Operationalizing Early Warning for Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in West Africa: A Case Study of ECOWAS Early Warning System

Reuben LEWIS

Graduate Student, Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation, Hiroshima University

Hideaki SHINODA

Institute for Peace Science, Hiroshima University

SUMMARY

The Conflict situations in West Africa have been characterized by intra state conflicts and struggle for identity, recognition and legitimacy all of which are constant factors in promoting human security. In the midst of this strategic shift in security challenges within the sub region, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) operationalized an early warning system as a mechanism to support conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This process has been supported by member states, security sector structures and West Africa Network for Peace building (WANEP) that has the largest presence of civil society networks in the sub region.

This article is an attempt to present an assessment of the operationalization of the ECOWAS early warning system looking at the historical context of the process and putting problems into perspectives. It also covers conceptual analysis of early warning and builds on its connection to early response and the initiatives that have been put forward so far in engendering the early warning system. The analysis covers the operational workings of the system, ECOWAS partnership with WANEP, and an overall review of the strength, opportunities, weaknesses and challenges in the ECOWAS early warning structure and its output in addressing security challenges in West Africa.

Introduction

Since the dawn of independence, the African continent has struggled to uphold peace and stability in various countries. Problems of governance, political instability, economic underdevelopment and socio-cultural disintegration continue to gain prominence and serve as an influential factor to the breakdown and collapsed of many societies across the continent. Civil wars and conflicts continue to spread unabated and the quest for peace, human security and development continues to be a distant dream. The post independence wind of change, the struggle for Liberation and the desire for African unity were largely eroded by neo-colonialism, weak political regimes, military involvement in governance, over stay in power of one political party, etc. The problem of corruption, tribalism, nepotism, political intolerance, economic inequalities due to inequitable distribution of state resources formed the bases for oppression and repressions which eventually metamorphosed into revolutions, tribal wars and protracted civil conflicts in different societies across the continent. From North and South, East to West and Central parts of Africa protracted, deadly conflicts have had its share.

In the midst of strategic shifts on global security trends and challenges for peace and international security, from national or state-centric security to the struggle for human security and empowerment, the continent continues to falter. In the 1990s, Africa was engulfed by all types of conflict ranging from tribal wars to revolutionary conflict, wars of secession to that of resource conflict and over territories and even the desire for change. The cost and consequences to the continent ranged from the loss of billions of dollars of economic opportunities to that of poverty and under-development. Many societies have been fractured at all levels of governance and some have even collapsed with very little possibilities of survival. Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) continue to face the brunt of human suffering. Issues of human trafficking, the proliferations of small arms and light weapons, drug trafficking, disarmament and the rebuilding of the political, economic and socio-cultural systems of governance pose a serious challenge to post conflict reconstruction, peacebuilding and peace consolidation efforts in many societies.

At the turn of the century, African leaders and their followers emerged with a

new agenda that called for African solutions to African problems. The establishment of the Africa Union in 2001 formed the institutional base for the development of a new African century. Through the African Union's constitutive Act and its protocol on Peace and Security Council (PSC), member states mandated the AU and its PSC to fulfill a substantially enlarged and much more robust role in the prevention, management and resolution of African conflicts.[1] One of the instruments through which the African Union and sub-regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) can operationalize peace and security mandate is the institutional capacity for the establishment of an early warning system.

The sub-regional organization in West Africa, ECOWAS, adopted a protocol on the 10th of December 1999 relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. The Protocol specifies the criteria and objectives of ECOWAS, the actions in conflict management in West Africa including: the linkage of economic and social development to security; the promotion of democratic forms of government; and the protection of human security. The protocol also underlined the necessity to strengthen the cooperation between member states in the fields of preventive diplomacy, early warning, and prevention of cross border crimes, peacekeeping and equitable management of natural resources.[2] Within this same period, ECOWAS commissioned West African Network for Peace Building (WANEP), a well established West African civil society peace building organization, to conduct an assessment of ECOWAS conflict prevention mechanism including its capacity and training needs with a view to develop and establish an early warning system as a sustainable mechanism to deal with emerging issues that hinders both state and human security in different countries across West Africa and especially those coming out of conflict.

More than five years have rolled out since the institutionalization of the Early Warning Mechanism and the partnership with these two great institutions from both sides of the aisle. Many things have happened in terms of implementation, coordination,

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[1] Jakkie Cillier, "Towards a Continental Early Warning System for Africa," ISS Paper 102, April 2005, p. 5.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 10.

legal framework, and institutional capacity that continue to drive the process. Many hands have been involved in the implementation of the Early Warning project in West Africa. Governments, civil society, security sector structures and even international organizations have played there part. But to what extent the Mechanism has helped to prevent conflict and sustain peace in West Africa has yet to be measured.

1. Historical Context of the Early Warning Project in West Africa

Early warning systems are rooted in new human security thinking about the responsibility of leaders to protect ordinary people, and have traditionally been located within technical agencies that forecast food shortages and within the non-governmental sector where they formed wide application among humanitarian relief agencies.[3] By definition, early warning involves a process of communicating judgments about threats early enough for decision-makers to take action to deter whatever outcome is threatened; or failing that, to manage events in such a way that the worst consequences are mitigated.[4] It uses open source material and generally aim to serve human security not national or state interests and it is this characteristic that makes early warning systems appealing to intergovernmental organizations such as ECOWAS.

When the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975, as a regional group of fifteen countries, its main focus was to promote economic integration in all fields, particularly industry, transport, telecommunication, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, monetary and financial matters, as well as social and cultural issues. In order to achieve its strategic objectives, some sub-institutional structures were established comprising of the ECOWAS commission, the Community Parliament, the Community Court of Justice and the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development. Also, other supporting organs and agencies were institutionalized.[5]

However, throughout the 1990s, the West Africa sub-region was ravaged by

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[3] *Ibid.,* p. 1.
[4] Mary O. McCarthy, "Potential Humanitarian Crises: The Warning Process and Role of intelligence" in Schmeidl and H. Adelman (eds.), *Synergy in Early Warning* (Conference proceeding, March 15-18,York: Centre for International and Security Studies, Forum on Early Warning and Early Response,1997), pp. 15-16.
[5] See "ECOWAS Early Warning Mechanism: Training Manual for Peace and Conflict Analysis and Data Management."

violent upheavals and civil conflicts which resulted in the wholesale loss of human lives, destruction of property, and, suffering and dislocation of innocent civilian population. In some areas, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote I'dvoire, the situation was compounded by famine and diseases leading thousands of civilians into taking refuge in neighboring countries or becoming displaced persons within their own countries. These conflicts destabilized communities and governments, such as those in Sierra Leone, Liberia; Cote I'dvoire, Mali, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria and elsewhere. Of the 16 countries that make up the West Africa sub-region, four have had large scale civil conflict and at least seven have experienced significant low-scale conflict within the last 25 years and these conflicts evolved as a consequence of multiple interrelated factors.[6] However, the ECOWAS sub-region, unlike the other regions in Africa has been able to set in motion ad-hoc conflict resolution procedures which have made it possible to mitigate its crises.

