

Ethiopia's Tigray conflict: exposing the limits of EU and AU early warning mechanisms

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Introduction



At the time of writing, the exact timeline and implications of the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region remain unclear. What is clear, however, is that two major international actors – the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) – have not been able to mitigate, yet alone prevent, the escalation of the crisis, despite having institutional mechanisms designed to do so. Given the investments in the past two decades – both financial and diplomatic – made into early warning mechanisms, the conflict raises the following questions: what accounts for the lack of early warning analysis and action on the part of the EU and the AU? Also, what future role can be envisaged for the conflict prevention toolboxes of these organisations? After giving an overview of the conflict that has unfolded in Tigray, this paper presents the EU and the AU's early warning mechanisms, analyses their weaknesses and recommends policies aimed at enhancing their effectiveness.

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**THE EU AND AU
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PREVENT THE
ESCALATION OF THE
TIGRAY CRISIS**

Immediate, intermediate and long-term causes of the conflict



On 4 November 2020, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that he had ordered the Ethiopian National Defence Soldiers to launch an attack on the county's northernmost Tigray region, aimed at **removing the governing Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) from power**. (1) This followed **armed assaults by the TPLF on the federal military Northern Command base** in Mekelle, (2) as well as on other military camps in Sero (3) and Dansha, (4) during which military hardware was seized – including heavy weapon stockpiles – and soldiers who refused to defect were detained or killed. (5) The attack was deemed by Addis Ababa an “act of high treason” and a “crime against constitutional order”, (6) requiring a “law enforcement operation”. (7) The attack was justified by Tigrayan leaders as an act of anticipation, as they perceived federal intervention as imminent. (8) The TPLF's assault on the military base was itself part of a broader movement of defiance by TPLF authorities, who in September 2020 conducted **regional legislative elections** despite Addis Ababa ordering to postpone these throughout the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (9)

The root cause of the conflict lies to disagreements over the **balance of power** between federal authorities and Ethiopia's regions. (10) After fighting the military dictatorship that governed the country throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the TPLF gained prominence when becoming the head of a ruling coalition in 1991. (11) During almost thirty years, the TPLF dominated Ethiopian politics and backed a system of **ethnic federalism**, which devolved significant legislative and executive powers to nine regions that were created largely in line with ethno-linguistic identities. Whilst the country achieved major economic growth during these years, the TPLF was criticised as exercising disproportionate power within the ruling coalition. The coalition – the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – comprised of four regional ruling parties, each of which was given an equal voting share despite large demographic differences, benefitting the TPLF greatly. Moreover, from 1995 to 2012, the EPRDF Chair and Prime Minister of Ethiopia was the Tigrayan leader Meles Zenawi. (12)

The coalition was condemned as highly repressive, curtailing free speech, establishing an extensive network of citizen-spies and stifling political dissent including through the arrest and torture of activists and protesters. (13) For example, government security forces infamously killed 200 protesters and arrested thousands of opponents who contested the results of the 2005 general election. (14)

Protests drove the party out of power, leading Abiy – a member of the Oromo ethnic group, who promoted the vision of a **unified and centralised Ethiopia** – to become Prime Minister. (15) Abiy's **pan-Ethiopianism**, combined with moves to remove Tigrayan politicians from positions of power, led to deepening tensions between Addis Ababa and Mekelle. For example, in late 2019, when Abiy dissolved the EPRDF on the grounds that it was too ethnically divisive, all regional parties apart from the TPLF agreed to join his newly created Prosperity Party. (16) The desire to protect and increase its autonomy led the TPLF to stage regional elections in September 2020, despite the National Electoral Board's decision to delay all elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The party accused the Prosperity Party of monopolising power and rolling back on democratic processes. Addis Ababa counter argued that the suspension of elections on health grounds was constitutional, because term extensions were granted to all regional governments. The federal government declared the regional elections unconstitutional, refused to recognise the new Tigrayan cabinet and legislature, redirected budget away from the regional government and warned Tigrayan leaders it would take law and order action if they did not disavow the election. (17)

The conflict: what we know so far



Battlefield dynamics are difficult to verify due to a communication blackout in the region, (18) journalists being intimidated and detained (19) as well as disinformation campaigns both by Ethiopian officials and pro-TPLF groups. (20) The actors involved in the conflict can be divided into two camps: the Ethiopian federal troops, backed by Amhara region paramilitaries and Eritrean soldiers (both of which have territorial disputes with the TPLF); and troops loyal to the TPLF. (21) Up to March 2021, both Addis Ababa and Asmara denied Eritrea's involvement in the conflict, although statements by both governments had been interpreted as hinting at it. (22) Addis Ababa declared victory on 28 November 2020, as federal soldiers captured Tigray's capital Mekelle. It has since been stated that it was engaged in minor mopping-up operations, delivering humanitarian assistance and establishing an interim administration to restore public services in the region. (23) However, it is believed that the fighting is still ongoing, and that humanitarian aid dispensed by the government is grossly insufficient. (24)

