Our participation in CEWARN began in 2002 at a meeting of regional experts who gathered together in Addis Ababa to discuss how one could monitor field events to warn on potential escalation into violence. The CEWARN approach—I would not characterise it as a formal model at this juncture—began with the challenge of tracking the failures to prevent violence. Virtual Research Associates’ (VRA) involvement in CEWARN was from the beginning more focused on the technical issues and software tool design and support for other tasks such as regular calibrations, Quality Assurance Control and training. We have had less involvement in the analytic side, except in helping to develop templates to formalise the reporting.

We built on the earlier PANDA project—Protocol for the Assessment of Nonviolent Direct Action, beginning with identification of what would become the target or dependent variables mandated by CEWARN. These include, for example, armed clashes, protest demonstrations, raids and other forms of violence.
and crime. Our focus was on the violence associated with pastoral conflict. Because the sponsors and IGAD prioritised this focus and because the regional expert participants were all familiar with pastoral violence, it was relatively straightforward to translate the phenomena into a reporting template for field observers to use whenever they saw it.

The following statement from the PANDA report summarises the basic conceptual approach based on experience with tracking nonviolent direct action that we subsequently implemented at CEWARN:

We treated nonviolent direct action, then, as a precursor to possible violence. We invoked the notion that violence does not erupt from a vacuum. Numerous precursors, including hate speech, accusations, demands and even flight could signal escalation into violent repression or instability. In this way the utility of the PANDA Project for providing early warnings on violence was established.¹

During the 2002 meeting we posed the question, “how do you know when such violence will erupt?” At this point we began to tape paper onto the four walls of the conference room listing the many precursors of violence the participants identified.

These precursors ranged from the usual revenge attacks to the pressures associated with economic constraints to changes in bride price and the pre-raid blessings of elders—all factors universally hailed as common indicators of an imminent raid. All several hundred variables were posted on the paper-covered walls during that first planning meeting with CEWARN.

We presented our approach of using incident reports (IncReps) as a target variable to measure the failures in early warning and using a periodic systematic observation template (situation reports or SitReps) based on the precursors to measure how their evolving levels of intensity signalled potential escalation. It took us another two rounds of review with the initial CEWARN staff to reduce several hundred precursors to several tens of operationalised indicators for the SitRep template that was operationalised in July 2003.

The challenges of refining the indicators took over a year. Problems of quality assurance and training undermined data quality, but the first year experience also gave us an important understanding of the potential as well as limits of weekly SitRep field reporting, as confirmed by the reporting of episodic failures as they happened.

¹ The “we” in the paragraph above refers to a group of colleagues at Harvard with whom I worked from 1988 to 2007. The “we” in the rest of these notes refer to VRA, the consulting company I started in 1996, where I continue to serve as a principal while maintaining my affiliation and teaching at Harvard University as an International Relations Advisor and Lecturer in Extension.
We began to have reasonably clean data by sometime in 2004 and it is at this point that our attention turned toward establishing baselines of the indicators, which we immediately saw as highlighting the seasonal pattern defined by the long and short rains each year. Around the same time, we also looked at the correlation between the heightened levels of observed indicators and the violence reported in the IncRep. The seasonal climatic patterns we observed also subsumed how foliage and rainfall variables might be driving some of the escalation of communal conflicts during times of environmental stress.

We have developed custom early warning applications and continuously supported field monitoring operations since 1999 in more than 70 countries. The applications range from corporate security to child protection services to risk to international organisations’ staff safety in different countries. Our monitoring and analysis applications are currently in operation at COMESA, CEWARN, CEWS, and ECOWAS regional economic communities (RECs), and we have also worked with the East African Community and the UN. All of the applications implemented are now in their third generation of upgrades to make the best use of emerging technologies enabling mobile devices to incorporate the fusion of diverse sources and types of data.

We have integrated an SMS channel input to offer a rapid reporting option that can be supplemented later via a linked IncRep. Our experience has shown that it is both scalable and adaptable for tracking a variety of dynamic indicators. We also combine this with structural vulnerability assessment applications that are in use in some of the same organisations listed above. We also are deploying an integrated data console for another African Regional Economic Community with a community discussion application featuring an interactive display for geographic and graphical, tabular and narrative data.

I do not consider CEWARN as a “big data” initiative and certainly not in respect to its focused origins. Perhaps it going in that direction in terms of its integration of diverse data streams, but as I see it, the CEWARN effort is still focused on a limited number of thematic contexts that were expanded under the 2012-2019 CEWARN Strategy.

The CEWARN model can be replicated to address problems like another Ebola epidemic or electoral violence. I suggest that the best tool for addressing these ephemeral challenges is a more focused mobile-only app for rapid mass use instead of the customised comprehensive model used by our clients to date. This is not to say that the two approaches cannot be combined, but only that the urgent need for rapid, mass participation
in observations would favour the quick deployment of simpler tools.

When people question the costs, it is important to remind them that CEWARN is an investment that will continue to generate returns over the long-run. This is why I disagree with the premise of the proposition that the investment is too high in respect to the outputs, and also with the unstated and ambiguous measure of what constitutes success. I have been asked by dozens of donors, “...but what conflicts did you actually prevent?” The answer, of course, is a logical impossibility since nothing would have happened in the case of a “success.”