In the 1993 Revised Treaty of ECOWAS, regional leaders agreed that there was the need for member states to work to safeguard and consolidate relations conducive for peace, stability and security within the region. "Article 4 of the revised treaty committed member states to social justice, respect for and protection of human rights, democratic governance and consolidation, popular participation and political and economic accountability and governance"[7]. In this vein, a peace intervention mechanism was put in motion during the Liberia Civil conflict. This ushered in a new epoch wherein sub-regional inter-governmental structures assumed the "responsibility to protect" people enmeshed in complex political and humanitarian emergencies.[8]

As the desire to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts take centre stage within many regional groupings across the African continent and the world over, early warning mechanism has been established as a useful tool in the prevention of conflict and the maintenance of peace and human security. The establishment of a unit for conflict early warning at continental level within the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was to make regional responses to emerging conflict more proactive. In June 1992, at its 28th meeting in Dakar, Senegal, the Assembly of the O.A.U. decided to establish the

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[6] See F. M'Cormack, "Conflict dynamics in West Africa", Helpdesk Research Report, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, 2011, available at <www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/HDQ752.pdf>.

[7] David J. Francis, *Uniting Africa: Building Regional Peace and Security Systems* (London: Ashgate, 2006), p. 150.

[8] See "WANEP Training Manual-Operationalising the ECOWAS Early Warning System, WANEP, 2009," p. 5.

Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. This Mechanism was charged with the anticipation and prevention of situation of armed conflict, undertaking peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts during conflicts and in post-conflict situation, as well as served as an institutional blueprint to be borrowed by ECOWAS a few years later in meeting the new security challenges emerging at the turn of the century.[9]

Realizing the need to develop a new legal framework, the absence of which has caused disagreements among West Africa governments, and as the growing desire for prioritizing conflict prevention in the same way as economic development and integration, the quest for change evolved in the late 1990s in the political spectrum of ECOWAS for a strategic security shift in emphasis from conflict resolution to conflict prevention.

On 10 December 1999, ECOWAS adopted the protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. This protocol represents the most comprehensive normative framework for confronting the threats to peace and security in the region on a more permanent basis by boosting the conflict prevention capabilities of ECOWAS to pre-empt potential outbreak of violence, resolve conflicts when they occur and to engage more effectively in post-conflict reconstruction in places where peace has been restored.[10] The Protocol specifies the criteria and objectives of ECOWAS actions in conflict management in West Africa and established the legal framework for the development of an early warning system. The office of the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security coordinates the Commission's efforts towards achieving the peace and security goal of ECOWAS through the implementation of the mechanism, and other relevant protocols on peace and security. Articles 23 in Chapter four of the 1999 protocol empowers the creation of a regional observation and monitoring centre for the collection, analysis and reporting of information in a way that prevents/mitigates conflict.[11]

In addition, the early warning mechanism focuses on the promotion of free movement of persons, the linkage of economic and social development to security, the

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[9] *Ibid.*, p.5
[10] ECOWAS Risk Assessment, 2012-2015: Technical Study of ECOWAS member States by ECOWAS Early Warning Directorate, April 2012, p. 30.
[11] ECOWAS Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management, Resolution, Peace and Security, ECOWAS Secretariat Abuja, Nigeria, 1999.

promotion of democratic forms of government and the protection of human rights. All of these structures have come to form a fundamental structure for understanding and cooperation between ECOWAS and its civil society partners such as West Africa Network for Peacebuilding.

As a background overview, West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) is a non-profit organization working in collaborative peacebuilding. In 1998, WANEP was formally launched as a network organization aimed at harnessing civil society and community-based peacebuilding efforts and initiatives in West Africa. This noble idea was borne out of the desire to respond to the civil wars that plagued West Africa in the late 1990s.[12]

The vision of WANEP is to see "a West Africa region characterized by just and peaceful communities where the dignity of the human persons is paramount and where the people can meet their basic human needs and decide their own direction". In a similar way its mission is to facilitate the development of mechanisms for cooperation among civil society-based peacebuilding practitioners and organizations in West Africa by promoting cooperative responses to violent conflicts, providing the structure through which these practitioners and institutions will regularly exchange experience and information on issues of social, religious and political reconciliation; and promoting West Africa's socio-cultural values as resources for peacebuilding. WANEP has national networks in twelve of the fifteen countries in West Africa and will expand to Cape Verde, Mali and Niger. Its regional secretariat is located in Accra, Ghana. Currently, WANEP network membership is over 450 civil society organizations (CSOs) spreading across its 12 national networks throughout West Africa.[13]

With such solid foundation in civil society peacebuilding in West Africa, ECOWAS entered into a cooperative agreement with WANEP by signing a Memorandum of Understanding to support each other in the promotion of conflict prevention and good governance in West Africa and in particular to ensure the operational effectiveness of the early warning mechanism.

The ECOWAS Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), started with the institutionalization of an Observatory and Monitoring Centre (OMC) later renamed Early Warning Department. This department is responsible to constructively collect,

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[12] WANEP Annual Report 2007, p. 3.
[13] WANEP Annual Report 2007, p. 3.

manage and analyze all information having a bearing on regional peace and security collected by Zonal Bureaus within the four regional zones so as to give warning of impending crisis.

In 2001, West Africa Regional Programme of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID-WARP) entered into a cooperative relationship with ECOWAS in order to strengthen the capacity of ECOWAS in Conflict Prevention and Good Governance. In October 2002 USAID-WARP awarded a partnership grant to West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) to work with ECOWAS to strengthen the capacity of both ECOWAS and CSOs in conflict prevention and peacebuilding in West Africa. The grant was to achieve three strategic objectives:[14]

1. Increase the effectiveness of ECOWAS conflict prevention capacity
2. Strengthen the coalition of civil society organization to promote peace building, conflict prevention and good governance
3. Build a functional relationship between ECOWAS and CSOs in West Africa

Since the start of the partnership with ECOWAS, in operationalising the Early Warning Mechanism, WANEP has galvanize support from its various national networks in operationalizing the early warning mechanism. It has established early warning desk offices with personnel serving as field monitors reporting on issues of early warning at country level. This structure is supported by Zonal Bureau heads within the geo-political zones in the region coordinating early warning assessment reports for the WANEP and ECOWAS Commission. At the top of the operational ladder is the Peace Monitoring Centre (PMC) giving support and coordination in the implementation of the Early Warning System.