Although information remains scarce and there are no reliable estimates of the number of casualties caused by the conflict, there have been reports of **large-scale human rights violations** by all sides of the conflict, including extrajudicial killings and sexual violence. (25) For example, Human Rights Watch has reported indiscriminate shelling by Ethiopian federal forces in urban areas of Mekelle, Humera and Shire. (26) Amnesty International confirmed that large numbers of civilians were killed using knives, machetes and other sharp objects in the town of Mai-Kadra, with responsibility pointing to TPLF fighters. (27) Both organisations also reported that Eritrean troops had massacred hundreds of civilians in the town of Axum, most probably in retaliation for an attack by Tigrayan militia and Axum residents on Eritrean forces. (28) At first, Asmara dismissed Amnesty International's report as "transparently unprofessional" and containing "outrageous lies", while Addis Ababa criticised the organisation for employing a flawed methodology and pointed to the need for further fact-checking on the ground. (29)

However, in an address to parliament on 23 March 2021, Abiy recognised that Eritrean soldiers had entered the Tigray region and committed atrocities. He stated that the "Eritrean people and government did a lasting favour to our soldiers" during the conflict but added that "any damage [that the Eritrean army] did to our people was unacceptable". He affirmed he had discussed the issue "four or five times" with the Eritrean government. Finally, he asserted that soldiers having committed war crimes would be held to account, although he also accused TPLF leaders of spreading a "propaganda of exaggeration". (30)

It is also believed that between **3 and 4.5 million** people are in need of **emergency food assistance** – roughly three-quarters of the region's population – compared to 1.6 million prior to the conflict. (31) Humanitarian agencies have been consistently denied access to the region in the first few months of the conflict. Although it has recently improved – some agencies have been granted access to Mekelle and two refugee camps – 80 per cent of the population remains out of reach. (32) Moreover, there has been reports of armed forces threatening civilians attempting to flee the region and attacking refugee camps. (33) For example, the United Nations (UN) stated that the two Eritrean refugee camps of Shimelba and Hitsats had been destroyed, (34) probably by Eritrean troops, with the fate of the refugees still unknown. (35) The conflict is estimated to have **displaced 2 million people**, including more than 50,000 to neighbouring Sudan. (36) Humanitarian agencies face major challenges in attempting to provide for refugees' basic needs, particularly related to shelter, provision of food and the COVID-19 pandemic (as social distancing is not feasible). (37)

Federal security forces have **arrested and detained Tigrayan government and military leaders**, some of whom have been killed, such as former Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin. The central bank has also frozen accounts of Tigrayan companies with ties to the TPLF. Outside of Tigray, the government has detained Tigrayans in leadership positions, including those serving in the federal army or the federal

police, in peacekeeping missions abroad or in Ethiopian embassies. **Tigrayan civilians** have also been barred from leaving the country at airports and Tigrayan families' homes have been raided by the police in Addis Ababa. (38)

The region is still under a **state of emergency**, which was declared on 5 November 2020 and scheduled to remain until early May. Although elections are scheduled to be held in other regions on 5 June 2021, they are currently suspended in Tigray. (39)

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International responses



The international response to Ethiopia's Tigray conflict has been feeble; whilst most governments have called for a de-escalation of the conflict, a withdrawal of foreign troops and an independent investigation into reports of human rights abuses, few have taken a pro-active stance on conflict prevention and resolution. (40) Revealingly, the United Nations Security Council has not discussed the conflict as a formal agenda item, but only as part of "Any Other Business" discussions. (41) For its part, Addis Ababa has dismissed the international community's statements of concerns as "regrettable" (42) and "unsubstantiated", (43) reiterating the principle of non-interference in sovereign states' domestic affairs enshrined in the United Nations Charter. (44)

The focus of this paper will turn to the African Union and the European Union's responses, as they have arguably gone furthest in their attempts to encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflict and parties' compliance with international humanitarian law.

The African Union's response

On 9 November 2020, AU Commission Chair Moussa Faki issued a statement calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities and for parties to engage in a dialogue to ensure a peaceful solution to the conflict. (45) In late November 2020, AU President Cyril Ramaphosa appointed **three high-level envoys** – former President of Mozambique Joaquim Chissano, former President of Liberia Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and former President of South Africa Kgalema Motlanthe – as mediators to facilitate peace negotiations and conflict resolution. (46) The announcement was immediately dismissed as fakenews by the Ethiopian government. (47) However, the envoys were finally received in Addis Ababa on 27 November, (48) but were **not allowed to meet TPLF leaders** as they were considered a "criminal clique", rather than legitimate representatives, by Abiy. (49) A day before the envoys' arrival, Abiy announced the "third and final phase" (50) of the military campaign, a move widely interpreted as sending a signal of non-cooperation and non-compromise to the AU envoys. (51)

Following the meeting, Prime Minister Abiy stated that he appreciated the AU envoys' "elderly concern" (52) but continued to justify the military response as a constitutionally mandated law enforcement operation, (53) dismissing international involvement as interference in the country's domestic affairs. (54)

The European Union's response

The EU is arguably the international actor that has gone the furthest in condemning hostilities, as it **postponed its direct budgetary support** of €88 million until the Ethiopian government complied with a set of conditions, including granting unconditional and unimpeded access for humanitarian aid operations to the Tigray region. (55) The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, justified this decision by stating that the "situation on the ground goes well beyond a purely internal 'law and order' operation" and referenced reports of "ethnic-targeted violence, killings, massive looting, rapes, forceful returns of refugees and possible war crimes". (56) Individual European countries including Germany might similarly disburse budgetary aid on the condition of starting a peace process and holding legislative elections as planned in June 2021. (57)

The EU has also **increased humanitarian funding** by €18.8 million to Ethiopia to provide life-saving goods and services to the population affected by the conflict. It is also providing an additional €2 million and €2.9 million to Sudan and Kenya respectively, to support these countries' capacity to provide basic assistance to refugees. (58)

