



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES REFUGEE

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON EARLY WARNING AND EARLY RESPONSE

The Continuing Quest for Early Warning and Early Response

Susanne Schmeidl

At an Early Warning Conference on 15–17 March 1997 in Toronto, Ontario (see summary in this issue), one of the participants approached me with the comment that it was interesting to see that the same issues from about ten years ago are still being discussed. Hearing such a comment makes one wonder if we will ever move beyond the stage of discussion into the implementation of early warning—rapid response and early action. In many ways such a prospect is very frustrating; one feels in a time trap, doomed to repeat history over and over again.

Yet, while I agree to some extent with the comment that early warning researchers are still struggling with similar issues as several years ago, I would argue that a shift has occurred. In the early years of early warning, the focus was not really on preventive action *before* the outbreak of a crisis, but more on early warning for preparing responses *after* a crisis has occurred and created refugees. Thus, while we may struggle with similar issues that in many ways are linked to the definition of early warning, changes have

nevertheless occurred (see also the article by Howard Adelman on the history of early warning).

One of the most important changes is that early warning is no longer an

exotic topic discussed only by a few individuals. Early warning has gone mainstream. This has led to an explosion of individuals and organizations that do early warning, or redefine their

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own work as early warning. In addition, many more governments now ponder the issue of early warning and consider the creation of special units (see the proposal by Andreas Kohlschütter and Günther Bächler to the Swiss government). On the one hand, I welcome this intense focus on early warning, since the topic deserves thorough consideration. On the other hand, I see the "early warning boom" as somewhat harmful to the cause. There is a German saying that "too many cooks spoil the soup," particularly if they disagree what the soup should look and taste like. Similarly, too many approaches to early warning will merely add to the confusion of the issues, lead to duplication, contradictions, and ultimately competition over scarce resources. This is not what early warning should be about. Early warn-

Quantitative and qualitative analysis is still done separately, and only a few efforts combine both. As briefly touched upon in an article in the last special issue of *Refuge* on early warning, the ideal would be to combine both methods, and our research should focus on achieving this goal.

Yet, despite all these advances, we still hit strong resistance in policy circles when it comes to early warning. The most widely used argument as to why early warning cannot be pursued is that there is a lack of political will, which we are unable to change regardless of our advances in information gathering, sharing and analysis. This argument, however, is an easy resignation: it cannot be done, so we will not do it. The world would never have seen some of its greatest inventions if certain inventors and scientists had

... the fruits of past early warning efforts and research are now visible. I would make the argument that information now is readily available to users. Thanks to the World Wide Web and electronic networks, information is at our fingertips.

ing, by definition, has to do with cooperation and the sharing of information. Therefore, it is important in this ever-growing field to seek collaboration among the different parties doing early warning. This issue of *Refuge* provides two such examples: the Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER) and the Burundi/Great Lakes Policy Forum (Barnett Rubin and Fabienne Hara).

Nevertheless, the fruits of past early warning efforts and research are now visible. I would make the argument that information now is readily available to users. Thanks to the World Wide Web and electronic networks, information is at our fingertips. Recent developments in search engines, and more importantly, computerized coding, have even facilitated the intake of the surplus of information in order to avoid an overload. While we have made advances in the research of early warning, we are still falling short of merging different approaches in order to obtain the most complete picture.

resigned themselves so easily. Whatever happened to the human spirit of pushing ahead and producing change? Has the world turned all of us into couch potatoes willing to observe events, but too hesitant and lazy to become actors?

I agree with those who argue that political will can be created. After all we know the CNN effect, when outside pressure "makes up the mind" of politicians to do something. If CNN can do it, then aimed and structured analysis with policy options should also be able to do it. The latter has the advantage of providing clear policy options based on thorough analysis, while the CNN effect merely plays on sentiments.

