Thinking Africa

NOTE DE RECHERCHE

A CONTINENTAL CONFLICT PREVENTION MECHANISM ON THE HORIZON? AN ASSESSMENT OF THE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM IN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

> "…We are confronted with persistent conflicts and crises of governance and security that threaten to derail our hopes for an African Union of peace and prosperity."
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> Kofi Annan, Address to the 37th Summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Lusaka (Zambia) in July 2001.

For over a century, Africa has experienced a violent cycle of warfare from colonial conquest, armed struggles for independence, to civil wars. These civil wars have many causes, including the struggle over artificial frontiers inherited from colonialism, friction and rivalry among different ethnic and religious groups, and the crude desire for power and associated wealth of some African leaders. Incidentally, however, the level of violence on the continent has remained high since the end of the Cold War; civil wars which, whatever their origins, attracting interventions by stronger powers either from within or outside the continent, or both, have become the norm rather than the exception in some parts of Africa.

During the Cold War, the situation was further exacerbated by intervention or "aid" from the former colonial powers and emerging superpowers. Although it has not been easy to prevent or contain these wars, increasingly, efforts are being made by the United Nations as well as the African Union in concert with its sub-regional bodies to provide peacemaking and peacekeeping as well as provide care for refugees and internally displaced persons. Nonetheless, as Woronoff (2008) wrote, for a continent that is poorly known and badly misunderstood to begin with, it is often hard to find useful information about underlying situations, groups and people involved, and even the course of wars. Africa's post-Cold War wars, moreover, with their often multiple causes, have varied enormously in scope and duration.

To illustrate this point, in Sudan, the half-century old war between the north and the south has finally relatively come to an end, but another civil war quickly replaced it in the huge Darfur province and now presently pronounced in the oil-rich Abei region, following the internationally recognised independence of South Sudan. Furthermore, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaïre), following the civil war that ended Mobutu's long tyranny, another series of war ensued. One of these war episodes rightly dubbed Africa's Great War directly involved virtually all of DRC's neighbouring countries as well as those far from the Great Lakes region such as Namibia and Eritrea.

The recent military victory by the UN-backed Congolese Armed Forces over the M23 rebel movement in DRC's North Kivu province notwithstanding, most of eastern DRC still is replete with armed men, and as such, the war seems far from ending. In West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire which had, for long, been seen as one of the region's most stable countries, descended into a civil war that split the country between north and south, and more recently between politically engineered clashing loyalties, following the November 2010 presidential elections. Nigeria, West Africa's powerhouse whose economic-military hegemony had previously gone unchallenged, now faces a host of security challenges in the wake of the Boko Haram Islamist militancy. Mozambique too, whose Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) exercise in the aftermath of its civil war was, until very recently, held a success story, is now facing an array of post-DDR security challenges.

Furthermore, the unprecedented popular demonstrations associated with increasingly deteriorating security situations in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya continue to spark calls for change for political pluralism, civic liberties, economic opportunity and an end to systemic corruption throughout the continent. Arguably, the notion and practice of an operational early warning system have somewhat been alien to governance models in most African countries until recently.

This essay attempts to evaluate the roles of the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) in view of the civil and other wars, such as the liberation struggles (which often overlap), and to assess the challenges facing CEWS in view of the endless cycle of African violence that has been a feature of the continent in the period since 1945 (and more so from 1960s onwards). Arguments in tandem with the CEWS bring into question a couple of concerns including whether it is never right to intervene in the internal affairs of another state; whether all states should be regarded as permanently inviolable; and whether the separation of fundamentally antagonistic groups, such as the Hutus and Tutsis of Burundi and Rwanda or the Muslim northerners and the Christian southerners in Nigeria, would not be better than attempting to keep intact states in which genocidal massacres appear to have become the periodic norm.

SOME THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

Early warning is a large field with many different methodologies operating on different levels and with a wide range of issues. Austin (2004) rightly put it that few people would disagree with the concept of early warning as to obtain knowledge and, what is more, to use that knowledge to assist in the mitigation of conflict. In this perspective, there is a need to actively engage in crisis prevention where the first step is the prognosis of when, why and where conflict will erupt. The options that can be taken are necessarily tied to the understanding of the cause.

Three underpinning questions remain at the base of any early warning endeavour. These include whether early warning systems can effectively identify the causes of conflict; predict the outbreak of conflict; and most important of all, mitigate that conflict (Austin, 2004).