In February 2021, Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto was appointed as **EU special envoy** to Ethiopia on behalf of Josep Borrell, and visited refugee camps in Sudan and Addis Ababa. (59) A month later, he was reappointed to return to Ethiopia and discuss three main issues: allowing humanitarian access to the Tigray region, carrying out a human rights assessment and reforming power-sharing between Ethiopia's regions. (60)

On 10 March 2021, the EU's Crisis Commissioner Janez Lenarčič floated the idea of listing Ethiopian leaders under its **EU sanctions regimes**, on the basis of violating international humanitarian law. This would require compliance with international humanitarian law to be added to the list of behaviours that constitute grounds for listing under the EU sanctions regime. (61)

Ethiopia's ambassador to the European Union, Hirut Zemene, has called on members of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs and Development Committees not to be distracted by "transient challenges". She asked members to look at "things in the right context and perspective" and to "remain committed" to the strategic partnership that the EU and Ethiopia have built. (62)

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The absence of early warnings and actions



Early warning consists of the **timely collection and verification of information**, the accurate assessment and **analysis of a situation** and the **formulation and communication of practical policy options** to relevant end-users with the goal of **settling conflicts in a sustainable and peaceful way**. (63) Unlike intelligence, early warning systems are based on open-source material and are designed to safeguard human security rather than regime interests. (64) Early warning systems have been used since the 1950s in military, intelligence, and humanitarian circles in order to predict attacks or humanitarian disasters. (65) They have featured as a component of conflict prevention strategies since the 1970s, but came to prominence in the 1990s following the tragic and traumatic conflicts that unfolded in Somalia, the Mano River region and Rwanda. (66) They have since been continuously identified as essential to effective conflict prevention and have proliferated at both continental and local levels. (67) This section reviews the early warning systems currently in place in the AU and the EU, and explores their key weaknesses with a view to providing recommendations aimed at enhancing their effectiveness.

The AU's early warning toolbox

The 1993 Cairo Declaration and the 1996 Yaounde Declaration created a Central Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution and a continent-wide early warning system respectively. These mechanisms were widely perceived as lacking capacity, due to the restricted mandate of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and severe resource shortages. (68) In 2002, the OAU was refashioned into the African Union, with a more ambitious agenda of promoting peace and democracy. (69) **Article 4(h)** of the OAU's Constitutive Act gives the organisation the **right to "intervene in a Member State [...]"** in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity". (70) This is often referred to as the **"duty of non-indifference"** – equivalent to the UN's 'responsibility to protect' – adopted in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. (71)

Article 12 of the protocol that established the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) provided for the creation of a **Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)**. The CEWS was mandated to provide early warning to the AU Commission Chairperson, so that they could advise the PSC on potential conflicts and recommend preventive actions. (72) The CEWS comprises:

1. A Situation Room: an observation and monitoring unit responsible for data collection and analysis.
2. The Regional Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution: observation and monitoring units operating in close collaboration with the Situation Room. (73)

The CEWS functions follow an analytical framework, which includes three steps:

1. The collection and monitoring of information to produce vulnerability assessments.
2. The analysis of dynamics, structures and actors to identify trends and conditions conducive to conflict.
3. The formulation of recommendations and development of potential responses through scenario building. (74)

The CEWS thus serves the explicit goal of anticipating and preventing conflicts by providing timely information on violent conflicts and by monitoring key indicators developed specifically for this purpose. The CEWS was enhanced in 2007 with the cooperation of the EU, (75) and became fully operational in the early 2010s. (76)

The EU's early warning toolbox

Article 21(2)(c) of the Treaty on European Union – the so-called 'Maastricht Treaty' – explicitly mentions **conflict prevention** as a **key foreign policy goal** of the EU. (77) Following the 2011 Council Conclusions on Conflict Prevention, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission finalised an **EU Conflict Early Warning System (EWS)** in late 2014. The EWS comprises of four steps:

1. Performance of a Global Conflict Risk Scan: collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative information to identify high risk and deteriorating situations globally.
2. Identification of 'at risk' countries: identification of countries requiring further analysis, and ultimately action, to prevent conflict or capitalise on peacebuilding opportunities.
3. Analysis for Early Preventive Action: analysis integrating input from EU staff in headquarters and in-country offices, setting objectives for early preventive or peacebuilding actions.
4. Reporting on Early Preventive Action: monitoring the impact of early preventive or peacebuilding actions on the identified conflict risk factors and integrating reporting conclusions into the next cycle of assessment analysis. (78)

The system operates on a biannual cycle and involves the EEAS, the European Commission, individual Member States and civil society organisations. (79) The Integrated Approach for Security and Peace (ISP) Division is in charge of this process, and presents the list of countries identified as "at risk" to the Political and Security Committee for the development of concrete early action proposals. (80) The objective of the EWS is thus not to predict conflicts, but rather to identify the presence of structural factors or indicators typically associated with violent conflict outbreak in order to stimulate "early preventive action before situations escalate into crises". (81) This system contributes to strategic planning and resources prioritisation as well as overall EU coherence of conflict prevention actions. (82)

Weaknesses of early warning mechanisms

Neither the EU nor the AU undertook early action to prevent escalation of the Tigray conflict. This is despite **literature** – including by the EU's own Institute for Security Studies tasked with providing assistance to implement the Common Foreign and Security Policy – pointing to **underlying factors leading to a deterioration of security and identifying the 2020 summer elections as potential triggers of violence**. (83)

