concluded that civilians are generally very pragmatic in their approach to early warning systems. They will engage if they think it is worthwhile – that is, if it is seen as a thing that could have a real impact on their lives. A network that generates reports of violations committed against civilians that are then fired into the electronic ether and produce no tangible results for the civilians themselves is simply not worth their time.

Demonstrating the relevance of this EWS to civilians has been a challenge, as different individuals respond differently, based on their own knowledge and engagement with wider issues. For instance, civilian activists who, by definition, are

trying to achieve change more readily relate to the aims of the project and have generally been willing to participate. They understand what the project is trying to achieve, and see its potential relevance to their lives and their activism. In contrast, business-people see the potential of the project, but want to assess its likely benefits – and risks – for their work before they commit. As a result it has taken significantly more time and effort to secure their active participation.

The potential risks associated with participation in the EWS have been another significant consideration for many. CEPO has had to engage with these concerns and demonstrate that they can be ameliorated in order to secure the participation of many civilian monitors. In the context of South Sudan, security is potentially problematic. All armed factions to the conflict have all been accused of committing serious violations, and several activists and opposition figures have been targeted for their peaceful activities. Civilian participants in the EWS have had legitimate concerns about sharing what might be, for factions involved in the conflict, sensitive information.

CEPO has found it best to raise the issue of security at the beginning of any prospective relationship with civilian monitors and to revisit this issue whenever necessary as the relationship develops. It has proven to be neither been possible nor desirable to detach security from the overall relationship between CEPO and monitors and treat it as a separate issue. CEPO discussed security and communications with each potential monitor in its early warning network from the outset, and developed a communications protocol tailored to every participant. Some did not have reliable access to the internet, or even mobile communications; others did not trust phones and initially preferred to communicate face to face.

In South Sudan, the landline network is virtually non-existent across much of the country, the mobile network is unreliable in the limited areas it does serve, which are generally centred on the major cities. Most people even in these urban areas do not own mobile phones, and data and minutes are expensive. The mobile communications app WhatsApp is commonly used and, despite potential security flaws which the South Sudanese government may have the potential to

exploit, it is popular among activists because of its convenience and its suitability for messaging and even voice calls in areas of poor or sporadic mobile internet coverage. Alternative and more secure messaging apps like Signal have proven to be less reliable for voice calls, which are preferred to messages as a means of transmitting sensitive information. Email is used in professional contexts, but is less common for routine and personal communication.

Most respondents were likely to make only occasional reports, while a few (see below) were in routine contact. The communications protocols reflected this. A key issue that has emerged is maintaining contact with the network; without routine contact, participants may forget or lose motivation and fail to report incidents. This has not been as significant a problem as was originally anticipated, as it has been dealt with through routine communications protocols by agreeing to touch base occasionally, and routine contact has been a key element in building trust with participants.

Where serious incidents have been reported that directly affected participants, follow up has been critical in maintaining trust. In most cases, this has consisted of informing UNMISS and local authorities and following up with them to ensure they take action, and communicating this to participants. Even when UNMISS and local authorities have not been willing or able to respond effectively, CEPO's efforts and the efforts it has made in following up have generally been appreciated by participants, though these occasions inevitably undermined confidence in the effectiveness of the EWS.

CEPO has successfully engaged individuals from a range of social, activist and business groups as monitors, including civil society and women's activists, religious groups, CSOs and business-people working in the transport sector. Because of limited resources, and the time it has taken to develop networks of contacts and refine methodology, the project was initially focused primarily on the Juba region and is currently seeking to expand across more of the country. The following two subsections present two case studies on CEPO's engagement with different groups to bring them into the EWS.

### **Case study 1: Transport companies**

An interesting case study of how this relationship-building can proceed is the CEPO/Ceasefire system's engagement with the public transport sector. It was realized early on that transport companies regularly cover large areas of the country, moving both people and goods, and have a vested interest in the safety and security of their routes – and especially of their staff, vehicles and passengers.

South Sudan's public transport sector has been significantly affected by the civil war. Before the war, fewer, larger companies ran a network of national and local routes through urban transport hubs. Because of the disruption and violence the civil war brought, these have now fragmented into many different companies operating from urban hubs running single routes. These routes generally run between urban centres and may stretch as far as 150–200 km in different directions.

CEPO first reached out to transport companies operating from Juba. Though the managers of these companies responded well to initial approaches, it took a long time for them to fully trust the initiative, understand what they needed to do and what they could expect from it, and work out a viable modus operandi. We estimate this took three to four months in total from initial contact to constructive engagement.