More than a decade has rolled out since the institutionalization of the Early Warning Mechanism and the partnership with these two institutions from both sides of the aisle. Many things have happened in terms of implementation, coordination, legal framework, and institutional capacity that continue to drive the process. Many hands have been involved in the implementation of the Early Warning System as governments, civil society, security sector structures and even international organizations continue to

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[14] See "Operationalising the ECOWAS Early Warning System, Training Manual."

be visible in the process.

2. Putting Problems into Perspective

The establishment and gradual operationalization of an early warning mechanism by ECOWAS vividly show its commitment to conflict prevention, peace and human security in the sub-region. It has been described as the most comprehensive and locally integrated system for conflict prevention and management on the African continent which in turn reflects a commitment to engage with the extensive regional conflict systems in the region.[15]

However, the establishment of the early warning system within the sub-region has been and continue to be affected by various institutional, administrative, restructuring and coordination issues that are emerging as major gaps or lapses in the process of achieving sustainable peace, human security and the prevention of potential conflicts.[16]

The Early Warning System lacks a direct linkage structure within its operational, legal or administrative framework that enhances or support early response structures to the early warning reports or analysis given by partners. This frustrates the mobilization for prevention and transformation through its lack of collaborative partnership with its relevant civil society actors in effectively and collectively developing response strategies and network systems to address potential early warning situation. These structures of obstacles to early action and response vary and this assessment will show a clear picture of its effect on collaboration and peacebuilding within the ECOWAS/WANEP partnership for peacebuilding in West Africa.[17]

Furthermore, the issue of resource mobilization, technical assistance, and operationalization of the ECOWAS Early Warning System is being overshadowed by many emerging issues that are affecting the effectiveness of its institutional operations, coordination and partnership. The process is being hampered by a lack of adequate equipment and even human resources to enhance and facilitate the process of data

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[15] Cillier, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[16] Emmanual Bombande, "Cooperation Between Civil Society and ECOWAS in Country Peace Opportunities and Challenges," WANEP Presentation, Accra, Ghana, August 28, 2008.

[17] Presentation of WANEP at the ECOWAS Coordination Meeting of Focal Point, Cotonou, Benin, February, 2009.

collection, processing and dissemination, although substantial donor assistance is being provided to the secretariat. Also, there is the problem of re-arranging conflict analysis and monitoring framework on conflict situations that emerged from political or humanitarian emergencies. Similarly, maintaining viable network and insisting on shift from "Reaction to Prevention" needs a fair assessment.[18]

With reference to the above, the issues of gender dimension in the programme and policies of the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems are a cause for concern. Incorporating gender sensitive issues into the collection and analysis process of early warning is important and makes existing models more comprehensive and allows for "early" warning by anticipating macro-level conflicts through micro level events.[19] The ECOWAS system lacks an effective structure for engendering early warning in the collection of data, the development and analysis of indicators and the monitoring and evaluation of local traditional scenarios in the final assessment of the process.[20] This paper, therefore, seeks to present the need for engendering early warning within the ECOWARN system, the technical and affirmative actions that should be taken in making it a reality and the collaborative efforts that should be taken between ECOWAS and WANEP towards achieving this goal.

In addition, the ECOWAS early warning mechanism is constrained in the area of building capacity that will enhance or increase the process of networking at both local and international level, within and between CSOs, and government and within and between sub partners at all levels. The issue of networking is fundamental in the operationalization of ECOWARN as it helps to increase commitments to the process and helps the process of learning and sharing of knowledge. Close to this conception of networking is the need to raise the awareness of other regional partners working on peacebuilding so that they will know and understand the importance of ECOWARN and their potential role in achieving the objectives of the Mechanism.[21]

Parallel to the above, is the issue and possibility for advocacy and strategic partnership within the ECOWARN mechanism for affirmative action. The potential for

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[18] WANEP Presentation, "Cooperation Between Civil Society and ECOWAS in -Country Peace Opportunities and Challenges."

[19] See "Training Manual on Developing Capacity For Conflict Analysis and Early Response," WANEP-Sierra Leone, 2011 p. 81.

[20] Nantene Coulibaly, "Gender Mainstreaming in Early Warning," WANEP Presentation. ECOWAS Coordination meeting, Accra Ghana, August 2008.

[21] WANEP Presentation at the ECOWARN Review Workshop, June 2009, Accra, Ghana.

advocacy can play a fundamental role in bridging the gap between various actors for increasing collaboration and partnership.[22]

The above analysis paints a clear picture of the issues and problems surrounding the West Africa Early Warning Mechanism.

3. Conceptual Analysis of Early Warning for Conflict Prevention

Early Warning is the systematic collection and analysis of information coming from areas of crises for the purposes of anticipating the escalation of violent conflict, development of strategic responses to these crises and the presentation of options to critical actors for the purposes of decision making.[23] Early warning systems link information sources, which often monitor specific indicators, with analysis that attaches meaning to the indicators. Accordingly, they help formulate response options, coherent political strategies and best and worst case scenarios to prevent or limit the destructive effects of violent conflicts.[24]

The Berghof Handbook on early warning stated that early warning from a conceptual approach is: "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"[25]. Therefore, the point being made here is that early warning, can be sub divided into three categories: "(1) estimating the magnitude and timing of relative risks of emerging threats, (2) analyzing the nature of these threats and describing, plausible scenarios, and (3) communicating warning analyses to decision makers."[26]

Early warning systems may be conceived as avoiding or minimizing violence, deprivation or humanitarian crises that threaten the sustainability of human development. Reliable early warning buy time not only to prepare for short-term

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[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER).

[24] Eugenia Piza Lopez and Susanne Schmeidl, "Gender and Conflict Early Warning: A Preliminary Framework," Geneva Swiss Peace Foundation with International Alert, July 2002.

[25] A. Austin, "Early Warning and the Field: A Cargo Cult Science?" Berghof Handbook, Berlin, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004, p. 3.

[26] Crisis State Research Centre, "Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanisms: Tools for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Regional Organizations? A comparative Study of the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, ASEAN/ARF and PIF," May 2009.

containment and relief strategies, but also to design, build support for and implement longer term proactive strategies and development programmmes that can reduce the likelihood of future disasters.[27] Through multi-method approaches often involving a number of actors, early warning systems have played an important role in anticipating- as opposed to predicting crises that could lead to conflict. In seeking to gather current, first-hand information, early warning has increasingly focused on the grassroots level, directly involving and cooperating with local partners.[28]

The UNDP Discussion paper on Indicators, Early Warning and Conflict Prevention in the Pacific Island maintained that: "Effective early warning requires reliable information on a range of possible common events - border crises, disintegrating regimes, human rights abuses, refuge flow and assessing where these are most likely to emerge. That, they attempt to identify threats to peace and security in social, political, economic, cultural, international, national and local conditions and events."[29]

Early warning models vary in objectives, structures, data collection methodology and the mandates of monitoring authorities. Specific methodology and choices depend upon the availability and reliability of information.[30]

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) High Commission for National Minorities describes early warning as: "any information from any source about escalatory development, be they slow and gradual or quick and sudden, far enough in advance in order for a national government or an international or regional organization to react timely and effectively, if possible, still leaving them time to employ preventive diplomacy and other non-coercive and non-military preventive measures."[31]

Initially devised for predicting natural disasters and stock market crashes, early warning systems were used in the 1980's to predict famine and potential refugee flows to alert relief agencies of impending humanitarian crises to allow for contingency planning and ensure the timely provision of adequate food, shelter and medication.