The notion of an "early warning" system is generically referred to as to mean any initiative that focuses on systematic data collection, analysis and/or formulation of recommendations, including risk assessment and information sharing, regardless of topic, whether they are quantitative, qualitative or a blend of both. Early warning requires "near real-time assessment of events that, in a high risk environment, are likely to accelerate or trigger the rapid escalation of conflict" (Gurr 1996, p.137). Dorn (2004) emphasised that early warning is an essential first step of conflict prevention.

In order to respond in time, "authorities need to know in advance of emerging threats to the peace." (Dorn, 2004, p. 305) In the context of conflict prevention, early warning thus consists of an information system that can provide data and indicators that will be used to forecast the emergence of conflict. Rupesinghe and Kuroda (1992) saw early warning as information that can provide a timely alert to potential conflicts. The purpose of such early warning system will hence be to collect information and data on the social, economic, political, religious, cultural, educational, resource utilisation, and military situations as available in member states. Effective early warning involves the collection and analysis of data in a uniform and systematised way. In this sense, the aim of early warning is to strengthen the capacity of end-users to identify critical developments in a timely manner, so that coherent response strategies can be formulated to either prevent violent conflict or limit its destructive effects (Cilliers, 2008).

According to Kiplagat (1995), an inventory consisting of an updated compilation of trouble spots, is one of the ways of dealing comprehensively with Africa's conflicts. Developing a set of indicators for an early warning apparatus in Africa, Kiplagat (1995) further pointed out, can serve as socio-political barometers of the level of actual or potential conflict in African countries. These indicators include the refusal of a country to permit refugees to return home; large numbers of citizens fleeing a state, particularly when those fleeing are prominent leaders, like intellectuals and politicians; growth in the numbers of displaced persons; significant growth in security budgets, changes in the structure of the security forces, and increases in personal recruited into such branches of the security forces as the police, paramilitary organisations, and the secret service; and a significant increase in the size of prison populations, especially the numbers of political and quasi-political prisoners.

While preparedness, prevention and mitigation, as the three pillars of an early warning system, are of critical importance in understanding the purpose of such a system, it should be borne in mind that even if the detection mechanism is perfect, it is of no use unless there is the capability for a timely reaction. In this regard, the provision of information alone does not constitute early warning per se.

Such information should serve a specific purpose. One of the critical issues is the origin of the information and data, and the time frame in which it has been developed. The receiver of such a forecast and what is done with the information provided become critical in determining the success or failure of an early warning system. That is why Kuroda (1992) specially noted that early warning should not be an end in itself; it is a tool for preparedness, prevention and mitigation with regard to disasters, emergencies, and conflict situations, whether short- or long-term ones.

Early warning should definitely be directed at those parties that could best utilise it for a specific situation. Consequently, choices will be required on the part of those who assemble early warning reports. These choices, Gordenker (1989) has noted, are essentially political judgements about who will respond, in which way and for what reasons. In some instances, early warnings could have negative effects on conflict situations, or even on the organisation receiving the data. The purpose as well as the function of an early warning system is therefore to send the right information at the right time to the right people who will, in turn, take timely action for prevention of conflicts.

A TRAJECTORY OF THE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Under the Auspices of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)

Before one can engage in the discussion on early warning system in contemporary Africa, it is important to note that early warning systems (EWS) are not new mechanisms. They have been in existence since the 1950s, since when different focal issues have been addressed using different methodologies. The origins of the modern EWS can be found in two stems: first, the military strategic intelligence gathering to predict an attack. Second, those used to forecast humanitarian and natural disasters such as drought and famine exemplified by the United Nations Humanitarian Early Warning System (HEWS). The litany of contemporary EWS has analysed and warned on many different issues and areas. Its spectrum has included genocide, minorities, Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHEs), terrorism and human rights violations.

With respect to the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) of the African Union, Cilliers (2008) has pointed out that through its Constitutive Act and the Protocol on the Peace and Security Council (PSC), Member States have mandated the African Union (AU) and its PSC with a substantially enlarged and much more robust role in the prevention, management and resolution of African conflicts than was the case with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). One of the instruments through which the African Union Commission is to operationalise this mandate, Cilliers (2008) underscored, is with the establishment of a Continental Early Warning System (CEWS).

