I became involved in this project right at the beginning in 1999. IGAD itself had decided as an organisation to put together a conflict prevention management strategy and within that there were several components. One of the areas was the establishment of a conflict early warning mechanism for the IGAD region. There was growing interest in early warning at the time due to the Rwandan genocide. I had just joined the London-based Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER). Then, I went to Addis for work in November 1999, and decided to proceed to Djibouti and engage with IGAD officials on the advertisement.

Our team at FEWER registered our interest in helping IGAD implement the early warning initiative. We put together a strong team that included Howard Edelman, Bethuel Kiplagat, Josephine Odera, and Susan Schmeidl. FEWER had already done some work on this issue, and we were selected to undertake the work. We then signed a contract with the German development agency GTZ (now GIZ) and
the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) who became the key partners helping IGAD to set up the mechanism. While exciting, the idea of a regional early warning system in the Horn of Africa also struck me as rather ambitious. The Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, one of the deadliest recent inter-state wars, was still raging. The Sudan peace agreement was yet to be implemented and like Somalia was in a state of civil war.

The idea that this region could develop this kind of mechanism seemed to be far-fetched. For example: countries had to express a certain level of willingness to engage with each other in conflict resolution. That implied a high degree of trust and open channels of communication. None of these basics were really in place. We spent a lot of time asking ourselves if the region’s governments were really serious about doing this?

It soon became clear that they wanted to do it, and that they had secured funding to do it. Our job was to make the project happen. The very first thing we had to do was ask the member states some basic questions: how do you view IGAD as a regional organisation, what is the level of commitment, and what are your priorities? IGAD was not an organisational priority for many of the countries. Our first task was to go around the member states to understand how they each engaged with IGAD. We were able to get a feel for the level of commitment based on that first round of consultation. We talked with all sorts of people in government, in the security sector and in foreign ministries. We quickly decided that the project was ultimately about developing a plan for collaborative action by regional Member States in order to address shared issues of conflict.

This is where the pragmatism came in. There were many issues of common concern, but that did not mean that these countries were ready to work together to resolve them. You had to be reasonably sure that you could elicit some collaborative action but not necessarily by the whole network of seven countries. We began to explore the matter of process. What is the project’s entry point and what are the issues on which these countries could actually collaborate?

A number of the countries, although not all, were able through a series of workshops to come up with options and issues for further consideration. In the end, we decided that consensus could potentially be achieved by addressing cross-border pastoralist conflicts. We then moved on to the question of geography with a view towards determining where the approach could be tested. This is how the idea of clusters such as the Karamoja Cluster (straddling the shared border zones of Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda), the Somali Cluster (encompassing cross-border areas of Ethiopia,
Kenya and Somalia) and the Dikhil Cluster (covering an area spanning Djibouti and its shared border zones with Ethiopia) came about. At the time we also contemplated doing something for the far north of the Horn, albeit the view was that this was probably not realistic at the time. We decided that it would be impossible to have any traction in the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict because the hostile relationships between the governments at the time obviated the prospects for meaningful cooperation.

We decided to choose ‘softer’ areas where countries were open to collaboration and where there were already existing structures and initiatives that could be strengthened. We adopted a very practical approach. What we did not do was try to create a kind of a comprehensive system to deal with all the issues of the larger region. That would have been a major mistake.

The thinking was that over time once you succeed this would build confidence, and then we would be able to look at other different issues across the region. This led to the plan to establish national conflict early warning units. The idea was to connect what our analyses showed in areas where there were already national-level initiatives. What was lacking were national actors who would then be able to create a bridge to other member states in order to move the initiative higher up the political chain. This incremental approach arguably added value to the CEWARN project over time.

The national Conflict Early Warning and Response Units (CEWE-RU) were established to serve this purpose. Fostering collaboration began with what we determined to be soft areas—places where the prospects for progress were high. Kenya and Ethiopia, for example, offered a long-standing tradition of collaboration and mutual understanding. Coordination on cross-border issues was not something new for these two countries. There was a structure for handling local issues functioning at different levels in place. What was missing was a system for backing up local collaboration on the higher-level policy issues.