In addition, September and October 2020 presented clear evidence of an escalation of tensions between Addis Ababa and Mekelle, which included movements of Ethiopian troops to the region's southern borders. It is thus clear that the outbreak of the conflict was both "sudden and predictable". (84) Recognising this, in a report released on 11 February 2021, the AU stated that the Tigray conflict exposed the need to upgrade the organisation's early warning and response systems. It acknowledged that the 2020 deadline, set as part of the Silencing the Guns in Africa campaign, had not been met and hence the timeframes and modalities of the campaign needed to be reformulated. (85) This section identifies key weaknesses that might have accounted for the lack of early response on the part of the EU and the AU in relation to Ethiopia's Tigray conflict.

Technical limitations

Current technical limitations of early warning mechanisms include human resource shortages, technological limitations, information access and data ownership issues, insufficient cooperation with regional and in-country organisations and mandates skewed towards addressing triggers of conflicts rather than structural causes. (86)

First, **constrained human resources** impact the ability of units to perform their information gathering and analysis functions in a timely and accurate manner. (87) For example, the CEWS Situation Room operates on a 24-hour basis to monitor relevant indicators in the AU's 54 Member States. (88) In 2015, the CEWS totalled 13 employees, compared to 11 experts at the observation and monitoring unit for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) alone. This led the AU's PSC to identify staff shortage as a major factor impeding the analysis of collected data – something that remains an issue today. (89) As for the EU, a limited amount of personnel and time is dedicated to conflict prevention activities, which inevitably affects the staff's ability to integrate conflict analysis into the organisation's programming. The EEAS's low staff-to-budget ratio means that officials, particularly

within geographical teams, face pressure to disburse funding envelopes and cannot devote neither time nor creativity to policy elaboration. (90)

Second, limited **technological infrastructure** restricts the ability early warning mechanisms to operate efficiently amidst the multiplicity and complexity of information sources. (91) The CEWS staff draws upon news media monitoring tools to screen articles from over 2,500 sources in five languages and to disseminate important information to relevant decision makers. Staff also monitor reports from field offices – currently totalling 14 – as well as external data from governments, international organisations and non-governmental organisations. Given the sheer volume of information to be processed, tools to aggregate and standardise data into digestible formats – such as maps, diagrams, and regression tables – are essential to the production of comprehensive risk assessments. (92) Upgrading the CEWS's technological infrastructure would enable the more efficient and adequate collection, processing and sharing of information. (93) For its part, the EU has yet to consider dual-use technologies such as satellites and remotely piloted aircraft systems in peacebuilding and conflict prevention activities, despite its Member States having invested significantly in their development. These technologies have the potential to contribute to monitoring, investigating and evaluating crisis-prone environments, especially if their use is pooled and adequately coordinated. (94) In Ethiopia, the UN used satellite imagery to evaluate the situation on the ground in relations to refugee camps, revealing that some camps had been destroyed. (95) A more widespread use of this technology by the EU would be welcomed, including to monitor developments prior to conflict outbreaks, particularly in those contexts where there are restrictions placed on information flows and access to certain regions.

Third, **information access and data ownership** issues constitute barriers to the timely and accurate collection and dissemination of data and analysis of trends. (96) Information gathering is strongly reliant

on unrestricted flows of information, which are often impeded by internet shutdowns, national censorship laws or practices and the categorisation of information as 'classified' by governments and their intelligence agencies. (97) Concerning Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, access to accurate information has been restricted by communication blackouts, persecution of journalists and disinformation campaigns. (98) Importantly, these issues were present before the outbreak of the conflict, with repression of independent media having increased since 2010, so much so that, in 2015, Ethiopia was the country with the second-highest of number of journalists in exile in the world. (99) The barriers to collecting reliable data might have played a role in a failure to produce timely and accurate assessments of the country's vulnerabilities and ongoing dynamics. There is also the problem of data ownership, as the sharing of information aggregated through early warning systems might be deemed sensitive information that requires protection under national laws. (100) At an EU level, this challenge manifests itself in the encryption incompatibilities between different early warning systems. The EEAS's data gathering systems – including Tariqa 3 and Virtuoso40 – feed on open-source information. However, the European Union Military Staff Directorate (EUMS) draws primarily upon information provided by national intelligence agencies. The EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (INTCEN) deals with confidential intelligence transmitted by foreign affairs offices, security agencies, and intelligence communities. These different systems undermine the performance, coherence and utilisation of early warnings within the EU, as some information has restricted access. (101)

Fourth, **insufficient and unsystematic coordination** and information sharing with regional or in-country organisations can affect the process of triangulation and verification of data. (102) For example, the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2008 in order to enhance coordination in the area of peace and security. (103)

