

Is a Public Early Warning System Necessary?

If so, what should it look like? What would be the benefits of such a system? Who would use it? How can we make it most useful to the most people?

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Developing a Public Early Warning System for Genocide and Mass Killing

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1. Introduction

It is unsurprising that we see continuing interest in a public early warning system for genocide and related atrocities, yet no systematic effort to fulfill this function has been adequate or sustained. There would be clear benefits from a high quality public early warning system, but there are also major challenges and risks associated with such an undertaking. The benefits, risks and challenges are largely, if not entirely, disconnected from the particular analytical approach taken (e.g., quantitative modeling vs. expert qualitative judgment). This memo aims to outline these issues in a general way as a basis for discussion at the October 5th seminar.

2. Background debate about the value of early warning

There is a broad consensus that early warning is a critical component in the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities. Particularly when considering the functioning of large governments and international organizations like the UN, which have global interests and a variety of potentially useful policy tools, few dispute that effective prevention requires an effective system of early warning. This means not just good analysis, but dedicated attention to catastrophic risks and a regular mechanism for communicating analytic results to those charged with taking policy action.

There are those, however, who maintain that “early warning is not the problem.” They typically argue that good country and regional experts and journalists always see problems coming in advance. The real problem, according to this perspective, is that decision makers fail to muster the “political will” to take decisive action in response to warnings. This view is still fairly widely held in the NGO community, in my estimation.

The work of the Genocide Prevention Task Force and other scholars, as well as ongoing efforts in the U.S. government and the UN, suggest that early warning could yet be strengthened in ways that should support more effective prevention. It is worth noting that the challenge of warning and response is far from unique to the prevention of genocide, but has been a focus of scholars and practitioners of intelligence for many years. Relatively little discussion, however,

has focused on the potential shape and utility of a public early warning system as opposed to discreet ones within particular political institutions.

3. Uses and users of a public early warning system

A public early warning system would be of use to multiple types of organizations/groups. Each organization can be expected to find somewhat different benefits from a public early warning system, but the main uses for the most relevant types of groups can be summarized as follows:

Table 1
Main uses of a public early warning system by type of organization/constituency

	Advocates	Operational NGOs	Scholars	Governments and international organizations
Independent check on own analysis	X	X	X	X
Prompt and help target preventive action		X		X
Support lobbying/advocacy with governments/IOs	X	X		
Educate and build public support for genocide prevention	X	X	X	
Build knowledge base about risks of genocide/mass atrocities			X	

4. Components of an early warning system

An early warning system is a multifaceted concept. It entails three principal elements:

- *Periodic global risk assessment to generate a watch list.* A systematic and parsimonious comprehensive assessment of risk helps narrow the focus from the entire world to a manageable set of countries/situations at highest risk. A watch list guides additional monitoring and analytical efforts and should prompt some discussion of preventive options.

- *Ongoing, detailed monitoring and analysis of high-risk situations to generate warnings.* Even the best global risk assessment will produce little more than a sorting of countries into bands of risk. Assuming end users want more specific warnings about what populations are at risk of what kinds of atrocities, it requires much more fine-grained monitoring and analysis of the particular actors, their interests, ideologies, and capabilities, and potential triggers or opportunities for escalation of violence.
- *A mechanism for communicating warnings to end users.* Early warning is a communicative process at least as much as it is an analytical process. Successful warning, at a minimum, requires that end users take cognizance of alerts and consider their analytical judgments. Given the abundance of information about international conflicts and crises, one should not assume that standard communication methods will suffice.

5. Challenges

Any public early warning effort will need to overcome significant risks and challenges to succeed.

- *It can be hard to demonstrate the value of an early warning system, especially in a relatively short period of time.* The combination of genocide being a very low frequency event and the inherent difficulty of counterfactual reasoning (e.g., evaluating what would have happened in the absence of a warning that was issued) make it hard to know whether a warning system had any effect on the ultimate outcome.
- *Even the best early warning system will inevitably appear to be wrong about some situations.* Given that genocide and related crimes are rare events about which we have imperfect knowledge, “false positives” and/or “false negatives” are unavoidable. People who don’t fully understand the limits on forecasting and warning may take this as evidence that the system is fundamentally flawed.
- *Consumers of a warning system are likely to have inappropriate expectations and to misinterpret judgments related to risk and uncertainty.* Experience suggests that people may misinterpret risk judgments or warnings as point predictions made with great confidence, even when caveats and technical explanations are included. This issue is particularly salient when quantitative results are presented.
- *The best scientific approach to assessing risks and generating warnings may not match end users’ judgment about the most credible approach.* Most end users are likely to be skeptical of quantitative methods that rely on blunt, structural data such as infant mortality rates. Yet, it is likely that these data and methods will be an important part of an early warning system. Finding a way to persuade users of the appropriateness and credibility of whatever analytic methods are chosen is a critical challenge.
- *It is a politically charged action to suggest publicly that genocide or mass atrocities are at risk in a particular country.* Any organization will have considerations unrelated to the true risk of genocide/mass atrocities that will impinge on its decision to cite particular

countries on a public risk/watch/warning list. These may stem from perfectly legitimate concerns, such as the “do no harm” imperative. Nevertheless, it is a challenge to ensure that political/institutional considerations do not corrupt the analytical process.

6. Provisional recommendations

- Recruit multiple organizations to co-sponsor an early warning effort to help manage institutional/political risks as well as costs.
- Make a commitment at the outset to continue an early warning effort for five years or longer.
- Pay considerable attention to the public communication component, especially to the challenge of communicating about methods and the appropriate interpretation and uses of results.
- Include some way for people to compare their own methods or final judgments about risks with those supported by the early warning effort.