Though the initial contact with the transport company managers was done collectively, we found that to actually secure their cooperation it was better to deal with each manager individually – they were more willing to discuss details and commit to participation in confidence. Even in private, it took regular visits over weeks for managers to take the proposal seriously and begin seriously to consider what it would mean for them. As the managers got to know the CEPO staff member tasked with engaging them, their trust increased. Though most managers were willing to participate, some were more enthusiastic than others and a minority flat out refused to cooperate without a significant financial incentive.

It also took them time to understand that UNMISS forces would not always respond in the ways they wanted or expected – that we could raise issues with UNMISS and follow them up, but that a deci-

sive response on the ground was not always forthcoming.

The communications protocols CEPO used to contact the managers of the transport companies also developed considerably. Initially, many of the managers were not happy communicating information on the phone, and the responsible CEPO staff member agreed to visit the transport managers once a week, or after a phone call in the event of a serious incident. After a few months, many felt secure communicating over the telephone, but CEPO has had to pay them small stipends to cover the cost of phone calls.

CEPO is now working to engage transport companies in other cities, where its expanding network of coordinators is located. However, it is likely to take some time before these transport hubs are able to contribute effectively to the early warning system, as the same slow process of winning trust and establishing the relevance and value of the EWS will need to happen with each potential participant, and CEPO coordinators also need to be briefed and supported as intermediaries in the development of these relationships.

#### **Case study 2: Women's groups**

CEPO has also had success in engaging with networks of women's groups and activists, although its experiences engaging these groups also demonstrates the difficulties that can be encountered in building civilian-led monitoring networks.

CEPO reached out to women's activists early in the project, and through them to the networks of activists and small organizations they were in contact with, which were mostly concentrated in Juba or neighbouring regions. Many of these activists and organizations had not had a great deal of contact with CEPO previously, but were happy to pass on information and raise concerns through a trusted intermediary who knew CEPO better. Specific cases were followed up by CEPO staff to obtain more information.

Unfortunately, communications with the network of women's activists became more difficult and the flow of information decreased when a key contact and supporter of the project left her position. CEPO is currently trying to build relation-

ships with new contacts who will support the EWS more actively.

The particular focus of these activists and groups was sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This information was passed on to CTSAMVM and UNMISS, and although the latter demonstrated an especial interest in SGBV-related information, it proved difficult to get feedback on what either actually did with this information. On one occasion, patrols were established in an area of informal housing near Juba in which women had been sexually assaulted. A police protection unit was also contacted about persistently high levels of sexual assault on women, and though they did evince concern their limited budget meant they were not able to extend their operations into the relevant area.

## **Lessons for civilian-led monitoring**

CEPO and Ceasefire's experience has produced valuable insights into what considerations should be taken into account when designing and running civilian-led early warning systems. These are the importance of understanding and adapting the project to its context; considerations of resources, organization and structure; and the importance of building trust and responsiveness to civilian concerns.

### **The importance of context**

An understanding of context is of critical importance in the design and development of any EWS. For the sake of clarity here, considerations of context will be divided into three separate sections: the modalities of conflict; society and civil society; and the broader political context.

### **Modalities of the conflict**

The modalities of the conflict are relevant because they directly concern who and exactly what the EWS will monitor. The objectives of the forces engaged in the fighting, and the ways the factions mobilize forces and act to achieve those objectives are critical in determining how an EWS should be organized and work. Further, the drivers and nature of the violence cannot be assumed to be the same throughout the conflict zone, and allowances for this variation must be made in the project design.

An international expert-led EWS with a limited number of observation teams is well-suited to a conflict in which the scope of the conflict is geographically limited and military forces square off primarily against each other across an established front line from which civilian populations have had the opportunity to flee.

However, this situation is rare in modern conflicts, which often take place within the borders of a state in response to a serious rupture or collapse of a political system, and which are often more fluid and may involve the systematic targeting of civilian populations.

In South Sudan, the conflict has been fought by an assortment of formal and informal forces, with local fighters largely mobilized by local grievances, fears, ambitions and the promise of opportunity to loot becoming more important as the war progressed. The diffuse and expansive routine coverage over large areas that civilian-led early warning networks have the capability to provide is ideally suited to a conflict such as the South Sudanese civil war, which is characterized by episodic outbreaks of violence, with highly mobile armed groups sweeping across the country and targeting civilians perceived to belong to or support opposing groups as a main objective of military action.

