PROGRESS TOWARD THE AFRICAN UNION CONTINENTAL EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

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Despite criticism from scholars, the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) at the African Union (AU) has recently made significant progress in its capacity to monitor, analyze, and provide warning of impending conflict situations in Africa. CEWS, however, remains constrained by human-resource limitations, developing cooperation and information sharing with the early warning efforts of regional organizations, and unsystematic coordination with the various AU organs focusing on peace and security. In addition, although the early warning-early response gap is narrowing at the AU, early response mechanisms continue to be constrained by limited capacity and issues of political will, as high-level political disagreements and issues of sovereignty militate against effective preventive action. Based on more than two dozen interviews with senior-level CEWS and AU officials, along with other relevant stakeholders, this paper highlights recent operational progress, identifies remaining gaps, and forwards policy options for the AU and international community to build on the gains of CEWS.
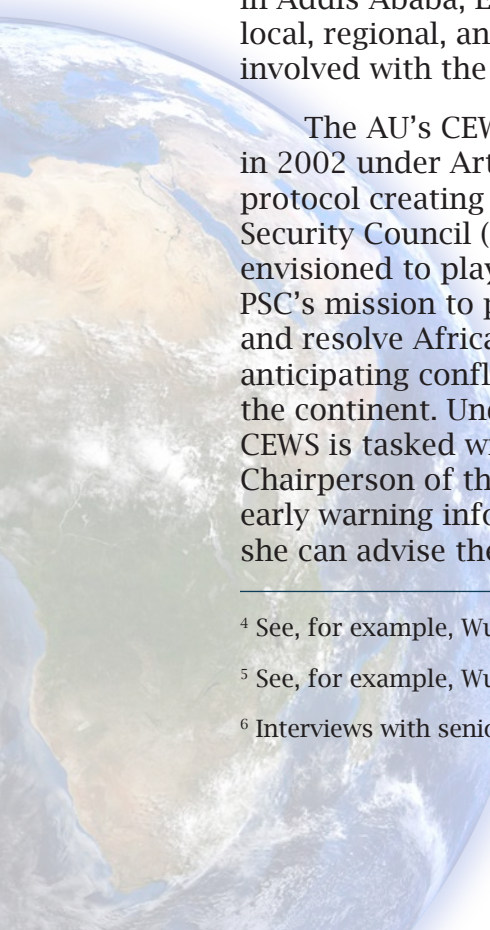
Over the past two decades, early warning mechanisms have proliferated from the international to local levels—particularly in Africa, with the standing up of the continent-wide Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) at the African Union (AU).

While early warning frameworks have long been used in military, intelligence, and humanitarian circles, the concept of conflict early warning systems rooted in a human security approach is fairly recent, emerging with United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's report (Boutros-Ghali 1992). Since then, conflict early warning systems have continually been identified by the UN[1] and international organizations as crucial to effective conflict prevention. Over the past two decades, early warning mechanisms have proliferated from the international to local levels—particularly in Africa, with the standing up of the continent-wide Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) at the African Union (AU); various mechanisms at the regional level, such as the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN),[2] and fledgling national and local systems, as seen in Kenya and Ghana.[3]

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[1] For an overview of early warning efforts within the UN system, see Zenko and Friedman (2011).

[2] For an overview of regional early warning mechanisms in Africa, see Cilliers (2005).

[3] For a discussion of national-level early warning systems in Africa, see Affa'a-Mindzie (2012).

In light of the recent expansion of conflict management systems in Africa, a growing academic literature has emerged on the conflict-mitigation capabilities of African institutions, with a developing focus on the role of conflict early warning mechanisms. Some scholars have been highly critical of early warning systems in Africa, highlighting a lack of resources and operational capacity and the political and structural impediments to preventive action that have led to an "early warning-early response" gap.[4] Assessments of the AU's CEWS have been especially critical.[5] Although several studies have explored the implications of African early warning systems, significant gaps remain in the literature—most glaringly, in empirical, field-based research conducted on early warning systems in Africa. In our effort to fill this gap, we interviewed more than two dozen senior-level CEWS officials at the AU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and other local, regional, and international actors involved with the work of CEWS.

The AU's CEWS was established in 2002 under Article 12 of the protocol creating the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC). CEWS was envisioned to play a major role in the PSC's mission to prevent, manage, and resolve African conflicts by anticipating conflict situations across the continent. Under the protocol, CEWS is tasked with providing the Chairperson of the AU Commission early warning information so that he/she can advise the PSC on "potential conflicts and threats to peace and security in Africa and recommend the best course of action" (African Union 2002). Article 12 calls for the establishment of a monitoring unit at the AU—the Situation Room—as well as monitoring and observation units based at the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) that will feed directly into the Situation Room. The protocol also mandated that the AU Commission liaise with the UN, relevant research centers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to "facilitate the effective functioning" of CEWS (African Union 2002).