The establishment of a unit for conflict early warning at the continental level was formally initiated in June 1992 in Dakar, Senegal, when the Assembly of the OAU decided to establish the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. This decision was put into effect a year after following the adoption of the Cairo Declaration which established the Central Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. The Mechanism's operational arm, the Central Organ, consisted of countries that were members of the Bureau of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, annually elected based on the principles of equitable regional representation and rotation. This Mechanism was charged with "the anticipation and prevention of situations of armed conflict as well as with undertaking peacemaking and peace-building efforts during conflicts and in post-conflict situations" (Cilliers, 2008, p.39).

Smock and Crocker (1995) argued that the commitment of African Heads of State to the OAU early warning initiative was impressive and promised new energy in addressing Africa's wars. The Conflict Management Division created by the Mechanism was expected (i) to collect, collate and disseminate information relating to current and potential conflicts; (ii) to prepare and present policy options to the Secretary-General of the OAU; (iii) to undertake or commission analysis and long-term research; and (iv) to support and manage political, civilian and military observer mission, and coordinate regional training policies to support peacekeeping operations. However, it was also clear that the Mechanism will for some time be a weak instrument on which to pin the hopes for a peaceful Africa. The OAU was restricted to conflict management and resolution—usually at the invitation of an affected government—rather than directed toward conflict prevention.

Furthermore, Cilliers (2008) remarked, as an organisation built on consensus and the sanctity of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, the OAU found it difficult to respond to emerging crises until such time as the clear warning signals became lost amidst armed conflict, widespread human suffering, and open hostilities. The 1993 Cairo Declaration explicitly stated that the Mechanism on Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution will be guided by the objectives and principles of the OAU Charter; in particular, the sovereign equality of Member States, non-interference in the internal affairs of States, the respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Member States, their inalienable right to independent existence, the peaceful settlement of disputes as well as the inviolability of borders inherited from colonialism. Further still, the OAU needed substantial assistance in training staff, developing systems, and financing peacemaking operations.

An African Peace Fund was advocated by James Gustave Speth, administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to which donors would contribute up to US$ 300 to 400 million, representing only 10 percent of the US$ 3 to 4 billion that the international community had already spent on conflict resolution in Africa (Smock & Crocker, 1995). The annual budget of the OAU was roughly US$ 42million in 2003, indicating that the Peace Fund would receive about US$ 2 million per annum.

While the Cairo Declaration on the establishment of a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution in June 1993 created both the institutions (such as the African Peace Fund) and practices (such as the use of eminent persons) that were sub-

sequently included in the Peace and Security Council, it did not explicitly provide for the establishment of a unit for early warning. Bound by the principles and objectives of the OAU Charter, its focus on national sovereignty and the practice of solidarity politics, coupled with a critical lack of resources, the Organisation could not give effect to its intentions. However, in order to strengthen the OAU's capacity for conflict prevention and early warning, the then General Secretariat organised three consultations in 1994, 1996, and 1998.

The 1998 meeting proposed a rudimentary early warning system consisting of an Internet-linked Situation Room based in Addis Ababa and the subsequent development of a system of early warning focal points around the continent (Cilliers, 2008). In addition to being a single large office with a number of televisions to monitor CNN, BBC, and SABC Africa, the Situation Room also became responsible for producing a wide range of reports such as news highlights, daily reports, and other ad-hoc reports. Sources of information include AU field missions, continental and global Internet-based news sources, as well as international organisations, like the United Nations (UN), think-tanks, and the media.

Although the system discussed at the 1998 meeting included the use of non-governmental organisations, universities, journalists and other appointed by the OAU to act as providers of information, the Organisation's performance remained, at best, uneven. While the OAU, for instance, was deeply involved with the UN, the EU and the US in attempts at the prevention of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and with France and Senegal in Madagascar, it was largely absent from Somalia, Sudan (until Darfur), Angola, the DRC, CAR, Sierra Leone and Liberia. More striking, more than five years after the adoption of the Declaration establishing the Mechanism, the Central Organ still lacked adequate information to effectively predict, plan for, prevent, and manage the complex and numerous conflicts that had plagued the continent. The OAU equally lacked the capacity for in-depth analysis of strategic options on which to base its decisions.

Under the Auspices of the African Union (AU)

The promotion of peace, security and stability on the African continent is a core objective of the African Union, detailed in Article 3 (f) of its Constitutive Act. The overall objective of the unit for Peace and Security is the maintenance of peace, security and stability through the coordination and promotion of African and other initiatives on conflict prevention, management and resolution within the context of the UN.

