

# **DISASTER EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS: PEOPLE, POLITICS AND ECONOMICS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a product of the Third International Conference on Early Warning (EWC III), held in Bonn, Germany from 27-29 March 2006. The conference was organised by the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) with support from the German Federal Foreign Office.

A Scientific and Technical Symposium formed part of the conference programme and ran for most of the three days. It comprised three sessions: multi-hazard approaches, mega-events, and people, politics and economics. A number of papers were presented and discussed in each session, and reports were presented to the conference's Plenary Session.

The plenary report of the People, Politics and Economics Session is published here in full, since it is not available elsewhere. The conference proceedings are at <http://www.ewc3.org/>

## **PEOPLE, POLITICS AND ECONOMICS**

The topic of this session of the Scientific and Technical Symposium is a very broad one. It is also very important, because it addresses a vital element in *all* early warning systems: how to link scientific and technical knowledge and capabilities with organisational systems and structures, and with communities at risk.

The inter-linkage of the many different components of early warning systems at all levels – from the international, through the national level to the community – is essential. The effectiveness of institutionalised early warning systems can only be achieved by close co-operation between all the agencies involved in running the system, and between these agencies and vulnerable people.

The 11 presentations and the discussions in the People, Politics and Economics session reflected the broad scope of this topic. They helped to confirm the consensus (expressed at this conference and in the ISDR's Global Survey)<sup>1</sup> about the current state of knowledge, policy and practice in early warning systems. It is clear that early warning systems have made great progress in recent times in technical, organisational and social terms. There is general agreement on the principles and many of the elements of good practice (and increasing awareness of some of the gaps in our knowledge). In particular, it is accepted not only that early warning systems must be 'end-to-end' – that is, they must reach out to communities at risk – but they must be 'people-centred': their acknowledged primary purpose must be to support and empower those people in protecting themselves.

In order to 'go the last mile', an integrated approach to early warning systems has to be based on the needs, priorities, capacities and cultures of those at risk. The early warning system has to be 'user-friendly' in order to serve its purpose. People living at risk must be partners in the system, not controlled by it.

Presentations to this session demonstrated the effectiveness of people-centred early warning systems that utilise and develop community capacities, create genuine local ownership of the system, and are based on a shared understanding of needs and purpose. Such initiatives are sustainable, replicable – they can be scaled up – and, importantly, they are adaptable and resilient.

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<sup>1</sup> *Global Survey of Early Warning Systems: An assessment of capacities, gaps and opportunities toward building a comprehensive global early warning system for all natural hazards* (UN ISDR, 2006, at [www.ewc3.org](http://www.ewc3.org)). This report was prepared for the EWC III conference.

Trust and confidence are key elements in successful people-centred early warning systems. Warnings must be credible and reliable. This does not only refer to the scientific and technological components of the warning system, but to the emergency management structures and other agencies in the system. It is not just a question of believing the message: you have to trust the messenger, too.

Informed citizens will make their own, informed, choices. They are, in a sense, consumers of early warning information, selecting from various sources and different forms. Rapid advances in information and communications technologies and the growth of global media have widened public access to early warning information. The pluralistic nature of the new information age does not fit comfortably with emergency managers' desire for a single, authoritative voice issuing warnings; but 'command and control' is no longer an option. Early warning systems must adapt to this new dynamic and find effective ways of interfacing with it.

Early warning systems are not simple, linear mechanisms. They require the collaboration of many scientific, technical, institutional and political stakeholders, in addition to communities. Early warning systems are by their nature multi-jurisdictional, and multi-disciplinary. The decision to take protective action will often be the outcome of negotiation between different groups and their priorities. The relationships of confidence and trust that are essential to make this work well are built up over long periods, through an ongoing process of negotiation and collaboration. The experiences of participants in this session showed that such processes can be challenging, and that patience and persistence are required.

Early warning pays off. A pre-requisite for an effective early warning system is recognition of its benefits by the general public, policy makers and the private sector. Cost-benefit analysis and related tools may help to foster the necessary political engagement and the will to develop and promote early warning as an instrument of disaster risk management.

Another challenge is to ensure that early warning systems are sustainable. What makes a system sustainable, under different conditions and contexts, needs to be better understood. It is clear, however, that early warning systems must continue to innovate and adapt: not only by developing new technologies and integrating new scientific knowledge (including the effects of climate change) but by continually reviewing their aims and performance, and renegotiating the multiple organisational and community relationships on which the strength of early warning systems ultimately depends.

Finally, let us not forget the many powerful economic, social and political forces that make so many people in so much of the world vulnerable – in the broadest sense of the term – even in so-called ‘normal’ times. Effective early warning systems are just a small part of the contribution to overcoming those challenges.

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