As a continental framework, the CEWS aims to harmonise and coordinate with regional early warning mechanisms such as ECOWARN and CEWARN, (104) covering Western Africa and the Horn of Africa, respectively. Cooperation between the AU and the RECs on early warning mechanisms is not systematic because the division of labour is under-defined in many foundational texts, and historically has evolved markedly differently from region to region. Despite progress made through joint trainings on conflict assessments, staff exchange visits and technical support programmes, the varied levels of cooperation still undermine the efficiency of the CEWS. (105) A similar issue can be identified for cooperation with civil society. Some regional mechanisms, such as ECOWARN, are relatively effective in engaging with grassroots organisations, thanks to the establishment of National Coordination Centres in countries such as Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Mali, which act as focal points for local peace actors. However, similarly strong coordination with local-level networks is yet to be duplicated across other regions. The CEWS faces strong limitations compared to ECOWARN in this regard due to its limited number of staff and field missions. (106) Turning to the European EWS, input from in-country EU delegations and civil society organisations complement the work of the EEAS and Commission geographical experts. There is a widespread recognition, however, that in-country officials are underused during the information gathering and analysis process. (107) Similarly, the EU has attempted to engage more comprehensively and systematically with civil society, by sharing information and analysis and providing funding for conflict prevention activities. Yet public participation, local ownership of programmes and inclusion of minorities remain limited and need to be expanded. There are also issues of cooperation with other international partners in the field. Whilst there are complementarities and synergies between the mandates and competencies of the EU, the UN, the OSCE and NATO, (108) their conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities are mostly implemented in a siloed, rather than in an integrated, manner. (109) Increased cooperation with EU delegations,

civil society organisations, and other major international players in the field is thus one key avenue for enhancing the EU's early warning capabilities.

Fifth, the current mandate of some of the early warning systems focuses on the direct prevention of conflict, rather than the identification of long-term dynamics that create an environment conducive to the outbreak of conflicts, thereby shifting attention towards **triggers of conflicts rather than structural causes**. This might reduce the effectiveness of early warning mechanisms by encouraging short-term responses that focus on immediate or intermediate causes rather than underlying issues. (110) This may have played a role in evaluating the situation in Ethiopia prior to the conflict outbreak, particularly as a major root cause of the conflict – power sharing between regions – is less easily grasped by quantitative indicators than other factors. To ensure a focus on long-term dynamics, in 2015 the AU adopted a Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework, which aims to increase the effectiveness of early warning mechanisms by identifying country-specific structural vulnerabilities and developing mitigation strategies. This has led to increased cooperation between the CEWS and other AU organs – such as the African Peer Review Mechanism – to exchange lessons learnt and best practices. As only one country (Ghana) has embarked on this process to date, others should be encouraged to undertake vulnerability and resilience assessments. This would not only benefit individual countries but would also strengthen early warning mechanisms by providing additional knowledge on the root causes of instability in African countries. (111) Ultimately, close cooperation between different organs and mechanisms, and integration of knowledge of both immediate triggers and underlying causes, have the potential to render early warning mechanisms much more effective.

Political limitations

The major limitations of early warning mechanisms remain related to the political impediments to preventive action – something that has come to be described as the “early warning-early response gap”. (112) Early warning is a means rather than an end: it is a tool for preparedness, prevention and mitigation of short- or long-term conflict, and therefore cannot be separated from early action. (113) However efficient and accurate the collection and analysis of data can become, such an endeavour would not yield much result if end-users do not have the political will to act on recommendations in a timely and appropriate manner. (114) As such, three political barriers to acting upon early warnings can be identified: disagreements over the political appropriateness of early action responses, the existence of a cultural gap between early warning and decision-making institutions, and issues of political will and sovereignty.

First, recommendations for actions are not purely technical solutions to a problem, but political judgements about who should respond and the form that such a response should take. (115) The perception of the **political appropriateness** of recommended actions plays a major role, with cultural and ideological factors influencing the reception of early warnings. (116) From the EU’s perspective, early action is politically sensitive as it risks offending governments, straining relations, or being perceived as alarmist. (117) Agreeing on joint action is therefore difficult, especially when certain members have important or sensitive relations with a country. (118) This major limitation is reflected in the institutional layout of the EU: whilst the Lisbon Treaty transferred conflict prevention – alongside a large portion of external affairs – to the EEAS, decision-making processes remained within the Council of the European Union’s competencies. This effectively ensured that the EEAS would not take on a strong political leadership role and that national representatives would remain in control of preventive action decisions. (119) The political considerations associated with early warning thus often affect the buy-in from end-users of the

recommended action and have sometimes led to the perception that such mechanisms are ill attuned to existing political realities. (120)

Second, there remains a **cultural gap between early warning and political decision-making institutions**. Whilst the former operates a mechanism based on open and transparent discussions and flows of information, the latter tend to insist on withholding information and to rely on trusted diplomatic or intelligence sources. This has meant that reports produced by the Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa tend to overshadow the CEWS’s products. (121) This cultural gap similarly constrains the ability of the CSDP and Crisis Response Directorate to coordinate between the different units and components involved in the EU’s early warning system. Whilst several divisions – including the ISP division – fall directly within its supervision, others – such as the EUMS and the INTCEN – are part of the EEAS’s military branch. The Lisbon Treaty transferred the EUMS from the Council of the European Union to the EEAS, and it has retained its distinct military characteristics and chain of command. Reflecting its origins as part of an intergovernmental institution (the Council of the EU) rather than a communitarian body (the EEAS), it is mainly staffed by military personnel from Member States and their permanent representatives. The INTCEN operates directly under the Chairman of the EU Military Committee and produces early warning analyses based on both national and open-source intelligence capabilities. The different organisational and analysis-making cultures between the military branch of the EEAS and its CSDP and Crisis Response Directorate leads to a divergent identification and interpretation of threats and challenges to international security. This hinders effectiveness of early warning, as inconsistencies in analysis “may lead to inaction due to unclear and incoherent prognosis”. (122)