Although the principle of non-interference remains a stated principle of the organisation (as per Article 4(g) of the Constitutive Act, 11 July 2000), the AU now has the right 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," as well as in instances of "threats to legitimate order" (Cilliers, 2008, p. 41).

The Maputo Summit in July 2003 did mandate the AU Commission to take the necessary steps for the establishment of the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) as reflected in the Protocol on the Peace and Security Council (PSC), in anticipation of its entry into force later that very year. According to this Protocol, the PSC shall be a collective security and early warning arrangement to facilitate timely and efficient response to conflict and crisis situations in Africa.

The CEWS, one of the five pillars of the PSC, is tasked with providing the Chairperson of the Commission with information in a timely manner so that s/he can advise the Council on potential conflicts and threats to peace and security as well as recommend best courses of action. Nonetheless, the AU admittedly still lacks a credible system that can perform early warning. Concomitantly, political obstacles (as this essay will soon argue) against giving effect to this requirement are still significant. What is even more shocking remains the fact that early warning and conflict prevention/management are pragmatically effected by the same staff as is the current practice within AU, thereby confusing analysis with action (Cilliers, 2008).

CHALLENGES FACING EARLY WARNING FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION IN AFRICA

First and foremost, the resources (financial and human), technical capacity, and technological infrastructure needed for successful early warning and early response are still lacking. Without these, information will not be easily accessible and hence responses cannot be rapid. For instance, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's (IGAD) Conflict Early Warning Response Mechanism (CEWARN) continues to be bogged down by inadequate information and the absence of a solid early response system (Wulf and Debiel, 2009). Ambassador Sam Ibok, then Director of Peace and Security at the AU, presented a couple of difficulties encountered over the preceding years of the establishment of an early warning system in Africa.

These included the barrier of national sovereignty, which often hampered efforts to collect reliable data and information, as well as timely intervention; the issue of data ownership, which often created problems

on the flexibility of the use and dissemination of data collected; the issue of defining early warning modules and their ownership by the OAU/AU; the lack of adequate technological infrastructure; limited financial and human resources; and the sheer lack of political will on the part of Member States (Cilliers, 2008).

The Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) West African Early Warning Network (ECOWARN) system too faces inadequate and ineffective technological equipment to enhance and facilitate the collection, processing, and sharing of information. A recommendation from the Workshop on the Establishment of the AU CEWS was the need to staff it with trained experts and equip the Situation Room with adequate technological resources so that information is easily and readily available and accessible.

Secondly, it is equally important to note that a democratic flow of information is the first condition for a reliable and open system of warnings and responses. However, information per se is a highly explosive and political issue, and more especially in the African governance landscape. Many countries have elaborate laws to prevent people from gaining access to some pieces of information dubbed "classified", or censorship laws which prevent people from reporting on what actually happens in a society. In early 2011, for instance, some governments in North Africa shut down Internet social networking, and in August of the same year Wireless Fidelity (Wi-Fi) connectivity for passengers on San Francisco's transport system was reportedly disabled in the context of threatened social unrest.

Moreover, governments, other non-state actors and natural calamities can all shut down communications channels—making online systems less workable or just useless. In same breath, impartiality, objectives, ethics, and reliability in sources of information are complicated issues for all reporters, and even more so, in conflict-prone areas (Petrén, 2003). Drawing a line between information and propaganda is therefore a subtle art, one that is yet to be mastered on the African continent.

Lastly, the broad use of data and reports from early warning processes might not be allowed or encouraged based on the idea that some reports should not be publicly shared due to the information that they might hold. In addition, the issue of data ownership comes to the fore that limits the flexibility on the use and dissemination of the data collected. The politicisation of the Early Warning and Early Response systems (EWERS) remains evident, specifically the control of political information in cases of (national) security.

The inherent suspicion of the political manipulation of data among member states of the AU as part of early warning is still not yet fully averted and the staff of the CEWS are yet provided with no technical protection. Wynn-Pope (2011) underscored that while the use of technology-based systems in repressive environments or where access is constrained looks immediately attractive, it should be remembered that technology is never truly secure and those making reports may be put at risk.

PROSPECTS FOR EARLY WARNING AND EARLY RESPONSES IN AFRICA

It is worth highlighting the significant progress that EWERS have made on the continent and the steps taken to make sure they are fully functional. In spite of the challenges that exist, there are a few opportunities that must be explored further for the continued success of these systems.