However, the conflict in South Sudan does pose challenges for an EWS. The informal and localized nature of the conflict, coupled with the situation of the at least partial collapse of state authority and institutions across much of the country has meant that it can be a challenge for advocacy to protect civilians to achieve real change. The central government authorities may not be directly involved in localized fighting, and the absence of officials on the ground may mean the government has limited ability to take effective action, and though the UN has a significant presence in the country its resources are in practice limited with regard to the scale of the crisis it is facing.

#### **Society and civil society**

Another important element of a civilian-led EWS is the nature of society and civil society in the country in question, which determines who can be engaged to monitor violations and their motivations for doing so.

To win the active support of monitors, the EWS has to win their trust and demonstrate its relevance. Both take time and effort, but of the two demonstrating the relevance of the EWS may be the more difficult, as it requires proof of the EWS's effectiveness, and proof that it can actually make a difference in people's lives. This is why active and ongoing engagement with monitors is needed to ensure that they understand what they are doing and why, and see the difference the EWS can make to their lives and the lives of other civilians.

Monitors should be independent or, at the very least, have a degree of autonomy from the warring factions. They should not identify with the warring factions and their interests should be distinct – security at the local level, not the victory of a faction in the war. In conflicts that develop along ethnic or religious lines this distinction may be less clear, but in most of these situations violence between ethnic groups drives populations to seek protection with their own ethnic group or co-religionists out of necessity, not choice, and beyond their need for protection they may not particularly identify with the interests of any given faction. In this case, monitors should be selected who do not have any close family or other association with the groups engaged in the conflict, and their reliability and impartiality should be assessed over time against other independent sources of information.

The possibility for the manipulation of the EWS to the benefit of one of the parties to the conflict can be further addressed by developing multiple lines of reporting, with multiple monitors reporting from the same area. While many incidents will be localized and may only be reported by one monitor, major incidents and serious escalations in fighting are likely to affect a large area and be reported by multiple monitors. There is also the possibility of independent confirmation of incidents, through other monitors or the coordinators of the monitoring network, when they have the possibility of reaching the location of the incident or accessing other witnesses. However, this requires a considerable effort that is likely to only be justifiable when it is particularly important to obtain more information or confirmation about the incident.

In some cases it may not be possible to verify a report that does not come from a trusted source, es-

pecially, for instance, if the source of the information is a witness or a victim of violence. The information and the source must be assessed quickly for credibility – whether the account of the violation is consistent both in itself and with the EWS team’s knowledge of the wider conflict, and whether the report could be motivated by politics, revenge or other malicious intentions.

However, given the time-sensitive nature of the information produced by the EWS, the passing on of information should not be delayed unless there is good reason to be suspicious of it. Where further investigation is necessary, this can be released later as an update to the initial report. The EWS team should employ a dynamic assessment process, using lessons learned from continuous assessment of its performance to develop better judgement as to where the balance of probability lies in any report. The inclination of parties to the conflict to interfere with reporting should of course be assessed and factored into this assessment. We have been constantly aware of the possibility of malicious interference from various actors in the operation of the CEPO/Ceasefire EWS, but we have yet to encounter a single verifiably false report.

Civil society, journalists and business can also play an important role in early warning. Civil society groups may have the advantage of being well connected – with other civil society groups and the wider society – and may have a track record of activism which can be reviewed to assess their impartiality. Journalists may already be involved in covering the conflict and may already have their own network of national and local contacts, and any biases and partialities will probably be easily discovered through their previous reportage. Journalists covering the conflict can be contacted and engaged as potentially useful sources of information, and may indeed reach out to the EWS of their own accord. However when engaging journalists it may be necessary to reach an agreement beforehand on what, if anything, they can publicly report about the network.

Business-people may also be able to make a valuable contribution, especially if their business involves moving goods or people across the country. Businesses may of course be compromised by actual or potential ties to warring factions – and many business-people have indeed profited from war in

one way or another – but conversely many businesses have a real stake in peace and security. Business-people should be assessed for possible conflicting interests and compromising ties, and their reports may be checked against other sources.

Though the conflict in South Sudan has been seen as being fought between ethnic groups, there have also been significant divisions within groups. The most prominent national leaders belonging to each group do not and have never spoken for or even represented the interests of all members of that ethnic group,<sup>157</sup> and the political economies that sustain the warring factions have likely never benefited the majority of the ethnic populations they claim to represent. This means that, for instance, the assumption that all or even most Dinka support Kiir in any meaningful fashion is certainly false. This means that it is probably safe to assume that those with no direct involvement with or relationship to those involved with a warring faction most likely have a vested interest in peace and security in their own local community. Even those who have benefited indirectly from the conflict, such as populations that have gained from the ethnic cleansing through the forced displacement of rival ethnic groups, can be assumed to have an interest in peace and security on the local level.

