



PREPAREDNESS & Early Warning—Early Response

This paper is one in a series that examines how the act of helping civilians brace for violence can complement and benefit efforts in many fields related to peace and conflict.

Local capacity for self-preservation has powerful implications for protection, human rights, nonviolent resistance, development aid, disaster risk reduction, early warning and response, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and security sector reform, as well as efforts to manage conflict, reduce recruitment into violence, mitigate displacement, and prevent conflict returning.

The knock-on effects of civilians being better prepared for inexorable violence have scarcely been considered (even within the field of protection). Nothing else has such crosscutting potential as preparedness: It is the hidden common denominator of our work.

Aid service providers will often be the best situated to support local preparedness. But by getting better joined up with such providers, the practitioners in these other fields may see a very impactful multiplier upon their work on the ground.

Plug warning into local tactical plans.

1. Many of today's conflict early warning - early response (CEWER) systems actually are not intended to help locals physically get out of harm's way. Rather, the creators and consumers of these systems tend to extract information about trouble on the ground with the intent of then influencing violent actors and events toward peaceful outcomes.
2. Warning is often plugged into *conflict prevention structures* aimed at convening stakeholders who might calm events before they escalate, or into diplomatic efforts aimed at pressuring parties to deescalate. Such initiatives should be undertaken whenever possible—but few even within the field would say their track record is very satisfactory.
3. Occasionally warning is plugged into *external security structures* aimed at intercepting violence. This can include peacekeeping missions or a host state's police or military, and they sometimes play a deterrent or rescue role. But similarly, few within those fields would say their track record is very satisfactory. Whether it is a Colombia-style CEWER system that tends to show up late, or a peacekeeping "come-to-us"-style deployment, rescue too often turns out to be an illusion.
4. CEWER platforms are anchored in conflict prevention, external security, journalism, advocacy, diplomacy, or other endeavors to interrupt or intercept violence. But they all have one thing in common: they tend to lack a Plan B. Except for limited peacekeeper experiments, they do not address how civilians might best tactically respond when coming face-to-face with abusers.
5. The prevalent forms of CEWER are not "point-of-contact" systems; they do not trigger alarms and trip community-level responses (like evacuation) when threats approach the perimeter of where those at risk live. This is unfortunate because community watch set-ups tied to tactical

planning “have particular value where police or security forces are absent, overwhelmed, or lack the capacity” to respond. ¹⁾ Preparedness support offers the basis for this contingency planning.

6. Other papers of this series note that such low-canopy warning and response can get synchronized or joined up in very complementary fashion with efforts in the other “silos” such as peacekeeping or host state security.

Wire warning to those actually at risk.

7. As the above remarks indicate, the preponderance of warnings are wired up and away from locals who are in harm’s way. Howard Adelman once said “the quest for defining ‘early warning’ is an exercise in understanding how what is happening over there comes to be known by us ‘over here.’” ²⁾
8. Compared to first generation CEWER systems, newer designs sometimes push warning much closer to the ground, being based primarily or entirely within the affected state. But ultimately, CEWER needs to be pushed closer to the very grassroots. It is often the case that locals do not consider fellow nationals to be “local”. This distinction matters a lot when considering that the wrenching decisions about what to do as violence closes in, always comes down to relationships, perception, and trust.
9. Self-appointed arbiters of CEWER extract and vet information. In processing that information they, albeit with good intentions, might delay, censor or monopolize it. In pursuing the types of “response” for which they have established themselves, they risk giving false hope to people in harm’s way and might actually discourage them from pursuing their own Plan B. It is a vertical, even proprietary approach to warning and response.
10. But preparedness support would facilitate the wiring of warning more “horizontally” to people in the path of approaching violence. This idea is not new—it borrows from the field of natural disaster response in which “people-centered early warning systems” are a rising priority.
11. It makes strong sense to help locals prepare CEWER systems: They are more motivated than anyone else to act. They can be more familiar with details of the killing zone than anyone else. They are the most logical end-users of warning because steps they can take in hours or minutes save lives. This is the exact purpose of standard “on contact” action drills for threat response. Warning for people on the ground is physically actionable.
12. Among locals there is no “compassion fatigue” for their own people; no lack of a “domestic constituency” for action. There is no diplomatic or bureaucratic reason for inaction; no humanitarian “fig leaf” for half-way measures. There is no ambiguous mandate or definition or nomenclature to endlessly debate. There is no “exit strategy” as a precondition for entering the fray. This is their home, their calculus, their survival.
13. Local preparedness does not substitute for today’s CEWER efforts—indeed it supplements them. For example, greater degree of local self-reliance (in safety, sustenance and services) can protect local populations for a provisional period (days? weeks? longer?) until the promised external responses of negotiation or rescue materialize.