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[27] "Training Manual on Developing Capacity For Conflict Analysis and Early Response."
[28] Craig Collins, "Indicators, Early Warning and Conflict Prevention in the Pacific Islands," Discussion Paper, UNDP, 2006.
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] OSCE Consultative Meeting of Practitioners on Women's Right and Early Warning – Development of Indicators, December, 2005, Vienna.

Today, they provide policy makers with data regarding human rights violation, the movement of small arms, inter-group tensions, complex humanitarian emergencies and many other processes.[32]

In addition, effective early warning must overcome "two distinct but interconnected problems (1) the informational problem of obtaining the necessary quantity and quality of intelligence in a reliable form and timely manner and (2) the analytic problem of overcoming various barriers that can impede or distort the accuracy of analysis."[33]

4. The Nexus between Early Warning for Early Response

In developing pro-active structures for conflict prevention and security in any society, early warning and early response mechanisms is an essential framework that can be used. The earlier a dispute or disagreement with the potential to lead to armed conflict can be identified and addressed successfully, the less likely it is that the situation will deteriorate into violence. The Training manual on Development Capacity for Conflict Analysis and Early Response states that "early response is the process of using information gathered from early warning systems to design actions aimed at preventing violent conflict. The action could be the development of a policy or Programme as well as strategies to prevent conflict at different levels using specific entry points."[34]

Therefore, early response accordingly means:

"any initiative that occurs in the latent stages of a perceived potential armed conflict with the aim at reduction, resolution or transformation. The term mechanism will refer to the individual units of an early warning system such as data collection, data formatting, data analysis with the understanding that there is a relationship and process between these unities for the system to operate"[35]

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[32] Craig Collins, "Indicators, Early Warning and Conflict Prevention in the Pacific Islands," Discussion Paper, UNDP, February, 2006.
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] "Training Manual on Developing Capacity For Conflict Analysis and Early Response."
[35] A. Austin, "Early Warning and the Field: A Cargo Cult Science?" Berghof Handbook, Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004, p. 23.

In the U.N. Secretary General's Reports on Prevention of Armed Conflict (2001), a clear connection was presented on the issue of early warning and early response. It states that, "the need for reliable early warning information and a deep and careful understanding of local circumstances and traditions is therefore of great importance, and the fundamental inequities need to be identified and addressed in development planning and Programme".[36]

In Africa and with specific reference to the ECOWAS sub-region, political leaders hardly respond constructively to warning signs of conflict. Two problems are implicated in this kind of situation. A political leader or a regional body like ECOWAS could refuse to respond constructively to the warning signs for political reasons. The lack of immediate response could also result from the fact that some of these leaders prefer reactive strategies to preventive ones.[37] In some situation, political leaders or sub-regional body may also not respond simply because it lacks the resources to avert, much less overcome, the impending problem.

However, in responding to warning signs simply means taking steps that could help to prevent an upward spiral of the problem. This is what the former Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutrous Boutrous Ghali, referred to in 1992 as "preventive diplomacy."[38]

From a theoretical perspective, early response is the development of strategic response to escalation of violent conflict and the presentation of option to critical actors (nation, regional and international) for the purposes of decision-making and preventive action. In achieving such frameworks, early warning must be aligned with early response.[39]

There are three basic tools of response to early warning: Military, economic, and political instruments. The military instrument refers to the use of limited force to prevent the escalation of the emergent problem. The use of economic instrument involve using economic incentives to reduce the tension in the society; and, the third which is political action could include fact finding, enforcement of human rights, confidence

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[36] U.N. Secretary General's Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict.
[37] "WANEP Training Manual-Operationalising the ECOWAS Early Warning System," p.28.
[38] Boutros Boutrous-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1992), p. 11.
[39] Takwa Zebulon Suifon, "Early Warning, Response: Preventing Violent Conflict" in Paul van Tongeren, Malin Brenk, Marte Hellema, and Juliette Verhoeven (eds.), *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub., 2005).

building, conciliation, mediation, establishing demilitarized zones, etc.[40]

The work of early response can be done by and targeted at anybody and is not strictly reserved for one person or institution. The work can be done by governments, opposition groups, ethnic and religious communities, or military organizations. The agents of preventive actions can be governments, international organizations, or national and international NGOs. The work is better done when all these organizations collaborate.[41]

In theory, the early warning system should trigger action through relevant departments of the ECOWAS Commission, including the development and implementation of policies relating to issues such as cross border crime, drug trafficking and small arms and light weapons proliferation.[42]

However, though the ECOWAS Early Warning System has developed a strong institutional framework and operational capacity in terms of early warning, there is still major emerging concern which is the development of policies, capacities and structures for early response or response mechanism. The system lacks a coherent response structure in which all stakeholders at various levels will feel that they are involved in the process. Immediate response feedback structured on the reports of field monitors is weak and sometimes unavailable. In addition ECOWAS needs to have a robust peace support fund which members of the international community need to support as a way of making meaningful contributions to the task of building collective security as well as collaborating with these international agencies in dealing with issues of state collapse and cross border criminality, international terrorism and the like.[43]

With reference to the above, it has been strongly argued by the ECOWAS Commission that there are difficulties in developing a response framework because the commission is a diplomatic organization that has its own protocols and standard operation procedures that serve as the guiding principle in their collaboration and networking with key actors in the ECOWARN system.

Therefore, no effective response strategy is so far present to give out feedback

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[40] "Training Manual-Operationalising the ECOWAS Early Warning System," p. 28.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[42] F. Olunisakin, 2011, "ECOWAS from Economic Integration to Peace Building" in T. Jaye and S. Amadi (eds.), *ECOWAS & the Dynamic of Conflict and Peace Building*, CDD West Africa, Consortium for Development Partnership (CDP), CODESRIA, Dakar, pp. 11-26.

[43] "Training Manual: Operationalising the ECOWAS Early Warning System," p. 28.

to reports and to engage in any constructive responses to early warning. This situation is proving to be a major weakness of the ECOWARN system as a pro-active structure for conflict prevention in the sub-region.

In addition, resources to bridge the gap between early warning and early responses are lacking as international policy makers and donors most times prefer to deal with crises instead of attending to pro-active initiative for conflict prevention.