Further, though South Sudanese civil society is under-resourced and underdeveloped in the sense that there are relatively few dedicated and professional CSOs, there are many civil activists and many community-based groupings or associations that perform many of the functions of civil society at the local level. These groups have proven to be interested and willing to engage with the EWS, and keen to see if it can leverage real change in their lives at the local level.

#### **Advocacy and the broader political situation**

Advocacy is critical for the success of the project. The EWS is collecting information to make a difference to people’s lives, and it needs a viable advocacy strategy to be able to influence key decision makers to do so.

This means the EWS must engage effectively with the broader political context in which it operates. In most though not necessarily all cases, this will mean both the domestic political context but also

engaged international actors, which will include foreign states, the UN and possibly other international institutions. The advocacy strategy must be based on sharing the information produced by the EWS, and the insights into grassroots violence and the concerns of the civilian population that can be derived from it, which can be used to leverage access to key decision makers. In some instances, simply sharing information may be enough, but in most cases the information needs to be crafted into an argument for action that is concrete and doable. Specific recommendations based on information about specific incidents is likely to be most effective. General calls for action will be more effective when backed by statistics and specifics.

Political developments in the country and in the country's relationship with the international community may directly or indirectly impact on the work of the EWS by changing the parameters or context within which it operates. It is important to recognize that, while early warning systems may be apolitical in their design and intent they operate in inherently political contexts, and parties to the conflict or violence they monitor may see them as politicized and attempt to undermine them, or instrumentalize them in their wider political strategies. This means it is essential to follow all developments in a country and analyse them for potential impact on the project, and for opportunities they might offer to increase the effectiveness and impact of the project.

The operation and possibilities for action of an EWS will also depend in part on the political and institutional situation that mandated the establishment of the system. Those managing the system must be aware of this and factor it into their calculations of the political context in which it operates. Those operating an EWS must be prepared to negotiate red lines and operational limits set by key national and international actors, and understand when and how to manoeuvre around them to keep faith with the people the system is meant to protect and on whose cooperation it ultimately depends. This will be especially true if the EWS was imposed on a national government by the international community, or approved grudgingly by a national government.

It must not be assumed that all national and international actors will act in good faith, and the peace or resolution to the conflict they claim to

support may reflect their interests rather than those of civilians in the conflict zone. Parties to the conflict may also attempt to instrumentalize international efforts at mediation, or to support a peace process to pursue its war aims through the internationally sponsored peace process. Foreign states involved in the peace process may also have their own interests in securing particular outcomes to the conflict. However, even when individual international actors may be biased, the engaged international community as a whole may be able to exert a positive influence and be a useful interlocutor, providing useful support for a civil society-led early warning system.

Further, monitors or a CSO running the network could be targeted by parties to the conflict for what they perceive as negative or critical reporting on their activities. A strong relationship between the EWS and impartial national or international actors willing to intervene and bring real pressure to bear on those who threaten it will offer protection against this possibility.

The media may also prove to be useful for educating and engaging the general public, possibly even facilitating engagement with new monitors, and to influence and put pressure on key decision makers. Journalists and international correspondents may be useful contacts for an early warning network, but they can also provide potentially useful coverage of violence at the local or national level to influence key decision makers. When influencing foreign diplomats, reaching out to media from their own country is likely to be particularly effective.

Luckily opportunities for impactful advocacy are plenty in South Sudan, as the effort to resolve the conflict has become thoroughly internationalized. The international community has been engaged in negotiating an end to the conflict in South Sudan since the first year of the war, and currently the UN, the AU, IGAD and an assortment of states from Africa and the wider world are invested to some extent in the peace process.

Further, and critically, after years of brutal and destabilizing conflict, the predominant interest of regional states in the South Sudanese civil war is that it ends and brings with it some form of stability. The regional rivalries that initially raised



fears the conflict could ignite a wider war have abated and interest is now focused on ending the war. This is a sharp contrast to, for instance, the civil conflicts in Syria and Libya, which have also become proxy wars for regional and international powers. In South Sudan the intractable nature of the conflict itself has prevented its resolution, not regional and geopolitical rivalries.

However, the civil war has its own particular challenges. The South Sudanese state has partially collapsed and state authority and institutions are largely absent across much of its territory. Local armed groups, who may be aligned with major factions but are not in any meaningful way under their direct control, are present in many areas.

