

5.3 Proposal for an early warning system

5.3.1 The challenges of early warning

Early warning systems pose a number of challenges. The first and apparently most difficult is the precise and accurate identification of incipient conflicts, which allows the necessary resources to be deployed early enough to prevent escalation. **However, we know from experience that by itself knowledge is far from sufficient to prompt preventive action.** There have been unmistakable signs prior to virtually all major catastrophes in history — signs which could be read and were read — but the "authorities" were either unwilling or felt unable to take concrete preventive measures.

However valid it may be, the speculative knowledge produced by experts (we shall refer to it as "coded technical knowledge") must first be decoded and then transformed into common wisdom. It is really only at this stage that decision makers can take political action. Decisions that call for large expenditures on the part of democratic societies can be made only on this basis. There are many examples of this process; this is essentially the role played by major summits (Rio, Jomtien, Beijing, Copenhagen). Unfortunately, this approach is too protracted to be effective in dealing with crises in Africa, which can develop very quickly; two or three critical stages can unfold in a matter of a few months or even weeks.

Another difficulty is that policy makers are usually preoccupied by crises in progress. **In December 1993, although the question of Rwanda was already on the agenda and there were clear signs of a major disaster on the horizon, the Security Council spent all its time discussing one of many phases of the Bosnian conflict.** In retrospect, it can be argued that preventive deployment of duly mandated UN peacekeeping troops in Rwanda might have prevented genocide. Furthermore, societies are blinded by the last conflict: Somalia casts a shadow over Rwanda; and in turn, Rwanda obscures our perception of, let us say, the Tuareg question.

The media have the ability to translate an obscure event (technically coded knowledge) into common wisdom almost instantly. It is enough for CNN to cover an event for policy makers to deem action warranted. But the media play by their own rules. Many events compete for their attention, and they typically focus on whatever is likely to arouse the most public interest.

In short, for the media too, an actual conflict is worth more than a potential conflict. Thus, the media cannot really be relied upon to bridge the gap between technical knowledge and common knowledge. **For all these reasons, early warning and conflict prevention must be based on three platforms, forming links in a chain.** Fact-finding units are the first link in the chain; they gather, process and analyse information, drawing pertinent conclusions. The second link entails decoding the information and analyses, translating them into social and political consequences, in light of the general political environment, and drawing conclusions. This is the role of the