Furthermore, West African Leaders have shown little or no political will and commitment to finance prevention and address issues of potential conflict in the sub region. Though some influential West African states are willing to send troops on peacekeeping operations, in the sub-region, they have not shown interest in undertaking strong preventive measures for conflict prevention. This is seen in the refusal by some leaders to ratify regional conventions and protocols such as the one on Democracy and Good Governance, Small Arms and Light Weapons, and Human Rights, and to enact them into their national legislatures.[44] These above conventions and related protocols are the source from which preventive actions can be undertaken in the sub-region. Therefore, the foundation for solid prevention of conflict lies on the commitment of ECOWAS Leaders to develop practical frameworks that will enhance collective responsibility in addressing issues of common concern such as arms proliferation, drug trafficking, good governance, etc., which in turn will help to bring stability and prosperity in West Africa.[45] And, though the ECOWARN System is a good preventive initiative the ECOWAS Commission has a big responsibility to develop new response framework in which all stakeholders in the ECOWARN System will feel involved.

5. Building an Engendered Framework in the Early Warning System

Early warning and preventive activities can be made more effective by utilizing the untapped potential of women. A gender perspective has been absent from conflict analysis, conflict early warning and preventive response system. The transition from gender blind indicators to gender sensitive analysis in transformative societies is critical

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[44] Courtesy of Discussion Forum, during the ECOWARN Review Workshop, March 2010, Dakar, Senegal.
[45] *Ibid*.

to early warning and response, which is geared towards enhancing positive peace.[46]

Piza-Lopez and Schmeidl have suggested that "Incorporating gender-sensitive indicators will fine-tune existing information collection and analysis mechanisms, allowing for previously overlooked signs of instability at a grassroots level that can anticipate conflict before it spreads to formal politics".[47]

Therefore, "incorporating gender analysis and perspectives into formulating response options ensures that discriminatory policies are not perpetuated in post-conflict situations, nor that new found freedoms reversed once fighting has subsided."[48]

Again, "gender analysis elicits different questions about the causes and effects of conflict on different sectors within society and their particular relationships and roles with each other."[49]

Since the 1980s, ECOWAS has developed series of measures to promote gender equality. In 1987, it recognized the Association of West Africa Women which enjoyed the status of ECOWAS specialized agency. Similarly, the revised treaty of 1993, especially in article 61 and 63, the Heads of States demonstrated their political will to formulate coordinate and implement appropriate policies and mechanisms in this regard in order to de-marginalize women and promote women's organizations.

In 2001, the West Africa Centre for Regional Development of CEA (Niamey) initiated a partnership with ECOWAS to develop a gender policy and involve women in the Community's programme. In this same vein, the 2002 partnership between ECOWAS-UNIFEM and the Commonwealth Secretariat resulted in a gender policy oriented document adopted by the meeting of ministers responsible for Women's Affairs. Also, in 2003, the 26th session of Head of States and Government in (Dakar) authorized the establishment of the ECOWAS centre for Gender Development.

All these established frameworks are capable of ensuring gender equality and non discrimination against women in ECOWAS policies, programmes and structures and set up a specific institutional framework as well as sensitize women on the importance of their inclusion in decision making bodies.

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[46] "Training Manual on Developing Capacity for Conflict Analysis and Early Response."
[47] Eugenia Piza Lopez and Susanne Schmeidl, "Gender and Conflict Early Warning: A Preliminary Framework," Geneva Swiss Peace Foundation with International Alert, July 2002.
[48] Felicity Hill, *The Elusive Role of Women in Early Warning and Conflict Prevention.*
[49] Eugenia Piza Lopez and Susanne Schmeidl, "Gender and Conflict Early Warning: A Preliminary Framework," Geneva Swiss Peace Foundation with International Alert, July 2002.

At the 2008 ECOWARN Review workshop, the desire for the development of a stronger and more vibrant institutionalization of gender mainstreaming within the ECOWARN system featured prominently. During her session on "Gender mainstreaming in ECOWARN: Modules and indicators", Nantene Coulibaly who is the ECOWARN Gender centre consultant presented a broader framework for action. She maintained that, "engendering early warning goes beyond the protection of vulnerable groups; that the aim of such an exercise is to understand how to apply gender to early warning, and how to develop gender sensitive indicators." [50] This also means understanding how to take gender into account in analyzing field data.

Furthermore, she postulated that the effectiveness of prevention activities under the Early Warning System could be further reinforced if decision makers and partners focus a little more on women's potential as individuals and as women's networks working in the area of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. That gender dimension in assessing indicators during data collection and analysis are critical aspect of the ECOWAS early warning systems and will make the existing model more complete. And, that taking account of every insignificant changes and interaction between men and women help to fine tune policies on conflict prevention and resolution and address men and women's specific vulnerabilities in order to ensure that discriminatory policies do not persist in post-conflict situations. [51]

Currently, gender guidelines have been produced to refine ECOWARN indicators and the overall policies relating to ECOWAS conflict prevention, peacebuilding and security practices in accordance with United Nations Resolution 1325 and other global conventions and regional protocols such as Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, the Beijing declaration and Plan of Action and the ECOWAS Revised Treaty of 1993 in relation to women's issues." [52]

However, even though there have been all these strong administrative commitment to develop and implement new gender frameworks and policies in operationalizing the ECOWARN System, its impact is yet to be seen in the structures

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[50] Nantene Coulibaly's Presentation on Gender Mainstreaming in ECOWARN: Modules and Indicators at 2008 ECOWAS Review Workshop, Accra, Ghana.
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] Presentation on Gender Mainstreaming: Modules and Indicators, August 2009, Dakar, Senegal.

and assessment of the various reports on early warning such as Situation Reports and Quarterly Peace and Security Assessment reports. This also means that the structured Format of the Situation Report does not have a well engendered framework. The same could be seen in the 94 indicators seen in the online data format, as few makes reference to women's concern. Therefore, if the ECOWAS Early Warning Department continues to use this format, little will be done to address cross cutting women's issues and their welfare across the sub region.[53]

Though the ECOWARN system is working on new initiatives for engendering early warning, there are various gaps within the system which weakens individual assessments of gender sensitive indicators. These gaps could be seen in the collection of data, monitoring and reporting, analysis and in the development of response mechanisms in order to make the process gender balance. Indicators, also lack a comprehensive approach that takes into account specific issues on the needs and aspirations of women and men.[54]

Therefore, engendering early warning does not only benefit women, but ensures that the concerns of men and women are considered. It also provides an overall improvement to existing approaches of information collection, analysis and formulation of response options.

6. From Conceptual Framework to Practical Reality: The West Africa Perspective

With respect to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, appropriate proposals were advanced regarding the establishment of an Observation and Monitoring System (OMC). By the end of 2002, the OMC was established within the executive secretariat of ECOWAS to give warning of impending crisis. Reporting to the OMC are four observation and monitoring Zonal bureaus within the sub-region that feeds into the system information from their local area on a daily basis through contact with government authorities, local citizens, public media and other new agencies. Each zone has an identification number and a zonal

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[53] Courtesy of Group Discussion on Gender Mainstreaming of the ECOWARN System, during the ECOWARN Coordination meeting March 2010, Dakar, Senegal.
[54] "Reflections on Gender Main streaming of the ECOWARN System," by Edwidge Mensah, Programme Officer, PMC, March 2010, Dakar, Sengal.

centre.