Furthermore, there is a strong argument that, in its engagement with the peace process, the government of South Sudan has not acted in good faith. There is evidence it has been both directly and indirectly involved in violence against civilians during the civil war; that it has acted to improve its position at the expense of civilians, preventing access of monitoring teams to key areas of the country and commissioning or encouraging violence that has forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes; and that its engagement in the peace process has been less than enthusiastic and whole-hearted.

The engagement of the international community has been extremely useful as a counterweight to the government. CEPO has intentionally cultivated close ties with the international community to provide protection against possible retribution from the government for its activities, and has used the early warning system to develop an even closer relationship with key international actors including UNMISS, the AU, IGAD and certain foreign embassies.

Because of this situation, the primary recipients of information from the EWS have been the international institutions – UNMISS, and the AU and IGAD early warning networks. Information has been shared with the South Sudanese authorities, but on a case-by-case rather than a routine basis, for instance when local police were engaged when dealing with incidents of violence against women. The credibility and perceived influence the EWS has on its international contacts has

meant that local authorities have taken issues raised with them seriously.

### **Running a civilian-led EWS: practical considerations**

The key considerations that must be taken into account when running a civilian-led EWS are threefold: the management of its operations, security, and broader issues of strategy and development.

#### **Operational management**

The operational elements of an EWS can be organized and run in a variety of ways as long as they meet certain strategic criteria essential to the success of the project; primary among these is that it is suited to the environment in which it operates.

The critical operational element of any civilian-led EWS is civilian outreach and engagement. This should be handled differently depending on the society and the groups that will be engaged, whether these are business, the media, civil society and activists. It is to be assumed that there are significant differences between how these sectors work and are structured in different countries, but a civilian-led EWS must go beyond these broad differences and deal with society on the most granular level – at the level of individuals.

It must be recognized that reaching out to, engaging and keeping individuals engaged involves a significant and ongoing investment of time. There are no shortcuts to this that do not pose a significant risk of undermining the project.

While engagement with each monitor or potential monitor should be conducted within the broad parameters of the project, each monitor needs to be engaged individually; a bespoke informal working agreement needs to be arrived at with each, and this needs to evolve with their situation, the situation in their locality and the situation in the country. Routine communication with monitors, perhaps on a weekly or monthly basis, allows for potential changes to be monitored and assessed, as well as providing reassurance for monitors and making an argument for the relevance of the EWS to their lives.

Modalities of communication need to be developed to suit the situation of every monitor, and reviewed and developed as required to suit their

evolving situation. In general, monitors in South Sudan felt more comfortable starting with a more formal and structured communications protocol, and as their familiarity with and confidence in the project increased, communications protocols evolved to become less formal and structured. For many monitors, the cost of communications may be significant and stipends to cover communications costs should be paid where this cost is not negligible. In addition to facilitating and incentivizing communication, stipends to cover the cost of telecommunications also serve to demonstrate that the EWS is serious and willing to invest in its monitors.

Similarly, the nature and quality of the information gathered by the EWS from civilian monitors will vary significantly. This will require flexibility in how it is processed, stored and analysed.

Provision must also be made to follow up on individual cases when required. The nature of this following up will vary, depending on the violation and the overall situation – whether it is judged most appropriate to raise the case with local, national or international authorities or some combination thereof. This might involve pressure to bring those responsible for violations to justice, or it might involve preventive action, for instance for police or peacekeepers to take action to protect civilians from violations or deter potential violators. This is important not just in terms of securing justice for those who have suffered serious violations, but also to maintain the credibility of the network among those who stand to benefit the most from it and without whose willing and active support it cannot function.

A process of dynamic assessment should be employed to analyse information as it comes in. Information should be assessed both in itself and as it relates to the broader phenomenon of violence in the country to identify patterns – is it an isolated incident, part of a general pattern or perhaps part of a wider incident like an armed group on the move? This should be reflected in advocacy messaging, and for this reason analysis and advocacy should overlap and not be entirely separate functions within the EWS team.

Another significant operational concern is resources and staffing. Running a civilian-led EWS

requires the investment of a great deal of time and energy. Building a network takes time, as it is necessary to reach out and engage, to explain and win trust, and – critically – to demonstrate the relevance of the EWS to the lives of civilians. This is an ongoing process, and some version of it has to be repeated for every participant. As civilians relocate to other locales, leave their positions in CSOs, or even leave the country, it will be necessary to recruit new monitors and the entire process will need to be repeated. Expanding the mechanism into new localities may be even more time consuming, as this may require developing networks of new contacts from scratch, and tapping into existing networks of CSOs and activists, winning their confidence and securing their buy-in to the project takes a lot of time and effort.

