

Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting at Expert Level

EEAS Early Warning Tools

Monday, 9 July 2012
Brussels, Belgium

I Introduction

On 9 July 2012, the latest in a series of dialogue meetings between EU policy makers and civil society organisations on key policy issues in conflict prevention and peacebuilding took place in Brussels. The meeting aimed to gather external expert input into early warning tools currently under development by the EEAS. The one-day meeting was organised within the framework of the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN), a three-year project funded by the European Commission (under the crisis preparedness component of the Instrument for Stability) aimed at facilitating dialogue on peacebuilding issues between civil society and the EU policy-makers. The CSDN is open to CSOs active in the field of peacebuilding and is managed by EPLO, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office.

Forty people attended the meeting. The participants were drawn from a mix of senior- and mid-level EU officials from relevant EEAS departments, and conflict early warning specialists from a range of international institutions, academia and civil society organisations. The meeting was facilitated by Joelle Jenny (Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Mediation Division, EEAS) and Catherine Woollard (EPLO) with support from Terri Beswick (independent policy consultant) and Heino van Houwelingen (EEAS). The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. The following opinions and recommendations can neither be attributed to any participating individual or institution, nor do they reflect the positions of the CSDN as a whole, EPLO, its member organisations, the EEAS or the EC. For more information about this CSDN meeting, please contact [Giulia Pasquinelli](#).

II Purpose of the meeting

The EEAS is currently developing an early warning system with the aim of strengthening the EU's ability to anticipate and respond to violent conflict. The meeting objective was to gather input from civil society, academia and other international and regional organisations into the early warning tools that will feed into the future system.

Documents made available to participants included:

- [Early Warning Risk Matrix](#)
- [Introduction to Early Warning Risk Matrix](#)
- [Country Conflict Assessment](#)
- [Model Early Warning Risk Matrix Country Report](#)
- [Questions for participants on Early Warning Risk Matrix](#) (working group A)
- [Questions for participants on Country Conflict Assessment](#) (working group B)

The meeting was designed as follows: to start by bringing in key good practices and lessons learned from those experienced in designing, managing and evaluating conflict EW systems, by way of kicking off with fresh perspectives from outside the EU system; a presentation of the tools as they currently stand, followed by working sessions where the experts were asked to

engage directly with the EW tools to suggest improvements and give specific feedback based on their comparative knowledge and experience.

Summary

Five key issues emerged:

1. Purpose of the tools:

There needs to be more clarity on the precise objective of the tools. For what and whom precisely are the warnings intended? Should they provide information or elicit a specific response/action? Does it relate to new, emerging or on-going or all conflicts?

2. Functioning:

What information do they gather, how and who does it at what intervals? How does the information which the tools generate relate to existing processes of in-depth conflict assessment and analysis? What will be the communication and decision making flows?

3. Terminology:

Clarity in terminology (including definition of early warning for the purpose of the system) should go hand in hand with clarity on the purpose.

4. Relationship with existing early warning systems and data sources:

How the tools can effectively draw on other existing tools and systems and external data sources. Need to identify the most appropriate ones. The choice of the type of indicators is central.

5. Communication of the warnings:

Options and challenges for how best to present and communicate the information and analysis to senior decision makers, both visually and conceptually, emerged in the discussion.

III Session 1: Strengthening the EU's ability to anticipate conflict risks: introduction to the EEAS EW system

The EEAS EW system is still under development. The EEAS considered it important to invite external expert input on its early warning tools at an early stage to draw on relevant outside experience. The draft tools attempt to balance many features: to draw on the extensive range of knowledge and expertise already in existence; to fit efficiently and effectively into a light resourcing model; to minimize burden on already overstretched staff, especially at EU Delegation (EUD) level; and to take into account the pressured agendas of the senior decision makers.

The key features of such an EW system for the EU:

- the importance of binding staff at all levels and locations to a shared analysis of what is going on in a conflict-affected or at-risk area;
- to identify areas which are of particular significance or priority.
- to assist decisions to be made about whether the EU is best placed to act and if so, how;
- to contribute to the design of effective communications and decision-making mechanisms between the field and headquarters;
- the need to present senior management with the right information at a glance, packaged in a way which is actionable and ensures the integration of a continuous learning cycle;

IV Session 2: Early Warning systems: key lessons

Three external experts, from civil society, academia and an international organisation respectively, gave input into the following three questions:

- 1) *What information and analysis inputs go into producing 'warnings' in your system? (i.e. how do you select and verify data sources?)*
- 2) *How do you present and distribute information on warnings to ensure that it is used? (e.g. format used? Narrative reports, scores, ad-hoc personal communications? Targets?)*
- 3) *In your view, what are the key mistakes to avoid in designing an early warning system?*

Experts' key inputs:

Purpose and terminology

- The EW system needs to be clear about what it wants to warn about: early response requires a very different warning framework from conflict prevention, for example;
- the most effective and comprehensive early warning systems are limited in scope, highly resourced and involve a dedicated training component for system users;
- part of training on and dissemination of the system should be to ensure that shared language and concepts are used by all involved in the system;
- scenario building can be a helpful tool.

Data collection and management

- Structural data without event data, and without a framing theory of conflict, is insufficient;
- some level of analysis is required for the first presentation to decision/policy-makers, and the possibility to link to or commission deeper analysis is an important capacity to maintain;
- indicators may mean different things in different contexts;
- a limited number of indicators will make the system easier to operate (but again the purpose of the system is the paramount consideration);
- the "S" in early warning systems is crucial: data and analysis produced by this system must be embedded in a communications and decision-making structure and process, in a continuously iterative way; this should respond to the fact that decision making in large bureaucracies is a "social process";
- the NATO example was notable because of its highly structured but also consensus-focussed model; NATO members are brought into the system by becoming sponsors of the so-called "warning problems" where they play a role in identifying and refining, and on which they report monthly.

Presentation of warning information

- It can be useful to maintain a searchable database and archive of warning reports and the information used to construct the reports;
- communication between the analysts and decision-makers/policy-makers is a critical area where mutual trust must be built;
- it is a challenge to continuously communicate with decision makers: the information provided should be resonant with their assumptions and predispositions so they can see the relevance of the warning to their work, yet it must also be able to provide independent and, where appropriate, counterintuitive information in a way which can be absorbed and acted upon;
- experience suggests policy-makers are more comfortable with qualitative analysis than quantitative evidence, and mistrustful of recommendations which are too strong/forceful: if they trust the analyst, they will trust the assessment, so one of the key reasons for the constant communication is to build mutual trust;
- the warning product is often a single page, in a highly automated, structured format, which may or may not include recommendations;

- an example of an effective and well respected early warning system was [FAST](#) (an international early warning methodology developed and implemented by swisspeace from 1998-2008, finally wound up due to lack of funding).

Plenary discussion:

Purpose and terminology

- Knowing the end state one aims at helps to define the information gaps; the EEAS would need a baseline assessment from which it is starting.
- EW may be a misnomer in this case, but is a useful label/catchphrase.
- terminology matters – but so does how you use it; if you over-use ‘early warning’ people become numb to it.
- an early warning system needs to be built up over time to build and maintain credibility (e.g. the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities has issued only two warnings in 20 years);
- conflict analysis and early warning should not be conflated. The capacity to trigger deeper analysis should be a key part of any EW system.

Data collection and management

- Scenario building was agreed to be a valuable tool, together with looking at ways of bringing root cause analysis into systems designed with conflict prevention in mind;
- the intervals of data collection and analysis are significant; for a response related early warning system, annual collection is insufficient; it needs to be almost continuous (hence resource intensive); conflict dynamics can evolve very fast;
- for data collection and analysis, local networks and ‘observatory’ functions are critical (though resource intensive); they can also help to triangulate and qualify data which is notoriously hard to collect reliably;
- some concern was expressed about the principle of limiting quantitative indicators: can they express the complexity of conflicts? Would composite indicators be better to capture some of the intersecting factors in conflict build-up (e.g. transnational crime, climate change, use of social media etc.)?
- a system must also be able to pick up “weak signals” which may be significant;
- the NATO and OSCE HCNM systems are appealing because they are focussed and draw on capacities held in-house; plus the NATO one has mechanisms for building capacity and ownership of its members; could EU Member States be brought into an EU EW system in a similar way?
- perhaps the EEAS would rather need a more effective system of institutional reporting and a management system which uses that information appropriately; an example of good practice was how the accession reports were developed ten years ago;
- EEAS faces a ‘triple bind’ both of strategic communications and management challenges between the institutional hierarchy and the Member States but also as a nascent body and membership institution, and because of the nature of its bureaucratic culture.