As reflected in several scholarly articles and policy reports, CEWS has struggled to become fully operational, with an exceedingly sluggish standing-up process since its inception in 2002 (Wulf and Debiel 2010; Williams 2011; Affa'a-Mindzie 2012). Interviews conducted with CEWS and other AU officials in September 2012, however, revealed a more optimistic and encouraging state of affairs. While coordination and implementation gaps remain, particularly regarding synergy with the RECs, much progress has been made in the past several years in operationalizing the Situation Room and improving the overall capacity of CEWS to monitor and provide early warning on emerging conflicts in Africa. On the other hand, we also found that operational and inherent political challenges at the AU continue to hamper the preventive action side of the early warning/early response equation.[6]

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[4] See, for example, Wulf and Debiel (2010).

[5] See, for example, Wulf and Debiel (2010) and Nathan (2007).

[6] Interviews with senior-level CEWS and AU officials, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 13–15, 2012.

CEWS IN ACTION: IMPROVED CAPACITY

The AU's CEWS has roots in the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor organization of the AU. The first explicit reference to a CEWS at the OAU can be traced back to the 1996 Yaounde Declaration, which hailed the development of an Early Warning System (EWS) located in the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution at the OAU (Cilliers 2005, 4). In 1998, a Situation Room was conceptualized and subsequently established with the assistance of donors. The early warning efforts at the OAU, however, remained rudimentary and fundamentally under-resourced, with an internal report asserting in 1999 that the Mechanism "lacks the capacity for in-depth analysis."[7]

At the time of writing, CEWS has a staff of 13, consisting of a director and several levels of analysts organized into regional clusters. According to CEWS officials, five early warning analysts recently joined the program in May 2012.[8] CEWS is housed in the Conflict Management Division (CMD) of the AU, with staff members located inside and surrounding the Situation Room, which operates on a 24-hour-a-day basis to continually monitor conflict indicators and identify potential flashpoints. Based on structural, dynamic, and actor data collection and analysis, CEWS produces multiple regular written products. Interviewees at CEWS emphasized that many of their products provide recommendations and response options to the PSC and other decision makers, including building scenarios and identifying those organs of the AU that could be deployed to help defuse a particular situation.[9]

The members of the CEWS staff use various tools and methods to collect and analyze data from a wide variety of sources. For events (or what CEWS officials term dynamic), data collection, and analysis, CEWS primarily uses three tools: the Africa Media Monitor (AMM), the Africa Reporter, and Live-Mon.[10] The AMM, an in-house tool developed in collaboration with the European Union (EU), captures data from the continent in real time, processing up to 40,000 articles simultaneously in all four AU languages and updating every 10 minutes (Affa'a-Mindzie 2012, 4). The AMM software also has the capability to send news updates via text message. The Africa Reporter gathers primary data from the different field mission and liaison offices of the AU and produces risk scores on conflict situations. The tool is based on predefined templates of incident and situation reporting. Live-Mon is a geo-coded tool that automatically displays news events on a map in the Situation Room as these events develop. CEWS supplements their in-house dynamic data collection capabilities by using

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[7] Cited without footnote in Cilliers (2010, 5).

[8] Interview with a senior-level CEWS official, Addis Ababa, September 13, 2012.

[9] Interviews with senior-level CEWS and AU officials, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 14, 2012.

[10] Interviews with senior-level CEWS and AU officials, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 14, 2012.

private analytical sources such as the Economic Intelligence Unit, Oxford Analytica, and BBC Monitoring (Affa'a-Mindzie 2012, 4).

For collecting and analyzing structural information, CEWS uses the Indicators and Profiles Module and Africa Prospects. The Indicators and Profiles Module is a repository of structural data organized into country background briefings and country profiles. Africa Prospects periodically conducts vulnerability assessments of countries based on various economic and demographic indicators. CEWS also collects and monitors actor-based data using the Indicators and Profiles Module (Affa'a-Mindzie 2012). In addition, CEWS has developed the CEWS Portal to facilitate coordination and data sharing with the regional early warning mechanisms. According to CEWS officials, the portal has begun operating, and several RECs have been exchanging data with CEWS. The operationalization of the Situation Room and these various data collection, software, and analysis tools allow CEWS to function at a basic level—monitoring and adequately warning of imminent and escalating conflict situations in Africa.

CEWS IN ACTION: GAPS REMAIN

Despite the significant progress of CEWS, our research revealed four main persisting gaps and challenges:

- Constrained human resources, training, and funding;

- Unsystematic coordination and information-sharing with the RECs early warning mechanisms;

- Insufficient levels of communication and collaboration with other AU peace and security organs relevant to conflict early warning; and

- The perennial problem of translating an early warning into an effective response.

No matter how technically robust the AU's early warning function is, limited capacity and the political nature of the early-response side of the AU's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is likely to continue to constrain the rapid deployment of effective conflict prevention initiatives in the future. What are the causes and consequences of the AU's largely ineffectual preventive response mechanisms?