- Zone 1 includes Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal with the zonal capital Banjul.
- Zones 2 comprises Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Niger and a zonal capital in Ouagadougou.
- Monrovia is the zonal capital of zone 3 which is made up of Ghana, Liberal and Sierra Leone; while
- Cotonou is the zonal capital for Benin, Nigeria and Togo.

The centres record and analyze all data and take action on any signs of a breakdown in relations between member states or of alarming socio political development within member states.

With reference to the above, the ECOWAS Early Warning System operates through various actors and at different levels, in monitoring, recording, processing and management of data. These actors include civil society field monitors (i.e. 15 for WANEP), 2 government field monitors from each ECOWAS member states, 4 ECOWAS zonal bureau, and 4 WANEP zonal coordinators "who are responsible for quality control of data and analysis."[55] And at the top of the operational ladder is the ECOWAS observation and monitoring centre or Early Warning Department and WANEP peace monitoring centre. Also the system comprises a data base built on conflict indicators and accessible via the internet and supported by a network of state and civil society reporters at the national level tasked with data collection and dissemination through incident and situation reporting. The situation room in the ECOWAS commission is tasked with the management and analysis of information and the provision of various reports to support early warning and response activities[56].

In addition, the **ECOWARN Internet Based System** has been established with the system calibrated into 94 situation report indicators with respect to standardized economic, political, social and security ratings for the sub region. This was done with

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[55] Birikit Terefe Tiruneh, "Establishing an Early Warning System in the African Peace and Security Architecture: Challenges and Prospects," KAIPTC Occasional Paper No. 29, September, 2009, p, 17.
[56] Joint Presentation on the ECOWARN system by Emmanuel Bombande and Dr Abdou Lat Gueye, during the ECOWARN Review workshop Accra, Ghana, August 2008.

the objective of fine tuning regional early warning trend evaluation and analysis[57]. Furthermore, ECOWARN has been successfully translated to French and an official launch of the **French Version** done in Conakry Guinea. This has given the ECOWARN System a more regional outlook and user friendliness.[58]

Similarly, the ECOWARN system has developed a **Standard Operating Procedures** (SOPs) that provide guidelines by which the system operates in the fulfillment of the various functions and tasks.[59]

The manual provides to focal points, bureaus and the situation room guidelines within which they must function and ensures consistency in attainment of goals and objectives, specifically in communications, processing of documents and flow of information.

Furthermore, the year 2008 heralded the use, defining and structuring of the various ECOWARN reports such as:[60]

- Situation reports (weekly)
- Overall sub-regional security situation reports
- Early warning reports
- Policy brief
- Thematic reports (small arms, refuges etc)

These reports are the key reports that are expected to come from Focal Points at various periods in the year. The Situation reports and Incident Reports can be found online by logging into the ECOWARN website. The situation report is structured with 94 indicators divided into three categories which includes immediate catalyst, proximate causes and systemic causes of conflict and covers issues ranging from governance, the economy, the environment, media, armed criminality, Cultural practices, social activities, women's issues, politics and other issues related to peace and security of a state. This report is expected to be submitted every Friday by both government and Civil Society (WANEP) Focal Points. Whilst Incident report, is submitted as and when an incident worthy of reporting occurred. The focus of this report covers a whole range of issues on possible incident that may occur at any time within a state. The various focal points also

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[57] Courtesy of The ECOWAS Manual on The Operationalization of the Early Warning System, p. 1.
[58] Courtesy of The ECOWAS Manual on The Operationalization of the Early Warning System, p. 1.
[59] *Ibid*., p. 1.
[60] *Ibid*., p. 2.

have the responsibility to send these reports.

However, for the other reports the structure is different. Policy Briefs, Overall risk assessment and Thematic Reports are through the use of early warning information supported by further research which is followed by a qualitative narrative and submitted to WANEP or attached into the ECOWARN system.

Some of these thematic reports are used by WANEP to develop strategic framework to respond to specific issues which are considered to be serious threats to Peace and Security within a particular state.

Development of a geographic information system

A **Geographic Information system (GIS)** has been developed as a way of enhancing ECOWAS early warning capabilities to view situation data with associated mapping information. The analyst will use links from this display both graphical and textual, as well as data base queries and generated reports to analyze data base information such as resource status and availability.

The GIS project was completed in October 2008 and the Laboratory is now in place in the Commission with capabilities to respond to other departmental needs in mapping and geo-information production. A spatial data base with supported maps at 1:50,000 through 1:200,000 for about 10 ECOWAS countries are now readily available in digital format.[61]

Development of the Peace Exchange

The ECOWAS Early Warning System comprises the ECOWARN reporters and the 'peace exchange.' The peace exchange system became operational in January 2009 and is now fully deployed with capacity for incident and situation reporting and a high-tech engine for graphical information analysis. The Peace Exchange serves as an internet data base used for the exchange of commentaries, narratives and instructed observations between ECOWAS/AU (with respect to the implementation of the Continental Early Warning System), the field reporters, civil society organizations, UN agencies in West Africa and early warning experts/observers in order to strengthen collaborative engagement and wider transnational information platform in addressing issues of conflict, peace, human security and development in the West Africa sub-region.[62]

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[61] Courtesy of The ECOWAS Manual on The Operationalization of the Early Warning System, p. 2.
[62] *Ibid*.

Conflict systems and risk evaluation studies

Central to the ECOWAS early warning and response system (ECOWARN), is the capacity of the analysts to understand the causes of conflicts and conflicts dynamics in the sub-region. These processes are fundamental for sound early warning products. It is practically impossible, therefore, to understand the root causes of conflicts in a country without a well researched country risk assessment. As conflicts never occur in isolation, developing a well studied conflict systems of the West African sub-region will give the analysts a broader and thorough understanding of conflicts.

A well researched country risk assessment and conflict systems is a fundamental process of the ECOWAS Early Warning System and offer the pre-requisite for sustainable understanding of root causes of conflicts and its dynamics. This will support structures to address issues of conflict such as preventive diplomatic strategies, humanitarian interventions and peace support operations. This, it is believed, will bridge the gap between early warning and early response.[63] The System has been developed with a strong risk assessment frame work that will serve as a tool to forecast emerging conflict through the use of various warning models to determine micro and macro structural trends in the occurrence of conflicts and instabilities within the sub-region. This includes an **Instability Likelihood Estimates**, with **Forecast Analysis, Trajectory of Instability** over time as well as **Projected Changes** over time on the peace and security situation of all ECOWAS member states.[64] Such solid evaluation framework will help to enhance the ability of the ECOWAS Commission as well as WANEP and other related partners to develop pro-active initiatives that will respond to issues of early warning in the various countries of the sub region.