### **Security**

A strong commitment to the security of monitors is critical for the success of a civilian-led EWS. This includes secure communications protocols, secure information storage and anonymizing information as much as possible before it is released to decision makers. Further, and as noted above, a close relationship with impartial national or international actors willing to act to defend the EWS and its monitors will mitigate the possible dangers for monitors and staff.

As the risks and the security concerns of each monitor vary, so must the security measures taken in communicating with them, and in using and anonymizing their information. This should be discussed openly with each monitor at the beginning of their relationship with the EWS, and raised with them routinely after that, and in response to any emerging potential threats to their safety.

Communication protocols should be allowed to evolve as relationships with monitors develop, and their situation and the situation in the country changes. As familiarity with the project increases, and trust and confidence develop, communications protocols can be revised to make them less rigid and demanding.

As monitors live and work in zones of active insecurity or conflict, it can be assumed that they will have an acute awareness of the risks and the steps they may take to mitigate them, and these could

of course include reporting these risks to the EWS. Coordinators should regularly discuss monitors' personal security with them and see if they can give them any advice or perhaps if there is training available for them. Information in conversations with monitors about security should flow in both directions, from monitors to coordinators about the situation they are experiencing on the ground, and from coordinators to monitors about potential or emerging threats they are aware of from other monitors or at the national level, for instance if the security of channels of communication is potentially at risk.

Information storage and properly anonymizing information is also a very real concern. No matter how securely encrypted information on a hard drive is, it is vulnerable if people who have access to it are arrested and tortured or otherwise pressured to reveal passwords, and disk drives physically present in the country can also be seized or stolen. For this reason, it is desirable to store information outside of the country where possible, and to have several individuals in the organization, and even outside of the country, who can shut down access if others are arrested or otherwise compromised.

The anonymizing of data to protect sources is important, though there may be some tension between the desire to protect sources and the necessity of revealing information. These must be handled on a case-by-case basis and, when it is necessary to reveal information that may possibly endanger a source, discussed with monitors where possible. Their decision as to how much to reveal should be accepted as final.

Security should be viewed as a dynamic element of any EWS, and security protocols should be constantly reviewed and adjusted to reflect the developing or emerging threats, whenever possible in an active dialogue with monitors.

### **Strategic development**

Because of the difficult circumstances in which early warning systems operate on the ground, and the challenging and dynamic advocacy environment in which they function, it is of critical importance that mechanisms for feedback and improvement be incorporated into them from their inception.

Further, a civilian-led EWS must invest in and actively seek to develop the human capital on which it depends, improving the skills, knowledge and awareness of monitors and EWS staff, and strengthening the relationships between monitors and staff. Given the varied and potentially far-flung situations in which monitors operate, it is likely that attending formal training sessions will be difficult, so it will probably be most effective for EWS handlers to view their routine interactions as possible opportunities to impart knowledge and expand monitors' knowledge – of human rights, the law of war, standards of evidence, national and international jurisprudence, relevant international institutions, the latest political developments and/or anything else that is relevant. This education should begin with the initial engagement with monitors, so they start to understand what they are doing from the very beginning. The investment of this time in the monitors will likely increase both their value to the EWS and their commitment to it.

As advocacy is an important element of any EWS project, an investment in increasing the relevance and impact of the messaging of in-country civil society partners, who will most likely be the project's interlocutors with key decision makers, will pay dividends. As their credibility and relevance increases, their advocacy work related to the EWS will become more impactful.

Further, and critically, advocacy strategies need to be constantly reviewed and developed as the political environment, policies, personalities and opportunities for advocacy can change rapidly. Advocacy plans, key targets and messaging all need to be constantly reviewed in light of current developments. Though Action Research, which envisages a cycle of planning, action and assessment, is perhaps the most common conceptualization of a feedback mechanism, the author has found the OODA loop (observation, orientation, decision and action)<sup>158</sup> more useful. Its stress on orientation in light of recent developments and conscious decision making is well-suited to complex, interdependent, rapidly changing situations.

### **Trust and responsiveness to civilian concerns**

The most important elements of any civilian-led EWS are winning and maintaining the trust of the civilians on which it ultimately depends, and es-

establishing its relevance to their lives and the lives of other civilians.