Third, issues of **political will and sovereignty** continue to constrain early response mechanisms. (123) When countries become the subject of early warning, governments typically react negatively and defensively, questioning the accuracy of the analysis

and shying away from open discussions about structural vulnerabilities. This stems from political leaders' desire to appear in control and avoid international scrutiny of potential causes of crises. (124) This issue has been raised continuously by the PSC since 2017, (125) for example with a communiqué stating that the "continued denials of objective/credible early warning signals of looming crisis" were responsible for "undermining the conflict prevention capacity of the council". (126) Governments also often invoke the principle of sovereignty, enshrined in Article 4(g) of the AU's Constitutive Act, to impede early action. (127) CEWS reports are presented to the Head of the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division and the Commissioner for Peace and Security, but rarely result in a PSC meeting as individual states lobby PSC members to avoid being placed on the agenda. (128) PSC meetings on horizon scanning also seldom mention specific country situations. (129) Ultimately, the PSC's *modus operandi* of consensus-based decision-making tends to prevent early action. (130) This has been highlighted in the 2021 AU Commission's End of Term Report, which states that "reluctance by some Member States to allow early mediation and political dialogue" is "one of the key factors contributing to the growing number of avoidable conflicts on the continent and negating the effectiveness of the AU's interventions". (131) With regards to Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, the government's continuous insistence on branding its military engagement as part of a 'rule of law' operation, and its reiteration of the principle of sovereignty protected under international law, has limited the AU's margin of manoeuvre in terms of conflict prevention and mediation. The AU's relative inaction has attracted criticisms pointing to double standards, as in similar situations – such as the Libyan and Sudanese conflicts – the AU had been much more active for example convening a special meeting between heads of state of the AU's Peace and Security Council. The AU has also bowed to Abiy's demands to remove Tigrayan officers from AU peacekeeping missions and a Tigrayan official serving as the AU Commission Head of Security. The AU's response (or lack thereof) to the conflict has thus prompted questions about Ethiopia's outsized

influence on the institution and its capacity to operate independently and according to the values of its Constitutive Act. (132)

Issues of political will can also be identified at an EU level, which can be attributed to several issues including: the so-called 'bystander syndrome', with the multiplicity of actors in the international community contributing to the diffusion of responsibility; (133) the perception that "non-action is safer [than] acting and running the risk of making a mistake and losing face"; (134) and the tendency to prioritise responding to ongoing high-visibility crises rather than investing in preventive action. (135) The tension between the principled commitment to conflict prevention and the reality of political (un)willingness to act upon early warning is well illustrated in the language of the EU's 2016 Global Strategy. The document outlines an expanded 'integrated approach' to conflicts, stating that the "EU will act at all stages of the conflict cycle, acting promptly on prevention, responding responsibly and decisively to crises, investing in stabilisation, and avoiding premature disengagement when a new crisis erupts". Whilst conflict prevention clearly features as a central component of the EU's foreign and security policy, the use of the word 'promptly' indicates an understanding of prevention that is still by and large reactive. (136) In relation to Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, two major considerations most probably limited the EU and its Member States' willingness to act on early warnings. First, Ethiopia's geostrategic position and its role in curbing both violent extremism and migration flows in the region most likely incentivised the EU to continue its support for the federal government, despite the increase in insecurity and authoritarian practices. (137) Indeed, Ethiopia has been an important strategic ally to the EU and other countries, such as the United States, against violent extremist groups – mostly operating in Somalia – such as al-Shabaab and the Islamic State. At the start of 2020, Ethiopia was also the second largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, with migrants mostly from South Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea. (138) Second, the EU has been disbursing large amounts of Official Development Aid (ODA) to Ethiopia to support political reform

programmes, inclusive economic development, and climate change adaptation. From 2014-20, the EU spent on average €214 million per year of ODA to Ethiopia. (139) The country's trajectory has been encouraging: from 2010-20, Ethiopia's economy grew by an average of 9.4% per year, which contributed to poverty reduction in both urban and rural areas. (140) As for governance reforms, Abiy's agenda on taking office was extremely promising, as he vowed to take Ethiopia on a path of strong multiparty democracy. Reforms implemented included releasing political prisoners, decriminalising opposition parties, strengthening the independence of the Electoral Commission and upholding the principle of gender parity for cabinet appointments. (141) Successful peace talks with Eritrea, which led him to win the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, also sent strong positive signals to the international community. The Abiy administration was therefore fairly popular amongst donor circles prior to the onset of the conflict in Tigray, which might explain the EU's reluctance to push for early actions on warnings. (142)



**POLITICAL
IMPEDIMENTS TO
PREVENTIVE ACTION
REMAIN THE
MAJOR LIMITATION
OF EARLY WARNING
MECHANISMS**

Learning from others: taking inspiration from early warning initiatives around the world to improve EU and AU mechanisms



Early warning mechanisms have been implemented in various countries and by different kinds of institutions. Reviewing initiatives ranging from a non-governmental organisation's project in Kyrgyzstan to a national governmental mechanism deployed throughout Guatemala, this section distils best practices and lessons learnt from these experiences to date. These will in turn inform recommendations aimed at enhancing the EU and the AU's early warning mechanisms.