7. ECOWAS/WANEP Partnership

In 2003, as a consequence of its review of the internal conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d' Ivoire, the ECOWAS declaration on a sub-regional approach to peace and security declared "human security" as the basic coherent doctrine underlying its work in peacebuilding, which resonates with WANEP's vision.

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[63] Presentation on Identification of Field Reporting, Data Collection and Analysis Issues, ECOWARN Review Workshop, June 2009, Accra, Ghana.
[64] Courtesy of ECOWARN Review Workshop, June 2009, Accra, Ghana.

This was the foundation for formalizing the partnership between WANEP and ECOWAS through the signing on 10th February 2004 of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the two organizations in recognition of the complementary role each plays.

Key issues in the memorandum of understanding are as follows:[65]

- Mutual collaboration in operationalization of the ECOWARN system (data base of indicators for peace, conflict and human security in West Africa).

- Joint trainings in data collection, collation and analysis.

- WANEP to establish and maintain a functional liaison office at ECOWAS Headquarters.

- Collaboration in production of strategic reports.

- Mutual exchange of technical support (views and studies and joint mediation, research, analysis and other forms of intervention related to early warning and response.)

Over the years, there has been a high level of mutual collaboration in operationalization of the Early Warning System (data base of indicators for peace, conflict and human security in West Africa). This partnership has enabled the development of different perspectives on the operations of the system. WANEP has been able to assess issues from civil society perspective, whilst ECOWAS has been able to link issues of peace and security from diplomatic and inter-governmental perspective; thereby developing a balanced assessment on peace and security issues which reflect on initiatives for responding to situation of early warning within the West African Sub-region.

In addition, joint trainings in data collection, collation and analyses have been conducted by the Early Warning Department of the ECOWAS Commission in the form of review workshops on a quarterly basis for all partners working on the ECOWARN System. These trainings normally include Focal Points from each government within the ECOWAS Community, WANEP national focal points, Zonal Heads, and the ECOWAS early warning team from its Headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria. Also, international consultants and experts including University Professors form part of the team of trainers to develop the capacity of partners in the field.

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[65] Presentation of WANEP at the ECOWAS Early Warning Review Workshop, February 2009, Cotonou, Benin.

The partnership has led to the establishment and maintenance of a permanent WANEP liaison office at Commission's Headquarters to coordinate the operational relationship between ECOWAS and WANEP in the Early Warning Programme. The Liaison Office is responsible to coordinate the planning of early warning meeting and review workshops, as well as coordinating all early warning reports from the various field monitors and WANEP Zonal head to the Early Warning Department.

Similarly, there is collaboration in production of strategic reports on Early Warning as well as response mechanism. These strategic reports vary in focus and in addressing sub-regional security issues. They include internet based Incidents and Situation reports and more sophisticated reports such as Strategic Policy Brief, Quarterly Peace and Security Reports, and Strategic Peace and Security Assessment Reports. All these reports help the ECOWAS Commission to understand burning issues on peace and security so as to put in place stronger response measures.

Also, there is mutual exchange of technical support (views and studies) and joint mediation, research analysis and other forms of intervention related to early warning and response in order to strengthen collaboration and networking at regional level. ECOWAS and WANEP, their Early Warning Department and Peace Monitoring Centre respectively have given technical support to each other when the need arises on related issues of early warning, and work together in developing responses to emerging issues of peace and security in the sub-region.

In the area of operationalization of the ECOWARN system, WANEP has proved to be an invaluable partner. Through its National Networks, it has been able to station focal points and field monitors in each ECOWAS state to strengthen the inputs of CSO's in the process.

Moreover, WANEP has zonal coordinators in each of the four geo-political zones in the structure of the ECOWARN system. Also, it has a Peace Monitoring Centre (PMC), at the WANEP Regional Secretariat in Accra, Ghana that is charged with the responsibility of coordinating and managing the activities and output of its national networks and their focal point in the overall operations of the Early Warning System, and also coordinating between the ECOWAS commission and focal points.

With reference to the above, the partnership between ECOWAS and WANEP is seen as a unique pro-active structure and an opportunity for learning and mutual

understanding between CSOs and inter-governmental organization in dealing with issues of peace, conflict, human security and sub-regional partnership and collaboration. It has been more than a decade of partnership between these two institutions and WANEP has been a strategic partner in the implementation and operationalization of the ECOWAS early warning initiatives and within this period many issues have emerged which continues to constitute a fundamental framework for reviews and evaluation in the operations of the early warning mechanisms. These reviewed issues include the operational structure of the Early Warning System, in the context of the ECOWAS and WANEP partnership, issues of capacity building and standard operations procedures in the process of linking early warning for early response, building a gender sensitive framework in order to engender the Early Warning System, and also the process of networking and management of data.[66]

In developing solid institutional framework in addressing the above mentioned issues, ECOWAS, WANEP and other interested partners have conducted review workshop, trainings, conferences and meetings within the sub-region as a means of assessment in order to find concrete options for response and in making these frameworks a reality within West Africa's Early Warning System.

Indeed, the early warning project in West Africa is a longer term peacebuilding efforts that will enhance existing capacities to meet needs and rights and prevent violence. However, it also states emerging gaps such as the different mandates/working styles, resources to bridge the gap between early warning and early response, demonstrating palpable results as well as the development of wide area networking and communications system for effective functioning of the system.

As stated in the 2008 ECOWARN Review Workshop, WANEP presentation on the "Cooperation between Civil Society and ECOWAS in Country Peace Opportunities and Challenges", the partnership between ECOWAS and WANEP is crucial for the success of an early warning and early response programme in West Africa. Since each partner has what the other needs and what neither can provide without the other.

WANEP has access to a wide base of community monitors who provide first-hand and crucial information at the community level, whilst ECOWAS has the mandate of the states in the region to intervene at state-level and garner military

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[66] ECOWARN Follow up Workshop to the ECOWAS Early Warning Mechanism, June 2009, Accra, Ghana.

resources when the need arises as demonstrated in Liberia and Sierra Leone. It is hoped that their partnership in the Early Warning Mechanism will continue to foster ties between civil society and regional intergovernmental institution in the promotion of peace and security.

8. Strength of the Early Warning System

The development and operational effectiveness of the Early Warning System is an outcome of participatory process. Since the emergence of the system, it has gained enormous strength from the participation of different levels of actors in its implementation. State governments, the ECOWAS Commission, WANEP and early warning experts at regional, continental and international level have all worked together to enhance effectiveness of the of its operation in West Africa.

Similarly, through quarterly trainings and review programmes, the capacity of focal points who are considered to be grassroots owners to the process have been continuously improved in understanding issues of peace and security in the sub-region as well as on methods to build stronger networks at national and sub regional levels in developing various perspective to issues of early warning as well as strategies to response to situations of early warning.