Civilian monitors have to trust that the EWS, its staff and the organizations running it will do what they claim to do – represent their interests and the interests of other civilians honestly and diligently. They also have to believe that these efforts will be relevant to their lives, that they can actually achieve or credibly claim to aspire to meaningful change.

The problem for the EWS is that trust and credibility is hard to win, but easily lost. In practice what this means is that mistakes, missteps or omissions on the part of the EWS in dealing with its civilian monitors and the incidents they report will undermine trust and the credibility of the EWS more than its successes will bolster it. An apparent lack of concern for the personal security of the monitors will be particularly damaging for a civilian-led EWS.

Given that missteps in any complex EWS operation are all but inevitable at some stage, this makes routine, open and honest communication with monitors and the active management of expectations critically important. When mistakes are made or shortfalls exposed, EWS staff need to be able to discuss them frankly, and should respond with honesty and clarity, and, where necessary, with urgency to monitors' concerns. The careful management of relationships with civilian monitors is essential if disillusionment with the EWS, and a consequent loss of motivation and declining engagement, is to be avoided.

Building trust and establishing relevance may be time consuming and difficult, but these issues also encapsulate the promise of actively involving civilians in an EWS. All too often when monitoring ceasefires or conflicts, a political process that

represents the interests of the warring factions and some notion of 'balance' between them is the primary concern of the monitoring mechanism; further, mechanisms that do not directly involve civilians may be paternalistic and dismissive of civilian concerns. By putting civilians at the heart of a monitoring mechanism, their concerns and interests are foregrounded and must be considered if the mechanism itself is to be effective. The political considerations that inevitably influence how these mechanisms operate, in South Sudan and elsewhere, must be reoriented to include rather than exclude or minimize civilian concerns. If they do not, they risk the erosion of trust and credibility and the possible collapse of the early warning system and the national and international political fallout that would have.

The promise of civilian-led monitoring systems is not that they are an alternative to 'boots on the ground' or 'monitoring lite' – a 'cheap' or 'easy' alternative to a monitoring mission led by a team of international experts. It is that instead of excluding civilians and civilian perspectives and interests from the political processes in which the EWS is embedded, it puts them front and centre. This could arguably be a key to resolving a conflict in a way that serves the interests of the population as a whole, rather than the interests of a narrow circle of warlords.

This is also the advantage of having a civilian-led EWS run by a CSO or even a coalition of civil associations. If the mechanism is run by an international organization, associated with the UN or any other multilateral body or for that matter a national institution, civilian concerns will inevitably be balanced against political or organizational imperatives, whereas the imperative of a CSO will be to maintain the support of the civilian monitors on which the network depends, actively promoting the civilian perspectives they represent.

# 3

## Conclusion: The promise and challenge of civilian-led early warning systems

CEPO and Ceasefire have built and operated a successful pilot fourth-generation EWS in South Sudan that is both civilian-led and civilian-focused. The experience has proven the concept is viable and has significant potential, though it is not suited for conflicts in heavily militarized areas in which civilians have been evacuated or had the chance to evacuate, or perhaps were never present in the first place. However, it is well-suited for conflicts fought in areas populated by civilians or in which civilians are actively targeted or otherwise harmed, which is to say it is suited for most conflicts in the modern world.

Several key points have emerged from the CEPO/Ceasefire pilot. First and most critical is that each project must be tailored to the context in which it operates. This includes the nature of the conflict itself; the activists, civic associations and CSOs that can be inducted into or constructed to form the network; and the political environment in which the EWS operates. The key to a successful civilian-led EWS is in its adaptability to the conditions in which it operates.

Of fundamental importance to a civilian-led EWS is an effective advocacy strategy. Without it, the EWS becomes an exercise in data collection. It needs an advocacy strategy that embodies the hope that their work will contribute to improving their lives or the lives of others, otherwise civilian monitors will not have a reason to invest their time and energy in it or justify the potential risk of their involvement.

The promise of civilian-led early warning systems is that they will of necessity foreground the interests and perspec-

tives of civilians in the political processes in which they are embedded. They should not be viewed as either an easy or a cheap alternative to mechanisms led by a team of international experts; they require time and effort to construct and maintain, and the team that runs the EWS has to be as active advocate for civilian interests in whatever political process it is embedded.

Civilian interests and perspectives are too easily marginalized by peace agreements and political processes that privilege the interests of the parties to conflict and/or the elites. Peace processes, or for that matter, inter-communal dispute resolution processes that exclude civilian interests, can be paternalistic or dismissive of valid civilian concerns and as such may actually be less effective. Civilian-led early warning systems are a step toward peace processes that are more inclusive of the interests and perspectives of the civilians they claim to serve.