Prepare the ground for warning information technologies.

14. In recent times, the expansion and democratization of information technologies has begun to alter the vertical, proprietary nature of CEWER just described. Locals are connected as never before, enabling people-centered approaches to rapidly grow. But the technologies’ plugs and wiring need to be very carefully grounded.
15. “As technology-enabled conflict early warning systems are expected to rely on much greater levels of community involvement, it becomes also necessary to rethink the conflict response

model and develop more usable systems that adopt *community involvement as a fundamental principle*. Greater community involvement would allow for building on existing assets; sharing adaptive strategies; and developing resilience in response to threats. *Technology and platforms alone will not achieve this goal*, but if designed properly they enable dialogue and information sharing within communities, and between communities and external actors, to achieve these objectives.”³ [Emphasis added]

16. Preparedness support is exactly the kind of process through which this dialogue and information sharing can come. An early warning “hand off” requires more than organizational coordination and technological prowess. It is psychological too. The prevailing mindset on the ground will be just as important as any skill set attached to warning. People may underestimate *or* overestimate risk—and both states of mind can be dangerous. Either way, messages about their vulnerability (or not) should be hard-linked to convincing messages and options so they feel neither panicked nor complacent.
17. Internet and social media-based warning is subject to eavesdropping and manipulation as well as misinterpretation. The “openness culture” of these platforms can be at odds with fundamental information security protocols. The builders of these platforms must, in each separate crisis setting, *decide together with locals* what would make the best “convertor or adapter” for such highly-charged information.
18. How does social architecture shape locals’ compartmentalization and need-to-know protocols? Who are the most trusted local nodes; who would be most persuasive? (It is highly unnatural for people to uproot their families and assets. So convincement and mental readiness is as important as physical preparedness.) Does the local populace rely on kinship *lines* for its most confidential communications? Or on concentric *circles* of trusted contacts? Do local providers prefer a nonhierarchical network of *cells* to work safely? Or on *relays* of cooperation to accomplish cross-faction work, as in Iraq? There is so much more involved here than, for example, telling locals to “set up a protection committee” and trusting that they will intuitively get out of harm’s way.
19. The insertion of new EW technologies can be compared to an air drop. If the drop zone is not well prepared; if contingencies downstream are not well planned, then the result can be diminished, dysfunctional, and even dangerous. There needs to be trusted social organization and contingency planning ready on the ground in order for EW to be used wisely in the face of violence.
20. Members of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative find that, “The effectiveness of technologies continues to be undermined by the lack of connection between warning and response, although the greater involvement of affected communities and civil society is promising. At the same time, there is little empirical evidence of what works and what does not in response to specific warning.”⁴
21. Fortunately, we need not be delayed by looking for a singular answer to “what works and what does not in response to specific warning” because there is none, and it is not technology’s problem to solve. The “last-mile connectivity” challenge for these brilliant technologies is best addressed not by a product but by a *process*. This process must be like preparedness support, which elicits answers suitable to a given situation.
22. Preparedness support can help fill early warning work’s most glaring gap: helping locals ready themselves to get out of harm’s way.

Endnotes

¹ *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons* (provisional release), Global Protection Cluster Working Group, Geneva, December 2007; p. 192.

² Howard Edelman, “Defining Humanitarian Early Warning”, Chapter 1 in *Early Warning and Early Response*, Susanne Schmeidl and Howard Adelman, eds., Columbia International Affairs Online, 1998; p. 2 of the chapter.

³ Phuong N. Pham, Patrick Vinck, “Technology, conflict early warning systems, public health, and human rights,” *Health and Human Rights Journal* 14/2, August 14, 2013.

⁴ Phuong N. Pham, Patrick Vinck, “Technology, conflict early warning systems, public health, and human rights,” *Health and Human Rights Journal* 14/2, August 14, 2013.