Presentation of warning information

- In order to process, present and receive information, institutional and other biases must be addressed. This requires regular training, application of policies (for example to avoid gender blindness) and internal controls. Human insight, intuition and experience remain invaluable throughout the system;
- there are issues related to the openness of the system and the classification of information it generates and shares: there are political sensitivities when countries are put on ‘watch lists’.
- conflict heritage is significant, and is already reflected in the EEAS tools.

V Development of an EEAS Early Warning Risk Matrix (EWRM) and a Country Conflict Assessment (CCA) Format

The main features of the CCA and EWRM were presented and discussed in preparation of the working group sessions.

EWRM

The purpose of the matrix is to visualise the risk of violent conflict through presenting assessments at three levels:

- long-term vulnerabilities
- medium term issues
- potential real-time triggers.

It is a light-touch tool, which is not intended to replace human analysis. It should help to monitor medium and longer-term trends and developments in conflict risk areas. It is designed to be regularly updated with minimal human resources, and should either incorporate or refer to existing EU assessment tools relevant for conflict risk analysis. Presentation and communication have been key factors in the design. It was noted that reliable data sources in countries affected by conflict is problematic.

CCA

The CCA is the product of a review and update of an existing tool developed more than 10 years ago by DG Relex. Key changes include expanding the categories of root causes of conflict from eight to ten¹, and reframing some of the categories. The CCA is to be filled in by EU Delegation staff to tap the rich, existing knowledge at country level (which includes other relevant in-country missions/operations such as humanitarian or CSDP ones). The CCA feeds into the EWRM. In each of the ten problem areas there is a series of statements to prepare for the presentation of a 'strong statement' at the end of the section and start a discussion process. Also, the CCA could trigger the commissioning of an in-depth analysis.

Plenary discussion

Purpose and terminology

- Participants highlighted the importance of a robust conflict risk assessment process aimed at conflict mitigation and prevention; EW tools and systems alone cannot replace such a process;
- analysis should be presented upfront, alongside the data; most participants felt strongly that stakeholder analysis should be a feature of this.

Data collection and management

- Qualitative data integration is vital to make up for the deficiencies of quantitative data. Data can be weighted by experts (e.g. this was done in FAST), according to its significance in the particular context;
- there can be a significant time lag between data collection (especially official data) and its publication that can affect the picture presented;
- event data are essential to give a semblance of 'real time' analysis;
- one participant presented a model for linking an early warning system to on-going media monitoring (Europe Media Monitor or OPTIMA) which links field-based analysts to an open source media monitoring platform;
- the problem of bias or exclusion in collecting, analysing and relaying data was also noted – in particular (though not only) with regard to women and gender. The all-female contingent of the Civilian Protection Corps of Mindanao (Philippines) International Monitoring Team is an example of good practice.

¹ Key problem areas now include: legitimacy, rule of law, security, fundamental rights, civil society and media, inter-ethnic/intercommunal relations, economic performance, disaster resilience, social welfare/inequality, regional security/stability.

On the EWRM, it was suggested that identifying the sources helps the understanding of the reader and the responsibility and the buy-in of the provider of information.

Participants felt that the strategic interest of the EU – a main concern for the decision-makers – should feature more clearly in the tool.

On the CCA process there were diverging views on the necessity and feasibility of making it compulsory for EU Delegations to complete the CCA, and also on the intervals. Proper training is very important to ensure common understanding and interpretation of the system by the users and recipients of the warnings, as well as a consistent use of terminology.

There was concern that transnational and regional issues and linkages are not well enough reflected in either document; similarly it was pointed out that different conflicts at different levels may be going on within one country; so clarity about what is being addressed is important. This relates also to data collection that may go on at sub-national levels and below (where there may be differences in the quality of data collected compared to national level).

In summary, participants argued:

- The purpose of the proposed EEAS early warning system needs to be further elaborated;
- high impact communication of a warning is essential (it was noted that interactive maps/visuals are under discussion in the EEAS).

There is a strong interest in stakeholder analysis, but more support and ideas are needed in identifying the most appropriate networks and sources. At a later stage in the process, the EEAS already has useful mechanisms like the [Civil Society Dialogue Network](#) for undertaking broader consultations on conflict risk assessments to inform policy decisions; finally the transnational dimension is recognized as critical and thus it is intended to organise the EWRM in regional clusters.

VI Working groups input to the EWRM and CCA

The group was split into two working groups to provide concrete input and suggestions. Group A dealt with the EWRM, considering a set of [questions](#). Group B addressed the CCA with its own set of [questions](#).

