

## Chapter 4

# Computer Assisted Early Warning – the FAST Example

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

FAST is a German acronym which stands for early analysis of tensions and fact-finding. It is a political early warning system that aims at enhancing political decision makers' ability to identify critical developments in a timely manner so that political strategies can be formulated to either prevent or limit destructive effects of violent conflicts or identify windows of opportunity for peacebuilding. Thus, FAST is not merely an academic exercise but tries to impact decision making processes. FAST products are tailored to the needs of practitioners and while we strive for sound intellectual analysis, academic rigor is not an end in itself. We also refrain from using one single methodology but strongly believe in a comprehensive approach using multiple methods. While qualitative analysis is considered to be essential for maintaining a context-specific understanding of the target countries, FAST uses quantitative techniques to manage the huge flow of information and thus to reduce complexity. Figure 4.1. shows how different qualitative and quantitative methodological parts feed into FAST's core products

## 2 DEFINITION OF EARLY WARNING

According to a generally accepted definition “early warning consists of [...] the collection and analysis of information about potential and actual conflict situations, and the provision of policy options to influential actors at the national, regional and international levels that may promote sustainable peace (FEWER, 1999)”.<sup>1</sup> According to this definition, in the FAST scheme com-

<sup>1</sup>. For an in-depth discussion of the early warning concept see Krummenacher et al. (1999) and Krummenacher and Schmeidl (1999).

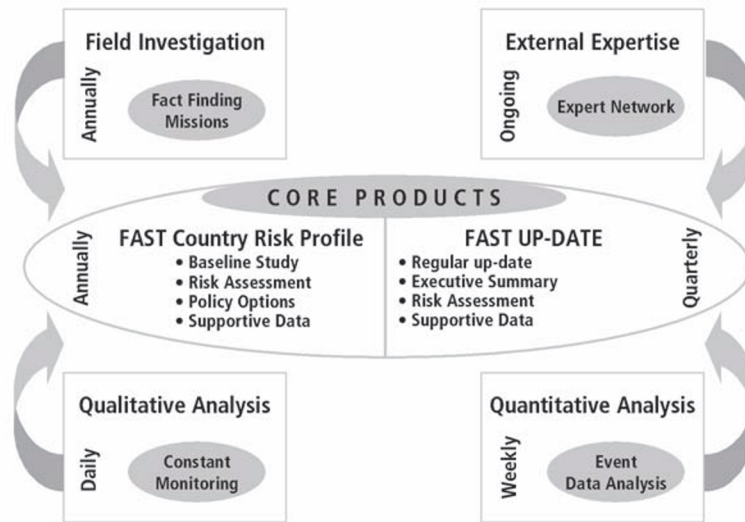


Figure 4.1. FAST - Methodological Overview

puter assisted research techniques play a role during the initial first two steps: the systematic collection of data and the interpretation of the data. While electronic data processing could in many ways be helpful in the decision making process as well and thus encompass all three steps or dimensions of early warning, we have so far restricted our ambitions to data collection and analysis.

### 3 EVENT DATA ANALYSIS

Methodologically, we rely on event data analysis, one of the most common types of methods used in quantitative international relations research.<sup>1</sup> Event data analysis is basically a three step process content analysis: First we determine a source or sources of news about salient political interactions in the countries under study. This could be an internationally-oriented newspa-

<sup>1</sup>. see <http://www.ukans.edu/~keds/intro.html> and Krummenacher and Schmeidl (2001) and Schmeidl and Bond (2000).