I have always found that when you go down to the ground you find the actors are relatively open to innovation. This is because there are not that many of them in the first place and they don’t really have much to work with in terms of resources. So if you really want to be effective first you need to form working partnerships, then continue to meet with your counterparts regularly. You can talk to people in Nairobi, for example, and they might be interested in the problem but when you go down to the local level you find that the practice is already there and you can actually do something to improve how the actors are going about it. We began building on pre-existing forms of cooperation, mapping cross-border issues, and examining
what these countries were already doing in the domain we were targeting. Our intervention was based on a combination of understanding the problem globally, utilising regional experts and holding workshops to refine the approach. Participants in the workshops said they wanted to legalise the initiative in the form of a formal protocol originating from within the region. This moved it from being an ad hoc structure to something formally embedded.

After agreeing on all of this, we had to fashion tools of information analysis and consider what the longer-term process would be. That task required its own detailed design based on what you see in various other kinds of information gathering and analysis projects, including how humanitarian agencies operate. They collect information starting from the local levels and feed that up the analytic chain. To develop the informational component of the project we needed people who could do quality control, refine and generate the data, and then disseminate it.

The response side and how it works was the less visible aspect of the problem. What is the platform for joint decision-making? Early warning thinking and theory has been around since the Rwanda genocide. But there are not that many examples of an actual early warning system that works. The response side is critical to the efficacy of other components such as training, the information-gathering protocol and analysis, and developing an efficient system generating the right information. It is not about collecting information as much as what you do with the information.

The landmark meeting for developing and designing the proposed system for the IGAD region was held in Nairobi in 2000. It brought together a range of participants. Everyone was kind of mystified at the beginning; there were lots of sceptics. People weighed in by claiming, “Oh, it is not possible for this region to do this, and the state security agencies will never collaborate”. The next meeting was held in Asmara later that year, in December 2000. Ethiopia did not attend but the head of IGAD peace and security happened to be an Ethiopian national. It was at this meeting where the protocol was negotiated, a very tough exercise. There were arguments about how people wanted information to flow, about the ownership of information, and over who would ultimately be responsible for collating and analysing it. But the issues people were most concerned with focused on how decisions would be made and how the early warning information would be treated at the political level.

The participants were taking the discussions about the operational and policy dimensions of the initiative very seriously. The differences
were worked out. The protocol was signed in January in Khartoum in 2001. That was quite impressive.

In hindsight, what I would have done differently at this juncture was spend a lot more time defining the geographic areas in order to get a better understanding how the system under development would work on the ground. It would have been useful to visit some of these regions to develop a deeper level of understanding of how the mechanisms would actually operate.

The reality was no one could know how they were going to function in the designated regions until later in the process. The focus of our work was identifying the entry points, and getting member states to agree that it was an initiative they could join. And although we succeeded on this score, it would have helped if we deployed some of the team members across the regional clusters to collect more feedback.

We talked a lot about resource conflicts at the time, and the areas were chosen according to specific criteria. We talked about cross-border conflicts with the reference to the major resource issues in these areas. We were not saying upfront that the early warning system would address all of them, but rather, that we wanted to build a foundation for collaborative action. The objective was to reach some sort of point where people would rely on those systems to support the collaboration and engage in the dialogue needed to resolve their conflicts.

Ten years later, I attended a meeting on Somalia in Nairobi in 2012 where I met a gentleman who said he was the CEWARN country coordinator for Somalia. I asked him what kind of work he did and he said he was involved in monitoring cross-border areas between Kenya and Somalia. I was truly amazed.

I said was that I was involved in the project at some point, but I didn’t go into the details. It was just nice to know this thing was alive and active in Mogadishu. At the time we anticipated that the project would probably take off in a few countries where it was actually functional. To hear someone from Mogadishu saying he was working for the CEWARN was very heart-warming.

Several Member States deeply committed to IGAD valued the organisation for specific purposes. Their representatives advised us that it would not be practical to do something comprehensive. “Yes, it’s a platform, yes, IGAD is influential on certain issues,” they said. But across the board commitment to what was to become CEWARN was pretty low in the beginning. That forced us to be very pragmatic about how we approached implementation, and to focus on niche areas. We built the confidence while understanding that we were building
an organisation that would expand or shrink according to its success.

I cannot think of any member state that stood up in the beginning and said this is an important organisation. But the decision makers did also say that they had to improve their ability to undertake joint action based on common analysis and understanding of the issues. There was quite a demand for that; the issue of common analysis was key to fostering the confidence that they required. Although it was difficult for the diplomats and bureaucrats to work together initially, they became our jump-off point. When the process took off and began to evolve, they began to value CEWARN. And based on that, who knows where this can go. It has already evolved considerably further than many people expected in the beginning.

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