EWRM

This group requested clarification on the purpose of the tool so as to better refine their comments. It was explained that the CCA as a first step generates a two-page report for each country from which the information is extracted which is contained in the matrix; for better visualisation a map could be supplied in addition. There is then a planned ‘filtering process’ through regionally defined working groups, possibly in the framework of the Conflict Prevention Group (the informal internal body which brings together all departments working on conflict prevention in the institutions) to decide situations which are critical, or below the radar screen and requiring attention of some kind. Consultations with Member States will take place in parallel. Some indicators are reviewed yearly, some more frequently. The assumption is that this would be undertaken in all countries where there is an EU presence, but only some would be followed up in depth depending on findings.

Purpose and terminology

- The discussion on the purpose of the EU early warning system circled back on the issue that the system will produce what you design it for: i.e. a system whose inputs are mainly updated annually will produce responses suitable for a similar timeframe;
- will the system follow situations which are “under the radar”, rather than, for example on-going conflicts such as Somalia or Afghanistan. While the results of the EW system could feed into, for example, Country Strategy Papers, the timeframe on such papers is too long (seven years) to be the main target of such a system;

- in order to keep senior management attention on an issue rather than on given action recommendations, it might be preferable to identify key flashpoints to watch (elections, seasonal migration etc., religious festival etc.);
- recommendations would be useful but should be tailored based on the purpose of the warnings (so for example operational recommendations like reviewing EUD security levels might not be appropriate);
- a pilot could be used to demonstrate how mitigation and resilience can be mapped.

Data collection and management

Data sources were proposed (some of which are already in use in the EWRM):

- Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research's annual [Conflict Barometer](#);
- various [SIPRI](#) indices including the Failed States Index and Armed Conflicts Index;
- Uppsala Conflict Data Program Database plus the [IISS Armed Conflict Database](#);
- the value of the data in the [World Development Report 2011](#) (which can be manipulated to see, for example, changes over time) was noted;
- crude indicators like how often the [International Crisis Group](#) issues alerts/reports can be surprisingly useful;
- [GNWP](#) has a civil society tool for tracking implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that has indicators relevant to assessing conflict risks;
- [IANSA and the Small Arms Survey](#) track small arms flows in their yearbook;
- missing indicators/features identified included cyber and organized crime, arms flows of all kinds, climate change, demographics like youth bulges, unemployment (including of youth), stakeholder analysis including with Diaspora, food security, access to natural resources, access to land; additionally, degree of trade openness, amount of natural resources, the size and strength of armed forces and armed groups;
- perceptions are as important as facts, e.g. "how safe do people feel?" is as important as the strength and level of training of the police force, for example;
- data showing the comparative strength or weakness of civil society can be hard to come by, as is data on external security assistance (including the work of private security companies) to/in third countries;
- media monitoring is hampered by the language factor, and one must always be aware of repeated incident reporting; some participants stressed it was the most valuable tool by far, but that automated systems were never as effective as the labour intensive work of human analysis;
- the need to counter deception strategies in the provision of data was noted;
- peer review, challenge dialogue and rotation of experts in EW systems are all crucially important but resource intensive;
- the clustering of issues and events, the identification of trends and also actor mapping, are all critical activities;
- how many sources are needed per indicator? For participants, up to five sources would be acceptable, although in many cases one might only have one or two sources;
- in terms of sharing/collaborating with others, the ECOWAS model of periodic tendering of the management of their CEWS system (in terms of provision of the information to be input) was highlighted.

CCA

Purpose and terminology

- The group also discussed the need to better understand the purpose of the early warning, particularly clarity on whether the CCA is meant to generate further discussion or trigger specific actions with regards to e.g. operations or programmes;
- it was noted that if the CCA represents a first step and could trigger a more in depth analysis (where appropriate) then it could be simplified and shortened;
- the wording used in the preparatory statements and final statements in some of the sections fails to account for the complexity of the context under review and can be at

times irritating as they do not fit all the possible country contexts and conflict, or post-conflict situations (the example of Kosovo was made).

Collection and management of data

It is recognized that the information generated by the CCA is subjective, but it was also noted that the data of the CCA should be cross-checked not just by desks but also by IntCen (the EEAS Intelligence Centre), building in mechanisms to manage the sensitivity of the information. Some thought that Member States should be consulted at the field/country level, and also that local stakeholders should be included. There was a sense that the process would be very top-down. This led to a discussion on how consultation could be carried out on the ground after a draft version has been completed online by a delegated EU Delegation staff members (who may or may not be a conflict specialist; but the likelihood is that they cannot all be, nor will all have received training). Essentially the process beyond the simple filling of the questionnaire could be very significant, as well as the level of training and awareness of those undertaking it.

