SESSION IV: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The principal themes identified thus far were summarized by the Chair:

- The best possible early warning system is of limited use if the right people are not there to respond;

- There is a need to know more about how decision-making operates, and about how early warning information can be brought to bear with decision-makers;

- Early warning is itself a form of political action;

- The role of leadership is critical both in early warning and response;

- A tension exists between the coordination of early warning and encouraging a multitude of early warning voices;

- Early warning needs to be made to work more effectively.

A participant argued that a triage approach may be necessary, whereby conflicts are ranked by their salience and are then acted upon in order. Thresholds and break-points for a rapid response system have to be identified, e.g. numbers of people killed, or numbers of refugees. Other participants questioned the utility of such an approach, noting that there may not be sufficient information available on which to rank conflicts, and that, in any case, there would likely be disagreement on the rankings.

An overall discussion evolved on whether priority should be placed on early warning or early response. There are indications that good early warning systems have already been established, and that instead, greater emphasis should be placed on early action. Is it true that the international community is well served with existing early warning systems, or does it need to find ways to improve them? If so, how?

One participant noted that the critical problem with regard to responding is determining how to intervene most effectively. Different actors have different thresholds and different means of intervening. He emphasized that there may often be an advantage to using regional organizations to intervene, given their particular regional expertise and their particular links with states and leaders in the region.

In closing, another participant cautioned that conflict prevention does not necessarily mean the prevention of any conflict, but of violent conflict. Thus, their is a need to focus on violence. Prevention is the key; once conflict has erupted, it becomes too late and too costly to intervene effectively.