The CEWARN Early Warning System’s Interface with the African Union

Early warning systems are critical to the African Union’s Peace and Security Architecture. IGAD has made progress in this domain and CEWARN has pioneered efforts to promote peace and development in the Horn of Africa region. It was among the first organisations to start working on indicators and data modules. We learnt a lot from the experience of CEWARN and those who worked hard to develop the initiative should be commended for breaking new ground. The peace-support operations undertaken by the African Union have benefitted from IGAD’s political leading role in the development of peace architecture. Situations that require deployment of the military on the ground are unsustainable without the support of a genuine political process, and this is why we are happy that IGAD is now expanding their early warning model to cover other aspects of conflict management. You can’t do conflict prevention without the necessary tools and early warn-
How do the early warning systems work within the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like IGAD and ECOWAS, and how do you assess the evolution of these mechanisms?

Each REC develops its own early warning system based on its own distinctive features and realities. IGAD began with pastoral conflicts. ECOWAS took on a larger set of issues, similar to the approach of the AU. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) adopted an approach similar to ECOWAS. But all of them should be linked to the AU and form a continental system that ultimately operates according to the same modalities.

In all these cases, the AU needs to interact better with the decision-making organs of the RECs. In the context of IGAD, for example, this means developing linkages with the Peace and Security Council, the Assembly of Heads-of-State, and the Council of Ministers in order to ensure we improve our capacity to coordinate and to act on the information generated by the early warning systems.

We wish we acted much earlier to prevent the crisis from turning into a full-blown conflict and we are still working hard to consolidate the September 2018 peace agreement that ended direct hostilities between the two main rival camps.
In an ideal African Union system where the early response is up and running - would we perhaps see an increasingly interventionist AU?

Let’s make a distinction between two important things. In addition to the early warning system, we have the African Standby Force drawn from the regional brigades. The East African region is operating within the framework of East African Command based in Nairobi and Addis Ababa.

The African Standby Force and its regional components can also be used in preventive diplomacy. This is one of their mandates. They can also be used to reinforce the settlement of conflicts as an external force overseeing the implementation of an agreement, like the peace accord in South Sudan. So the deployment of forces is just one among the many tools available to the AU and regional communities for handling conflicts. For every single conflict or potential conflict, the best option to prevent it from degenerating into a full-blown crisis is through diplomacy and negotiation. There are a variety of ways to keep the peace, not just the deployment of armed forces.

How dynamic is your AU peace and security architecture, and can it keep pace with changing conflicts?

It’s one of the more dynamic and effective systems in the context of the other regional economic communities’ early warning systems. We have intergovernmental tools at various regional and continental levels. There are institutions operating at different scales, dealing with different stakeholders, and looking into the variety of conflicts and challenges we are facing. When you look at the way the AU, IGAD and other REC institutions have been operating, although they have shouldered great responsibility, this doesn't mean they have succeeded. The many new challenges like terrorism that were not so prominent in the recent past are part of the problem.

Despite this dynamic, the system is flexible enough. The problem is mainly in the implementation. We have good documentation, useful agreements and conventions, but we need to work on implementation. Saying that what we have does not work effectively enough will only lead us to engage in an endless process of policy discussions.
Was there an early warning system in place that proved instrumental in determining the AU’s response to the Ebola epidemic?

The AU was not involved in the response because the continental early warning system (AUCEWS) is not designed to deal with epidemics. Other organisations, like the WHO in particular, were and still are better placed to do that than we are. The primary target of the early warning system in countries operating in places like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and their neighbours was related to the peace and security implications highlighted by the epidemic, hence the decision made by the Peace and Security Council to support an AU mission to assist in the Ebola zone.

Once again, this underscores the relevance of CEWARN’s efforts to expand their early warning mechanism to other drivers of conflict, like the current circulation of small arms and the long-term consequences of climate change.