In addition, why not try early warning and see how it works? Of course we still need to learn much about its implementation and what action is best to take. Nevertheless, without trying—and I mean systematically not *ad hoc*—we will never know if it will work. So far, early warnings have been ignored

for many reasons. It seems we have tried so many things that have not worked, so why not give early warning a shot? If policymakers are so sure about its failure, they should at least amass some empirical evidence for this position. But perhaps policymakers

approach early warning. Despite surveying academic, UN, and NGO efforts in early warning, as well as providing some critical comments, certain areas remained untouched. One of the most important areas, as should be apparent from the discussion so far, is

specifically dealt with here. Moreover, no government approach was surveyed. Rather, this issue has a special section on European perspectives which includes an article by Kohlschütter and Bächler on the proposal of an early warning system for the Swiss government, and an article by Julie Fournier on the state of conflict prevention in France. Both articles are complementary, with Switzerland being a very small country with a long history of neutrality, and France being a very big country with a long history of interventionism and power politics in Africa. The two articles provide a perfect example of the constraints and challenges such different countries face when struggling with the issue of early warning.

So far, early warnings have been ignored for many reasons ... If policymakers are so sure about its failure, they should at least amass some empirical evidence for this position. But perhaps policymakers are afraid that early warning may actually work. Then, they would have to respond to something they may not want to respond to. After all, was it not a policy rationale that human lives are dispensable for the greater political good?

are afraid that early warning may actually work. Then, they would have to respond to something they may not want to respond to. After all, was it not a policy rationale that human lives are dispensable for the greater political good? Are policymakers afraid that we may actually be able to change events on the ground? Would it be such a bad thing to live in a world without conflict? Or are policymakers afraid they could put themselves out of business? After all, the more conflict, the more necessity to monitor, work on policy options, provide aid, etc. Surely, there must be justifications for policymakers other than going from crisis to crisis and emergency to emergency. Some might criticize me for straying from my area of knowledge. But I do know that crises *can* be prevented if we do it right, and that conflict and human suffering are in most cases avoidable and unnecessary. I disagree very much with the notion that human lives are dispensable, and I am sure that policymakers would too if it was their life (or that of family) at stake. As much as I hate to use the Nike slogan, it seems to fit when it comes to early warning: We have come a long way, so "Let's just do it!"

About a year ago, I edited the first special issue of *Refuge* on early warning. While compiling this issue, it became readily apparent that one edition alone may not be enough to provide even a glimpse of the different ways to

the link between early warning and early action. This particular link can make or break early warning in the eyes of many. After all, what good is it to know, if one cannot act. Therefore, early action or early response (or even preventive response) seems to be an inherent component of early warning, although the latter evolution only appeared in the past ten years. The article by Howard Adelman provides an historical overview of how early warning and the perception of early warning have evolved. This article is very important for an understanding of the meaning of early warning. It may also aid in clearing up certain misunderstandings about early warning that arise from different definitions.

This link between early warning and action is also explored in the two NGO perspectives that add to that provided in the last special issue of *Refuge*. The two articles do not simply provide a description of activities; one emphasizes how early warning is perceived by NGOs and linked to early action (the article by Kate Whidden); while the other provides a concrete approach on how the resources of NGOs can be pooled together for continuous early warning and monitoring of conflict areas, with the ultimate goal to impact on the activities on the ground (article by Rubin and Hara).

While the last special issue provided some critical commentary on early warning in Europe, this subject is not

Finally, rather than updating the directory of early warning (which is still in the works), I decided to include some more detailed information on a very new consortium on early warning—The Forum on Early Warning and Early Response, and a brief report on a recent conference in early warning. Both efforts in a way pool the different perspectives together. FEWER comprises UN, NGO and academic members (with governments in a contact group), while the conference attempts to survey all spheres of early warning, challenges to it, and ways to overcome diversity in order to reach synergy.

I hope this issue of *Refuge* will not be perceived as a repetition of old issues, but rather as an introduction to new perspectives. We need to keep the focus on early warning and continue to try to convince policymakers to act. In addition, we need to pool our resources towards a joint effort of early warning and early response, so that we can look back ten years from now with the satisfaction of knowing that we have come a long way indeed. ■

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