



# Conflict early warning in the Horn of Africa: can it work?

by Sharon Rusu

*Is it possible to warn about violent conflicts, prevent them before they escalate and reconcile the warring parties?*

**P**rotracted social conflicts do not erupt overnight. They are the result of a slow accumulation of tensions and hostilities built up over time. In the Horn of Africa an innovative early warning mechanism being explored by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) could provide a pointer for similar conflict-prone regions.

There are three key aspects of a more proactive international system of conflict warning: placing people at the centre of rights-based approaches; promoting, testing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating methods of addressing and resolving the origins of conflict; and, thirdly, making conflict prevention an integral part of a policy process which automatically

involves senior ministers and high-level diplomats at the outset of trouble.

The Inter-governmental Authority on Drought and Desertification (IGADD) was created in 1986 to coordinate efforts to prevent drought and desertification in the Horn. It became increasingly apparent that IGADD was a forum through which wider political and socio-economic issues could be dealt with in a sub-regional context. International and regional evaluations of crises in the Great Lakes, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Somalia resulted in recommendations to develop a regional conflict early warning capacity. In 1995 the heads of state of the member states agreed to revitalise the agency. Renamed the Inter-

Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), it was given a mandate to address broader development issues in the region. Headquartered in Djibouti, IGAD has seven members — Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda.

The issues of conflict prevention, management and resolution have emerged as part of its widened role. In March 2000, IGAD commissioned the Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER) to undertake part of a feasibility study that will form one of the five components of a broader conflict prevention programme for IGAD.

### Constraints and limitations – and ways of addressing them

In a region with recurrent internal and external conflict (IGAD members have gone to war in recent years) there are great constraints on IGAD's capacity to fulfil a conflict prevention, management and resolution mandate. The IGAD Secretariat has limited capacity to undertake conflict early warning initiatives. There are no mechanisms to involve member states in consultations and negotiations or allow for the participation of civil society in peace promotion. There are no credible mechanisms for regional responses to cross-border humanitarian emergencies.

The IGAD Secretariat, along with IGAD member states, regional organisations and their partners, identified criteria to address these limitations. These involve: integrated approaches to the prevention of conflicts involving all levels and groups in society in the region; decentralisation of decision-making among IGAD member states; development of common information policies, information systems and analytical reporting on forthcoming crises for IGAD decision makers; capacity-building measures (individual or institutional) including a human resources development programme; more effective monitoring and evaluation of activities and impacts.

The method adopted for the project was participatory and interactive, linked to a series of workshops bringing together participants from all member states to ensure that the final report incorporated the views of a wider audience of civil society, academia and governments. National consultants drawn from IGAD member states were used for the case

studies. The result was a conceptual model and recommendations on what role IGAD could best play in the early warning and conflict management field. An implementation plan followed in November 2000. After discussion with IGAD, it was agreed that full implementation would wait pending further consultation with stakeholders in member states to explain fully the objectives, structure and working methods proposed for the conflict early warning and response mechanism (CEWARN).

A workshop in Nairobi in May 2001 resulted in agreement to continue to explain the purpose of CEWARN and to expand agreed 'entry points' (such as conflict in pastoral areas, cattle rustling and arms smuggling) for operationalising CEWARN. It is initially proposed that CEWARN will comprise a unit within the IGAD secretariat that is small and professionally staffed. Its purpose will be to link up with and tap already existing and developing capacities for early warning in member states.

To take the initiative forward, the media and government institutions have key roles to play as do local and international NGOs and academic institutions. Building collaboration with these actors is essential for developing institutional capacities and linkages with civil society. International NGOs can play a role in capacity building, facilitation and northern advocacy but should not lead the process. A free press is essential; IGAD member states should be encouraged to achieve the aim of a free and uncensored press that is underpinned by a professional, regulated and unbiased media.

### Future challenges

Does IGAD's mandate overlap with that of the Organisation of African Unity? Despite years of effort, the OAU has not yet fully implemented early warning and risk assessment capabilities. Though progress has been made in institutional capacity building, the nature and extent of most conflict prevention activities in the Horn continue as individual efforts. IGAD is slightly ahead, however, in that it has moved beyond discussion and planning to actually attempting to establish CEWARN.

Lack of a tradition of press freedom, transparency of association and

information sharing is a major constraint. Gaining support and implementing a shared information collection and analysis system will be problematic. Though some mechanisms do exist, efforts to harness various peace-building initiatives in the interests of broader objectives at various levels of society are lacking. As long as they remain unsupported by legal mechanisms and institutional frameworks, local mechanisms for peace building will continue to lack authority outside a small circle of civil society.

Although it is too early to draw conclusions, it is inevitable that IGAD will face difficulties in implementing a conflict early warning mechanism. Some member governments themselves took office through violence and view violence as an inevitable and necessary condition of power. As parties to the agreement establishing IGAD, member states are committed to achieving peace and security in the Horn. A major challenge will be to translate member state commitment to conflict prevention and management into action.

The region's chronic economic crises are linked to ongoing conflict, environmental challenges and persistent and recurring droughts. Breaking this cycle is essential to the promotion of peace, security and stability in the region. The challenge is to inspire a resoluteness of purpose and collective political will to build a common preventive capacity. If the cycle of protracted violence is to be broken, the ultimate challenge for IGAD will be to convince member states that working cooperatively to activate CEWARN is central to their individual and collective interests and for those of the region at large. The challenge for the international community will be to resource and monitor the process and learn from unfolding lessons.

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