From its inception, the AU has embraced a fundamental break from the OAU's stance of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states—moving toward a more active position of non-indifference (Williams 2011, 1). Indeed, from 2003 to 2011, the AU staged or participated in nine peace operations—ranging from small-scale election monitoring in the Comoros to approximately 9,000 troops deployed in the AU Mission in Somalia—and imposed sanctions 10 times during the same time period, primarily for unconstitutional changes of government (Williams 2011, 15,

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[11] Interview with a senior-level CEWS official, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 14, 2012.

18). Most of these efforts, however, have aimed to lessen or end ongoing conflict or punish recalcitrant behavior after the fact—as opposed to being preventive. Despite a more vigorous conflict management posture, early response mechanisms at the AU remain a work in progress operationally. For example, the African Standby Force (ASF), which has yet to be deployed, has faced a host of difficulties in the standing-up process, while, according to a 2011 study, the Military Staff Committee barely functions in practice (Williams 2011, 10–11, 13). Perhaps more troubling is the revelation from interviews with AU officials that early response organs are often held hostage to political considerations, effectively rendering the early warning reports of CEWS useless. Officials asserted that issues of sovereignty, personal rivalries, high-level political disagreements among member states, and a preference for consensus-based decision-making at the PSC frequently stifle swift and cohesive preventive action, no matter how timely and incisive the early warning of CEWS.[12]

To illustrate the difficulties of translating accurate early warning into an early preventive response, one CEWS analyst cited the recent cases of political instability in Mali and Guinea-Bissau in 2012. He argued that although CEWS provided sufficient early warnings on the potential for conflict in both countries, including the prospective regional fallout from the collapse of the Libyan regime, adequate preventive measures were not taken to forestall violence.[13]

At the same time, the AU has had some success in bridging the early warning-early response divide in other cases of impending conflict. The same analyst noted that CEWS reports prompted a response from the Panel of the Wise, an APSA organ, in the recent cases of escalating tensions in Ghana and Sierra Leone.[14] AU officials also cited election-related conflict situations in Senegal and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2012 and Kenya in 2008 as instances where the Panel of the Wise worked with CEWS and other departments to help avoid or mitigate large-scale political violence.[15] Because of the inherent political dimensions, several CEWS and AU officials argued that by the time a particular conflict situation reaches the level of the PSC, it is often too late for any effective early response to be formulated and implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CEWS, THE AU, AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

CEWS for Africa has come a long way since its inception. Increased staff and new technology at CEWS

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[12] Interviews with senior-level CEWS and AU officials, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 13-15, 2012.

[13] Interview with a senior-level CEWS analyst, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 14, 2012.

[14] Interview with a senior-level CEWS analyst, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 14, 2012.

[15] Interview with a senior-level member of The Panel of the Wise Secretariat, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 14, 2012.

greatly aid data collection and analysis on conflict indicators and potential flashpoints although substantial gaps remain. In the words of one senior CEWS analyst, the system's "capacity is quite good, but not sufficient."[16]

To consolidate the gains of CEWS and bridge existing gaps, our article offered the following six main recommendations:

- Further improve relations and data-sharing with the RECs by instituting a staff rotation policy and redoubling support for the development of regional early warning systems.

- Formally institutionalize relationships with other AU organs working on issues of peace and security, particularly within the CMD.

- Increase, regularize, and sustain the budget, with a particular emphasis on pooled and longer term funding from donors.

- Expand human resource capacity by hiring five more analysts who have specialized expertise and by implementing more extensive and focused training.

- Improve the comprehensiveness and quality of data by expanding partnerships with international actors and civil-society organizations.

- Increase the capacity of AU response mechanisms and encourage regional and international actors to apply private and public pressure on the PSC to respond adequately to crisis situations as they develop.

CONCLUSION

During the past several years, the AU's continent-wide conflict early warning system has made considerable progress in its capacity to monitor, collect, and analyze information from a variety of sources and to provide warning of imminent and escalating conflict situations in Africa. Despite this progress, however, CEWS continues to suffer from human resource and funding constraints, inchoate cooperation and information-sharing with the conflict early warning efforts at the RECs, and unsystematic coordination with other AU organs focusing on peace and security. In addition, early response mechanisms continue to be constrained by low capacity and a debilitating lack of political will.

Despite the political impediments and capacity constraints at the AU that militate against converting early warning into a muscular early response, the fact remains that successful preventive measures are possible only with timely and forceful early warning. As Africa continues to experience bouts of political instability and armed conflict and as African institutions continue to shoulder more of the continent's

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[16] Interview with a senior-level CEWS analyst, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 14, 2012.

conflict management responsibilities, accurate early warning at the AU is vital. Although CEWS has made progress, substantial operational and political challenges persist.

Taking steps to help solve these remaining pieces of the early warning puzzle would improve the overall effectiveness of the AU's conflict early warning and response systems.

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The AU Continental Early Warning System: From Conceptual to Operational?

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