Also, the System has gained strength by developing and assessing peace and security situation from both individual and collective perspective i.e. civil society and government thereby enabling the Commission to have a balance focus when responding to early warning reports; and has increase in the knowledge base of the ECOWAS Commission and its related administrative organs such as the Office of the ECOWAS Commission, the Department of Political and Humanitarian Affairs and the Council of Elders to get proper understanding on peace and security issues in the sub-region.

As system has been developed with an online data reporting and information system, the process of accessing the ECOWARN system is easy. This is because field monitors and all other ECOWAS and WANEP personnel working on the system gets easy access to information as well as reporting into the system where ever they may be as long as there is internet accessibility. This method helps information to flow within the system, and enhanced networking among the all partners operating the system. The

participatory approach amongst the various sectors builds a sense of commitment in the operational processes and increases confidence in the process of early warning and networking among all stakeholders.

With reference to the above, the early warning structure also draw strength from the Memorandum of Understanding signed between ECOWAS and WANEP. This MoU has helped to foster legitimacy to the process and enables WANEP to galvanize support amongst it 450 civil society member networks across the West Africa Sub region in co-coordinating the operations of the ECOWARN Mechanism. The MoU explains the roles, responsibilities and limitations of all partners in the process.

Also, it has gained strength from the human resources and institutional capacities that have been developed. This includes focal points, zonal bureaus, peace monitoring centre, observatory monitoring centre, online database, internet data collection process, etc. The development of all these sectors in the system has helped ECOWAS and WANEP to run the programme effectively.

9. Opportunities for the Early Warning System

The operational pattern of the Early Warning System clearly shows that there is an open opportunity created with an enabling environment for linkages and networking among civil society actors and between civil society actors and the government. This is because, WANEP and government Focal Points are able to engage each other and find common solutions to issues of peace and security in their country as well as creating the possibility of developing balanced opinions on the part of ECOWAS to address issues of concern in the sub-region.

The early warning system as a tool for conflict prevention and peacebuilding at national and regional level has increasingly been appreciated by national government and civil society as it helps them to understand and deal with issues of early warning within the state. And, that the Early Warning System has helped states through diplomatic pressures from ECOWAS to respond to emerging issues that will affect the general peace and security situation within the sub-region.

Again, the operational foundation of West Africa's early warning structure over the past years has created increased opportunities for advocacy and intervention on

emerging issues in various countries across the sub-region and given civil society actors the confidence to engage through advocacy with the government on issues of early warning thereby influencing government efforts to respond to situations when necessary.

There is potential for expansion of the Early Warning System at local/ community level if resources are provided. The initiative developed at the sub-regional level can also be replicated at national level through training of community monitors as well as establishing internet data system to monitor issues of early warning within local communities as it will be of immense benefit to many countries in the West Africa sub-region.

10. Challenges and Threats

Looking into the operational structure of the Early Warning System, it has been observed that it lacks an organized system of giving feedback on early warning reports that are communicated to ECOWAS. This situation has over time weakens the commitment of partners to respond or suggest response mechanism to the Early Warning Department. Lack of response also discredits the objectives of the early warning programme.

Also, there is the existing issue of the inability of partners to access critical information within certain period time from every corner of a state which is largely as a result of unavailability of local monitors at community level that will report on peace and security issues within their localities. This situation is further compounded by instability of internet systems and connections at different time of the day thereby making timely submission of report a serious problem.

Various partners in the operational process maintained that the peace exchange programme was a failure in the early warning programme. This is a result of the fact that the peace exchange programme was not properly popularized by both ECOWAS and WANEP so that their various partners may have interest in participating in online discussions and developing commentaries and narratives on peace and security issues as part of its efforts to develop early warning assessment reports from various perspectives.

Again, lack of adequate IT and communication technology is seen as a major weakness for the smooth operations of the early warning online data system.

Another weakness observed so far is the lack of publicity of the ECOWAS early warning programme. Even though there are many stakeholders involved in the process, the Early Warning System has not enjoyed the required publicity it deserves. This is because the ECOWAS Commission has not being able to develop project at country level that will increase awareness of all relevant authorities working on peace and security in their country to know about its early warning structure and the related institutional structures that are at the core of its operation.

Similarly, the problem of lack of zonal coordination and lack of opportunities to conduct zonal meetings for focal point has continuously been sounded. Though the operational work of the ECOWARN System was divided into four geo-political zones with coordination done by zonal bureau heads, there is no structured system in place such as holding of quarterly meetings within each zone. This weakens the possibility for effective networking on issues of common concern to members of each zone.

Conclusion

An Early Warning Mechanism is an important pro-active structure for conflict prevention in any society. The development of vibrant early warning system is an integral structure that helps to broader the dynamics of identifying the causes of conflict; predict the outbreak of conflict in order to find structures for intervention to de-escalate conflict situations.

The focus of this article has been to assess the operationalization of early warning for conflict prevention and peacebuilding in West Africa and the collaborative partnership between ECOWAS and WANEP in the establishment of the ECOWAS Early Warning System. This partnership has become a catalyst for a paradigm shift in government/civil society relationship and a unique platform for collaborative engagement.

In the article various operational structures and institutional capacities were presented including the technicalities that are involved. Similarly fair assessment of the strength, weaknesses and challenges of the ECOWARN system were presented

including a general assessment on the gaps between early warning and early response as well as the problem of developing an engendered perspective in the ECOWAS early warning programme.

The assessment of the system presents a hopeful picture for stability through conflict prevention in the sub-region. It expands on the prospect for peace and that it can be achieved through integrated approaches and collaboration between and among civil society organizations and state actors at all levels of governance. The work that has been done so far in the operationalization of the system is very good. The training and capacity building programmes for Field Monitors and those at the operational level at ECOWAS have been effective and continue to add value to the process. The review of the system through regular workshops and evaluation with all key actors in the ECOWAS Early Warning System always create a common platform to re-arrange thinking and integrate new approaches in order to enhance effectiveness in the overall output of the system.

Indeed, the process of networking is an important pillar to enhance continuity and coordination as it will strengthen operational effectiveness in terms of information sharing and gathering and in the process of collective prevention in the sub-region. Therefore, networking is considered to be a fundamental pillar in the day to day operations of the system.

It is hoped that with the current commitment to institutionalize gender guidelines in the system, WANEP and its civil society partners will help to inform the process so that the system will be engendered in a way that the needs, views and opinions of women and men will be monitored and assessed in a very fair way.

Finally, the ECOWAS early warning mechanism is indeed a useful structure for conflict prevention in the sub-region. Its unique collaborative relationship gives a new meaning to the role civil society actors can play collectively with state actors and regional organization in the process of preventing conflict and promoting peace and human security.