

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

TEN WAYS TO CREATE PEOPLE-CENTRED EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS IN CONFLICTS AND RECURRENT CRISES

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Motivation

Over the last decades, investments in early warning systems (EWS) have brought huge improvements in the provision of forecasts, particularly those based on hydrological-meteorological data. The current concern, for example through the 'Early Warnings for All' initiative, is to ensure that this information serves the needs of everyone. This will be a particular challenge in conflicts and places suffering recurring crises, the very places where people most need early warning information.

Purpose

This policy brief looks first at what it means for EWS to be 'people-centred'. It considers the implication of a knowledge-system way of thinking about EWS, and considers the particular challenges of improving people-centred EWS in conflicts and recurring crises. Finally, we offer 10 recommendations for meeting these challenges.

Approach and methods

Much of SPARC's research over the past five years in conflicts and recurrent crises has generated learning relevant to this challenge. This policy brief synthesises SPARC's learning related to EWS. It does not offer a comprehensive analysis of all work on people-centred EWS in fragile situations of conflict and recurring crises.

The policy review looked at all SPARC publications, and it distils all of the findings and recommendations relevant to EWS in conflicts and recurrent crises.

Findings

For early warning to serve its purpose, it is not enough to generate timely and accurate forecasts. A people-centred EWS must maximise the chances that people will receive, understand, interact with, trust and act on the information that they need. This takes an EWS out of the purely technical world because it is necessary to understand and address how and where people access information, what makes them trust and share it, what makes them act on information and what constraints they may face in doing so. This makes the design and operation of an EWS partly

a social function, requiring social expertise and the involvement of a range of actors who form part of a society-wide knowledge system, many of whom do not think of themselves as part of the EWS.

Policy implications

1. In places affected by conflict, EWS must consider how conflict, insecurity and state fragility shape vulnerability. Conflict also affects what can be done and who benefits from it, so conflict analysis must inform all decision-making.
2. People's circumstances and information needs vary too much for prescriptive advice to be generally helpful. An EWS must encourage people to think about options and how to cope with uncertainty. Strengthening also means creating more spaces for ideas to be exchanged and reflected on, so that people can make more informed decisions for their own situations.
3. A people-centred EWS must maximise the chances that people will receive, understand, interact with, trust and act on the information that they need. To serve the most marginalised, efforts are needed at every stage to prioritise their interests, understand their information needs and build trust with them.
4. Supporting a people-centred EWS does not mean creating a perfect technical system for forecasting. It is about improving the knowledge system – how people receive and share information about what is forecast. This requires social, political, institutional and knowledge management skills.
5. The next shock is unlikely to look exactly like previous shocks because everything is constantly changing in insecure places. A rigorous EWS is useful but it is risky to rely on it. Flexibility is essential. It is good to keep one eye on the data dashboard but necessary to keep the other on what is happening outside the window.

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