### Recommendations

#### For early warning systems globally

- Civilian-led early warning systems should be employed when they are suited to the modalities of a conflict, that is, when the conflict is conducted in areas populated by civilians, when civilians are actively targeted, or when they are otherwise subject to harm.
- Civilian-led early warning systems should be viewed as a way of incorporating civilian priorities and perspectives into decision-making processes relating to conflict resolution.

- When designing conflict resolution processes, whether these are formal peace processes or mediation mechanisms to end inter-communal violence, policy makers should recognize that civilian-led early warning systems require a serious commitment of time and resources. They are not an afterthought, or a cheap and easy way of doing monitoring. They require significant political and material support, and protection.
- Decision makers in conflict resolution processes should be receptive to incorporating and prioritizing civilian perspectives in their decision-making processes. They should recognize that this makes decision-making processes more effective, and more likely to produce viable and durable resolutions to the conflict.

### **For early warning in South Sudan**

- Key national and international decision makers must prioritize the protection of civilians in the ongoing violence in South Sudan and support the inclusion of civilian perspectives into the peace process.
- Decision makers should recognize the potential contribution of the EWS to the peace process and to ending inter-communal violence, and actively facilitate that contribution.
- International decision makers should support a national roll-out of the CEPO/Ceasefire civilian-led EWS, and continue to support it politically.
- The international community should be open to closer coordination with the EWS and more responsive to its alerts to assist civilians in need of protection.

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# First to Know: Civilian-led early warning in armed conflict

## In brief

Civilian-led early warning of violence in armed conflict is a viable technique that has significant potential to save lives by alerting both responsible authorities and civilian populations themselves of impending threats. It is well-suited to the majority of today's conflicts, which frequently occur in populated areas and in which civilians are actively targeted or otherwise subject to serious harm.

Civilian-led early warning systems have the potential to:

- Ensure that information on a wide spectrum of violence or threatened violence is captured, including in particular sexual and gender-based violence, extortion, pillage and other exactions against local civilian populations, as well as communal violence and patterns of criminal violence linked to the conflict;
- Provide real-time information from territories to which access is difficult or denied for official monitors;
- Ensure that warnings quickly reach the communities that are most under threat;
- Enable local community interests and perspectives to be regularly inputted into peace processes;
- Recognise the active role civilians play in improving civilian protection and security.

Informed by a detailed consideration of the historical development of early warning systems for various forms of political violence, this report considers aspects of the role of civilians and civil society organizations in early warning systems in zones of conflict, and summarizes the lessons learned from the civilian-led and civilian-focused early warning project run by the Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation (CEPO) and the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights in South Sudan from 2019 to 2021. The report examines the pilot early warning system in South Sudan in detail, considering the context in which it operates, the challenges it has faced and the opportunities it has realized. It focuses on the political considerations of operating in such a sensitive situation and the security concerns for staff and monitors that need to be addressed in the design and implementation of the project.

Two key points that have emerged from this pilot project are first, that a civilian-led early warning system must be tailored to the

context in which it operates – to the nature of the conflict itself but also its social and political context – and, second, that without an effective advocacy strategy to protect civilians and advance their interests it becomes an exercise in data collection.

The promise embodied by civilian-led early warning systems is that they will, of necessity, foreground the interests and perspectives of civilians in the political processes in which they are embedded. They should not be viewed as either an easy or a cheap alternative to mechanisms led by a team of international experts; they require time and effort to construct and maintain, and the team that runs them has to be an active advocate for civilian interests, which are too easily marginalized by peace agreements and political processes that privilege the interests of the parties to a conflict and/or political elites.

Civilian-led early warning systems are a step towards peace processes that are more inclusive of the interests and perspectives of the civilians they claim to serve.

### This report recommends that:

- Civilian-led early warning systems should be employed when they are suited to the modalities of a conflict, that is when the conflict is conducted in areas populated by civilians or when civilians are harmed.
- Civilian-led early warning systems should be viewed as a way of incorporating civilian priorities and perspectives into decision-making processes relating to conflict prevention, de-escalation and resolution.
- Policy makers should recognize that civilian-led early warning systems require a serious commitment of time and resources. They should not be an afterthought, or a viewed as cheap and easy way of doing monitoring. They require significant political and material support, and protection.
- Key national and international decision makers in peace processes should support civilian-led early warning systems and recognize that they offer a means of prioritizing the protection of civilians and supporting the inclusion of civilian perspectives into those processes.

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