Methodology

Almost all evaluations of early warning mechanisms point to the need to **combine robust quantitative and qualitative models**, in order to benefit from the strengths of these analytical methods and mitigate their respective weaknesses. (143) A 'best practice' case study is Kenya's early warning mechanism, managed by the National Steering Committee on Peace Building and Conflict Management, which also serves as the national unit for CEWARN. The mechanism now benefits from a database compiling standardised field reports focusing on 57 indicators, monitoring a large range of local dynamics from communal relations and economic activities to natural resource use. Qualitative information on conflict dynamics is gathered through field monitors, members of provincial administrations, district security and intelligence communities and civil society organisations, amongst others. The mechanism also integrates information from members of the public, mostly gathered through crowdsourcing – receiving alerts by SMS, email or social networks such as Twitter or Facebook – and through geographic information systems. Once information is verified by data analysts, follow-up calls are made to security structures and field monitors in the area concerned by the alert. Gaps in implementation can be identified, most notably related to capacity, analysis of quantitative data, appropriateness of technology used, and integration of structural data. Still, the initiative has already contributed to strengthening national and local capacity to respond to latent or emerging conflicts, for example by prompting targeted campaigns against hate speech or

promoting intercommunal mediation in identified 'hot spots'. (144)

Extensive **verification, cross referencing and triangulation** of data is another major best practice in the field of early warning. The need for such a thorough process was made clear in Sudan's Crisis and Recovery Mapping and Analysis project managed by the United Nations Development Programme. As part of the Sudan Vote Monitor initiative, crowdsourcing was extensively used to monitor the 2010 Sudanese presidential elections. However, it is now widely believed that spoilers fabricated or over-reported specific incidents in order to spread misinformation or bias data collection, thus affecting the reliability of the early warning analysis. (145)

The question of relying exclusively on **open-source information** is an important one to consider. Ultimately, any decision should take into account the role envisaged for the early warning system, the country's regime type, and the broader context including the country's recent history of conflicts and cultural attitudes towards the intelligence community. (146) Systems relying exclusively on open-source information can promote more participative, collaborative and arguably more integrated community-based responses to early warnings. They can also prevent the mechanism from being biased towards an internal client based composed of governmental institutions and/or security apparatuses. (147) In Guatemala, the country's pilot CEWS relied heavily on civil society participation and traditional community knowledge to empower local actors to participate not only in data collection, but also analysis and public policy formation. The system was thus seen as a form of 'alternative intelligence' in a society that had come to perceive the intelligence community negatively, due to the latter's role during the civil war. (148) However, exclusive reliance on open source data might lead to inaccurate or partial assessment of trends and processes at work, owing for example to restricted or biased information flows under authoritarian regimes. (149) The inclusion of classified information for triangulation purposes

could therefore constitute an asset in some instances, such as for regional early warning mechanisms that can receive reports from various intelligence agencies on dynamics in specific countries.

Finally, the **choice of technology** is crucial to the functioning of early warning mechanisms. The appropriate tools must be selected based on factors such as a country or region's internet and phone coverage, demographics, literacy levels and other such factors. (150)

Local ownership

One of the important 'best practices' identified in the literature is the necessity for **strong local ownership** of early warning mechanisms. To meaningfully include communities in all aspects of conflict prevention – from information collection to the design and implementation of responses – tends to produce more legitimate and sustainable results. (151) For example, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) observed that communities were under-resourced in early warning systems – relying mostly on volunteers – which affected the timeliness and consistency of reporting. Following this observation, WANEP adopted a bottom-up approach to early warning. It now focuses on providing technical support to communities, building the capacity of stakeholders involved in dialogue and mediation initiatives and strengthening existing peacebuilding infrastructure. Most notably, the National Peace Councils set up in Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone have become models for enhancing countries' resilience to threats to peace and security. (152)

When involving communities and civil society actors in early warning mechanisms, many have emphasised the **role of marginalised individuals and groups**. In terms of gender mainstreaming, several successful strategies can be identified from the UN's early warning projects in the Solomon Islands and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. First, women of different ages and socioeconomic levels should be involved in the planning and design

of early warning mechanisms, to ensure that their experiences of violence and role in conflict prevention activities are taken into account. Second, the use of gender-sensitive indicators and sex-disaggregated data is essential to ensure that gender dynamics are taken into account in analysis and response. Third, including local actors from different genders in data collection, analysis and the development of response options is important for raising awareness of gender and early warning issues and empower communities to draw upon these insights and tools. (153) Similar best practices can also be replicated in other communities, such as the youth and members of ethnic, linguistic or religious groups. Indeed, a major lesson learnt from the conflict in Darfur has been the necessity of incorporating minorities' rights into the mandates of early warning institutions, so as to enhance both operational and structural conflict prevention. (154)

Timeliness

A crucial aspect of effective early warning and early response is **timing**, due to the particularly fluid and dynamic nature of crisis-prone environments. (155)

For example, a community-based early warning mechanism rolled out in 2003 by the Foundation for Co-Existence in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province often failed to produce accurate reports due to the time elapsed between the information being collected and its formal dissemination. Ultimately, this may have contributed to the failure to prevent the conflict from escalating into an all-out war in 2006. (156) Timely data collection was also an issue for the UN's early warning project in the Solomon Islands, as few field monitors had phones, radio contact was unreliable, transportation modes were often delayed or cancelled and travel bans were frequently imposed in 'hotspots'. (157) In both cases, a major 'lessons learnt' was the need to recruit permanent local project field monitors and ensure timely communication via text messages or telephone calls. (158)