The engagement between ECOWAS and the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) has been rather positive and showcases a solid example of cooperation between sub-regional bodies and civil society organisations. The selection of WANEP as a facilitator of ECOWARN creates the opportunity for easier and faster collection of information and more involvement at the grassroots level. WANEP's strength lies in its national network offices in key member states, namely Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. WANEP has been involved in capacity-building and sensitisation, design, and implementation of the EWERS; participation in coordination meetings; and reporting on the system.

In January 2010, WANEP was involved in the Early Warning and Response Design (EWARD) meeting organised in Abuja, Nigeria, to develop a framework for the West African Conflict Assessment that focused, amongst other things, on bridging the early warning and early response processes. This partnership should be encouraged and duplicated across the continent. More ways in which the African Union can benefit from this partnership is needed.

The need-driven support of international actors would no doubt lead to positive steps in building African capacity in early warning and early response. The establishment and implementation of CEWARN has been strongly supported by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (Wulf & Debiel, 2009). More partnerships with other sub-regional and even inter-continental EWERS will allow for the sharing of best practices and the cross-pollination of ideas.

The value of continental and sub-regional EWERS

comes from their ability to provide coordinated early warning and early response support to member states. More importantly, the success of these systems depends largely on strong political will and commitment by member states. The Rwandan genocide provides a clear example of where early warning communication was provided; however, response was not timely. The report by the "International Panel of Eminent Personalities to Investigate the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda and the Surrounding" stated that the comprehensive study done by Human Rights Watch lists 30 pages of early warning prior to the genocide beginning on 6 April 1994. Stanton (2009) argues that the genocide was ignored due to a "failure of political will" by the US, the UK, the UN Secretariat and the UN Security Council in refusing to prevent the genocide. He [Stanton] further adds that political will is stronger when "governments must perceive and understand the crisis and have realistic options to resolve it." The role of early warning information is very important in building this understanding and perceptions.

With reference to digital revolution in conjunction with prospects for early warning in the 21st Century, new developments in information and communication technologies indeed demonstrate the potential of technology to empower communities to raise the alarm about threats that they face. The visual evidence provided by satellite images and geo-visualisation techniques can serve to corroborate and strengthen local reports of conflict, destruction and displacement. Geospatial technologies and techniques, which include a range of modern technological tools such as satellite imagery, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) that allow for mapping and analysis, offer valuable avenues for identifying, measuring, monitoring and documenting, among other phenomena, large-scale displacement, whether displacement caused by conflict, natural disasters or development projects.

CONCLUSION

The promise of and need for a reliable CEWS in Africa is considerable. The main interest in early warning is to identify situations with sufficient advance timing that preventative measures can be adopted by the AU, the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and other key stakeholders which can reduce the likelihood or the severity of impending humanitarian disasters. In sum, the primary aim of the CEWS is preventative rather than simple forecasting. The time-span of the indicators of a pending crisis warranting early warning can be seen as long, medium and short-term. The precise length of these time spans will probably remain somewhat arbitrary, as each incident of conflict has its own particular characteristics. The time-span depends partially on the type of early warning signal that is evident. If it has to do with related causes of immediate problems, the time-span must be short-term. If it has to do with the development of more fundamental social trends, then, the perspective will be long-term, extending over years and even decades. The medium-term frame probably extends over months and includes readily discernible reasons for conflict.

The AU will not succeed in translating its obligations on early warning into practice if it does not cater for sufficient, capable and interdisciplinary staff. Consonant with this, as the AU makes advances in the operationalisation of the African Standby Force (ASF) and becomes even more deeply engaged in peace-keeping, peacemaking and peace-building, the requirement for an operations room that is staffed at all hours to refer urgent messages and information to key members of the Commission, becomes even more relevant.

Efforts too must be made to strengthen the capacity and competence of CEWS to communicate locally and internationally so as to create a democratic global communication system. An information system of the monolithic type developed by the superpowers or typically akin to that of the geopolitical West should not be encouraged insofar as the EWERS in Africa are concerned. This is so because there is a wealth of knowledge available within the local societies; hence, there is greater need to devise ways of tapping into this wealth of information, and of involving the local societies and integrating their work, so as to harness local competence in monitoring and evaluating Africa's own experiences.

In a nutshell, relegating all efforts at conflict management and/or resolution remains a huge uncalculated risk which the current leadership of the African continent simply should not afford to bet. Yet, engaging in conflict prevention without an effective early warning system is similar to entering into a cave without a torch—a move that 21st century AU ought to escape from. Only then can the African continent afford to be at peace with itself.

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