What I have witnessed over the years, however, are arbitrary, ill-informed or ignorant decisions based on the view that early warning and monitoring mechanisms are too expensive and require too much time to become effective. These arguments periodically resurface even though the case for the critical deliverables they provide remains the same. This is why the focus of discussion should be the problem-solving capacity generated by the modest investment in the people that participate in programs like CEWARN.

I firmly believe that the funds to support efforts like CEWARN should be counted as an investment with a return, and not a cost simply to be donated. If an investment is to reap a return, human resources have to be given ample time to learn and to sustain their own system instead of spending an inordinate amount of time trying to respond to the logically impossible challenges of substantiating “success.”

After working with these professionals for some fifteen years beginning with minimal infrastructure support, I have seen our CEWARN colleagues develop into competent analysts working on behalf of their communities. Their investigation of situations that may escalate into violence is a form of citizen empowerment and their sustained attention on the precursors to violence are critical to both the prevention of conflicts and to good governance.

I advocate all investments contain a sunset provision that will allow for a mentoring role in order to maintain state of the art development. Recently we have talked about training local technology vendors to take over the technical support of CEWARN and reserving our involvement for periodic mentoring and perhaps assessment. I welcome this development.
The account above was drafted in 2016. Around the same time CEWARN began a series of consultations with regional analysts to formulate the specifications for an upgraded field monitoring and analysis application. In addition to a technological software platform upgrade, the primary issues addressed in this new formulation were an expansion of the scope of monitoring to reflect CEWARN’s newly articulated theme-based strategy. This requires the adoption of a multi-dimensional analysis approach to CEWARN’s field situation assessments that goes beyond the focus on pastoralist conflict.

The CEWARN review and design workshops in mid-2016 produced specifications for the modifications, and within a year a pilot application was deployed with a view towards generating feedback for its ongoing improvement.

By early 2019, a more robust platform with refined analytic features based on the feedback was ready for review. By mid-summer 2019 the application was stabilised and deployed.

The 2019 version of the CEWARN Reporter includes theme-linked assessments as well as an upgraded interface for both incidents and situation reports. Expanding CEWARN’s approach to address the new strategy entailed segmenting the collection of data into thematic categories: economy, environment, governance, security, society, and response. The CEWARN Reporter now links each incident and situation report with its thematic focus. Its refined interface and complementary features support multi-dimensional contextualised analyses.

The Reporter now provides comprehensive situation risk scores, calculating both raw and mitigated risk values. The risk component scores of impact and likelihood are also presented as indicated by ratings of the current condition and escalation potential, respectively. A response adequacy rating is used to calculate mitigated risk scores. This risk assessment approach offers diagnostic information to better understand the volatile conditions prior to escalation as well as guidance for the formulation of responses.

Perhaps the most important feature of the 2019 version of the CEWARN Reporter is its support for the identification of vulnerable or “at-risk” groups. By providing mainstream integration of gender in every field situation assessment, offering 100 per cent engendered ratings for the groups at risk in all of CEWARN’s situation assessments. The 2019 CEWARN Reporter includes the following seven groups at risk, as well as a residual “other” group that can be specified: boys, girls, men, women, elder men and elder women, plus differently abled, other (can be specified),
and all (the default). By identifying more precisely groups in need of support, CEWARN is now able to facilitate improved formulation of response initiatives that are tailored to the groups at risk.

Finally, the 2019 version adds the ability to customise weights for the situation assessments. In the past, an equal weighting scheme had been used. This new feature allows CEWARN to implement a country-specific weight by individual thematic foci and indicators for use in all situational analysis calculations.

The resultant country-specific scores are more readily interpretable and hopefully useful for analysts at both the regional and national level. In closing I would like to return to my earlier comment about the CEWARN investment. Ideally CEWARN’s success might be measured by conflicts prevented, but such a performance metric implies an absence of conflict behaviour can be used to support its prevention, but the absence of evidence is not the same as the presence of evidence. Nevertheless, CEWARN has compiled a number of anecdotal reports of its role in activating prevention and mitigation initiatives, and importantly CEWARN engages in an active effort to support rapid response initiatives as well as its preventive monitoring.

What is equally important is the vibrant capacity and network that is clearly evident in the participants involved in sustaining CEWARN activities and the CEWARN network of national, regional and continental partners. CEWARN has conducted regular assessments of their effort and has adapted to its expanded mandates with cutting-edge technologies as they have become available. Still, challenges remain, and they are not significantly different since their articulation in the CEWARN Strategy Document from 2006.

The major challenge facing IGAD and all other African RECs remains the question of sustainability and ownership of these core programs, which are crucial to the peace, security and development of the continent. Heavy reliance on donor support presents problems of sustainability and ownership which must be overcome consciously.

I would like to close by suggesting that building such “sustainability and ownership” is well-rooted at CEWARN, but realising the full return from the institutional investment will require that CEWARN utilise its accumulated mass of regional expertise over the coming years if peace is to have any chance of displacing violence in the IGAD region.

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