The group reflected on how to handle responses that contradict the answers of previous years, focussing on the need to have a solid baseline. There is an existential question as to whether it is even possible to have an objective baseline; but it is useful to know what a particular institution, as well as other stakeholders, think about a particular situation. This led also to reflections on how to make sure that each year's iteration builds on the former one to promote continuous institutional learning. Significant event marking can be very helpful as a way to focus the minds of those receiving and processing composite analysis and information in terms of EW.

There was some reflection on the original CCA process, which was started in 1999 as a paper exercise and then went online. It was found that it was very dependent on individuals filling it in. The experience showed that people cannot and will not spend much time on it and that triangulation was highly necessary. But the key finding of this experience was how much relevant information was gathered though it that was not coming in through the standard reporting and monitoring channels from delegations to headquarters.

Participants felt that it was important to be more rigorous about drawing on existing sources, which may have invested significantly more time and resources in analysing root causes of conflicts. In terms of internal sources, it was noted that EU political reporting also contributes to this.

The binary choices required by the format of the questionnaire (with very limited space for analysis and description) could be problematic. This design does reflect the institution's theory of conflict, as it posits specific causal links (e.g. between ineffective civil society and potential conflict risk). In addition the 'don't know' box on the questionnaire elicited concerns that professionals would be worried about demonstrating less than complete knowledge of the context in which they worked. Participants felt that the standardized format, while understandable, may frustrate and irritate respondents who cannot see how it fits well to their own contexts.

The "problem areas" list (as reflected in the statements in the questionnaire)

The list was described as capturing a set of factors that the EU believes in many contexts is part of the structural factors that enable or directly cause violent conflict.

The following points were raised by participants:

- **Gender responsiveness:** most of the issues/statements are gender-blind and could be improved, and certainly in the case of e.g. rule of law and fundamental rights, social welfare and equality. The question here is the relation of structural gender equality issues to the root cases of conflict.
- **Difference between risk factors and predictors** of violent of conflict should be highlighted.

- **Section on Legitimacy:** having no constitution and having a constitution that is violated are two very different things. There is an important distinction between having civilian control and having proper oversight and checks and balances at the parliamentary level that is confused here. Reference not just to corruption but to the consequences and impact of corruption should be included.
- **Section on Security:** this was one area that has been 'elevated' to its own problem area in this new version of the CCA. An indicator on the interplay between the military and political parties and structures in this section and the rule of law section should be included.
- **Section on Media:** given that the media is never really impartial, wording in this section could include reference to the fact that media "evidently" fails to show the range of different points of view.
- **Section on Civil Society:** the statement "civil society is ineffective" and preceding statements are rather blunt. A reference to the lack of an 'enabling environment' could be included.
- **Regional specific conflict / risk indicators** are missing and could be added. Current OSCE's work on early warning design includes different set of indicators for the different regions where different categories of risk factors emerge as relevant.

Additional issues / suggestions from participants:

- Alternative approach to the CCA could be asking simple questions like: "is conflict likely in your context, in what timeframe and based on what factors, involving what actors?" and then allow the recipient to structure their own responses; this however depends on the sensitivity and level of conflict analysis knowledge of the people on the ground;
- as the format does not allow for explanations on the responses given, a comments box could be added to make sure staff in EU delegations can provide additional explanations on the choices in the questionnaire and on whether or not they agree with the ways statements are formulated in relation to their specific context;
- the questionnaire's repeated request to review reform processes (and other relevant developments) fails to address the issue that reform, while positive in the long run, may trigger violent conflict in the short term;
- the need for training to support implementation of the CCA and to ensure consistency in the use of terminology and its understanding;
- the term 'assessment' might well be problematic (suggesting it was more in-depth than it is intended to be), but participants did not offer alternatives. It was also suggested to reflect on whether the term 'conflict' actually belongs in the title;
- the term "conflict" in the title should also be reconsidered in view of the actual purpose and nature of the exercise.

VII Next steps

The meeting closed with appreciation expressed for the active and open participation of all, and a summary of the next steps that the EEAS will take: the EEAS will prepare a proposal to senior policy-makers having reflected on the range of inputs received. The early warning system will then most likely be piloted in an identified region of the world.