Responses

A widespread challenge for early warning practitioners is to achieve conflict prevention action, which is all too often inhibited by the political environment, institutional sensitivities, cognitive biases and other such barriers. (159) The early warning-early action gap was tragically clear in Darfur, where the crisis-prone and worsening nature of the situation, as well as the plight of minorities, were already well known to both local and international actors. Alarms raised in 2000-02 amid increasing violence were insufficient to trigger international action, until a large-scale armed conflict broke out in March 2003. (160)

Several best practices and lessons learnt that aim to encourage and facilitate effective preventive action can be extracted from the literature. First, drawing up **clear plans of response for different kinds of early warnings** and **securing political will** for such actions is essential. Responses need to be context-specific and conflict-sensitive, so as to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability, and must avoid exacerbating tensions or worsening structural vulnerabilities. (161) A 'best practice' case in that regard is the Guatemalan early warning system, which identified a number of 'ideal responses' for every conflict phase (latent, early, late, crisis) for state actors to follow. (162) In order to secure political will and overcome obstacles such as funding scarcity or cognitive biases, policy options can be designed in a way that frames them as tools to reduce losses or generate high returns. (163) Second, acting in an integrated manner is deemed essential for drawing upon the comparative advantages of different agencies and groups evolving in various sectors and at distinct levels and for coordinating their response on order to generate positive synergies. (164) This is perhaps the most challenging 'best practice' to implement, due to barriers including different institutional cultures and potential areas of tensions between sectoral activities. Some early warning mechanisms, such as the World Bank's initiative in the Boke region (Guinea) and WANEP's work across West Africa, constitute positive examples of projects that are multi-sectoral, with initiatives supporting

government-citizen dialogues, peace education in schools, political participation of the youth and social cohesion in communities. (165) Third, **monitoring the impact of preventive actions** and adapting strategies accordingly is crucial to allow such actions to remain context-specific and conflict-sensitive. To date, monitoring and evaluation procedures have rarely been implemented consistently and followed through in practice. (166)



**EARLY ACTION
SHOULD BE
CONTEXT-SPECIFIC,
CONFLICT-SENSITIVE,
LOCALLY-OWNED.**

Enhancing conflict prevention: recommendations



Following the previous analysis of technical and political limitations of current early warning mechanisms within the EU and the AU, and the review of best practices and lessons learnt from early warning initiatives around the world, this section recommends policies aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of early warning *analysis* and early warning *action*.

To enhance early warning analysis, the EU and the AU should consider:

- Reframing mandates to ensure a structural, long-term and multimodal approach to crisis prevention. (167)
- Upgrading technological systems for data collection, visualisation, analysis and communication. (168)
- Investing in greater human resources and providing additional training and capacity-building for staff members, including cross-regional joint training. (169)
- Consolidating quantitative and qualitative methodology, most notably through: increased funding towards qualitative in-country assessments; improving the comprehensiveness of data through extended partnerships with international actors and civil society organisations; and emphasising processes of verification, cross-referencing and triangulation. (170)
- Strengthening communication between headquarters and in-country observation and monitoring units as well as other field networks. (171)
- Encouraging the integration of national and regional early warning mechanisms.
 - For the AU: e.g., between the CEWS and CEWARN, ECOWARN, etc. (172)
 - For the EU: e.g., between the EWS and Germany and the Netherlands' own national early warning systems. (173)
- Clarifying communication methods for early warning, to ensure correct identification of target audiences and appropriateness and timeliness of messaging. Integrating feedback loops to ensure a two-way communication. (174)

- Devising clear response plans to match different levels of early warning.
- Ensuring strong local ownership of early warning mechanisms, with local community meaningfully involved in processes of data collection, design and implementation of responses, and impact monitoring. Particular emphasis should be placed on marginalised groups, including women and youth as well as ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities.

To reduce the early warning-early response gap, the EU and the AU should consider:

- Hosting formal and informal exchanges on early warning mechanisms aimed at fostering conversations on their distinct added value, with the aim of encouraging greater buy-in and operationalisation. (175)
- Institutionalising discussions of early warning products in decision-making bodies.
- Clarifying the role of decision makers on the uptake of early warning recommendations.
- Increasing the involvement of civil society in regional and continental conflict prevention mechanisms to build trust with local stakeholders and to contribute to increasing pressure on states and supra-national decision-making bodies to take preventive action. (176)
- Creating direct communication channels between early warning units and individual Member States.

Conclusion



Ethiopia's Tigray conflict not only has major human security and domestic political implications but also has ramifications for the **EU and the AU's credibility** and legitimacy as international actors that have conflict prevention as an explicit goal. Whilst early warning mechanisms are still arguably in an experimental phase, there is also **increasing pressure to demonstrate their appropriateness and efficacy given the resources – both financial and diplomatic – that have been invested.** (177)

This paper has set out the weaknesses of the EU and the AU's early warning toolboxes and provided policy recommendations aimed at enhancing their effectiveness. As more information on the number of casualties and extent of the damage caused by Ethiopia's Tigray conflict emerges, the international community will come under increased scrutiny and pressure regarding their conflict prevention and mitigation strategies. Whether or not they improve their capabilities and commit politically to early warning strategies will be key in shaping Africa's peace and security terrain in the upcoming decades.



**ETHIOPIA'S CONFLICT
HAS MAJOR
IMPLICATIONS FOR
HUMAN SECURITY,
DOMESTIC POLITICS,
AND THE CREDIBILITY
OF INTERNATIONAL
ACTORS' CONFLICT
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