

Unfinished Business: An Overview of the Small Arms Problem

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Small arms and light weapons have been on the international agenda for just over a decade. This text will sketch out the main features of the problem and examine the many challenges that governments and other actors face in addressing it. As we will see, its complex nature precludes easy solutions.

Background and Basic Concepts

A Brief History

While the firearm has been with us for around 700 years, it has only recently come under sustained international scrutiny. States have regulated weapons for centuries within their territories, but are only now trying to coordinate their efforts at the regional and international levels.

There were several reasons why the international community turned its attention to small arms and light weapons in the early 1990s. The conflicts fought in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and since have largely been fought with these weapons. This includes virtually all of the internal wars that have plagued Africa since 1990. An expansion of peace-keeping in the early 1990s brought many foreign forces face-to-face with the problem of small arms proliferation for the first time.

Equally important, as of the mid-1990s a normative framework emerged to guide international action on the small arms issue – specifically, the concept of “human security”. An informal label for human security is “freedom from fear”. More precisely, we can say that human security concerns itself with removing the threat of violence from social, political

and economic life at the individual and community levels. Whereas traditional notions of security focus on the defence of national territory, human security emphasizes the security of individuals and communities living within that territory.

The success of the landmines process, which culminated in the adoption of the Mine Ban Treaty in late 1997, also helped catalyze international action on small arms.

The UN took the lead in addressing the small arms problem, establishing for example a Panel of Governmental Experts that produced an influential definition of small arms and light weapons. Yet, the first international instruments were adopted at the regional level – in the Americas (OAS), Europe (EU) and western Africa (ECOWAS) – with important efforts following in other parts of the world (elsewhere in Africa, OSCE, etc.). Action at the global level is relatively new, with significant progress occurring only in 2001, when agreement was reached on the *UN Firearms Protocol* and the *UN Programme of Action*.¹

The Small Arms Life Cycle

What weapons are we talking about exactly? “Small arms” are essentially hand-held firearms, whereas “light weapons” are portable military weapons that are carried and used by one or more soldiers.²

Efforts to control small arms and light weapons confront a series of problems. One is the remarkable longevity of these weapons. If properly stored and maintained, they have life spans of several decades. They often pass through many hands before the ends of their lives, further complicating control efforts. The small arms life cycle begins with

¹ For the full text of these instruments, see UN docs. A/RES/55/255 and A/CONF.192/15 respectively.

² See: *Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms*, UN doc. A/52/298, paras. 25–26; *International Tracing Instrument*, UN doc. A/60/88, annexe, para. 4.

production and moves at some stage to possession, but does not necessarily end with first possession. Transfer, re-transfer and stockpiling are all part of the normal small arms life cycle. The life of a small arm or light weapon ends when it is destroyed or becomes permanently inoperable.

It is important to note that, with very few exceptions, most illicit small arms and light weapons begin their lives as legal weapons. At some point these weapons move from the legal to the illicit sphere. Small arms control measures intervene at various stages of the weapons life cycle in order to prevent this from happening.

Other Challenges

Several other aspects of the small arms problem complicate efforts to deal with it. First, in contrast to weapons systems that can be prohibited outright, like antipersonnel landmines, small arms and light weapons have a range of legitimate uses involving both public and private actors (police, military, and civilians). Moreover, these weapons are, by definition, highly portable. They move easily from one owner to another, or from a region where conflict is ending to another where conflict is brewing.

Their portability and the ease with which they can be concealed means that small arms tend to move across borders quite easily. The small arms problem is global in nature. No country can insulate itself. Effective action requires the cooperation of other countries.

Last, but not least, the acquisition, use and misuse of small arms are strongly influenced by the social environment. No matter how sophisticated, efforts to control the supply of these weapons will achieve little if such broader factors are not also addressed. These include the reasons that lead individuals to acquire, use and misuse weapons.

Activities and Actors

This introduction would not be complete without a brief look at the broad range of activities and actors now engaged in tackling the small arms problem around the world. Action on small arms extends from the community level (e.g. weapons collection or demand reduction programmes), through the national and regional levels, to global forums such as the UN.

As they themselves have recognized in the *UN Programme of Action*, the primary responsibility for addressing the small arms problem falls on states (para. III.1). In a world of sovereign states, small arms regulatory regimes are inevitably rooted in national legislation and institutions. Yet other actors are also playing crucial roles in the fight against small arms proliferation. International organizations, including regional organizations, fund and implement many of the practical measures that address the small arms problem on the ground.

Civil society – a broad term that includes NGOs, research institutes, journalists and individual experts – performs many important functions ranging from policy advocacy to ad hoc monitoring of national implementation efforts.

The Role of Research

If we are to get a handle on the small arms problem, information is crucial. The study of small arms – and armed violence in general – is growing, yet remains in its infancy.

While the availability and misuse of small arms is one of many factors that contribute to armed violence, the small arms issue is worth studying in a focused way for at least two reasons. First, the proliferation and misuse of these weapons are largely preventable. Second, the costs associated with their misuse are much higher than those associated with other instruments of violence.

Fundamentally, in developing effective policy measures good research is essential. Research can help us understand the nature of the small arms problem in specific communities, including important relationships and dynamics that must be taken into account when devising appropriate responses. Research is also important in monitoring the implementation of policy measures and in evaluating their effectiveness.

Civil society has a critical role to play in research. The Small Arms Survey was established in 1999 in order to fill an information gap that existed in relation to small arms and light weapons. It is a gap that the Survey and others still struggle to overcome. Many important questions remain unanswered or only partially answered.

Nevertheless, during its seven-year existence the Survey has provided many important pieces of the small arms puzzle. A key vehicle for this research is the annual *Small Arms Survey* (same name as the organization). The first edition, published in 2001, outlined some of the main features of the small arms issue. It included chapters on production, global stockpiles, transfers, effects and measures. All of these subjects have received further scrutiny in more recent editions of the *Survey*. The *Survey* has also focused on particular aspects of the small arms issue: the humanitarian and development impacts of these weapons, the threat they pose to the realization of basic human rights, as well as the roles they play in armed conflict.

Unfinished Business

The 2006 edition of the *Small Arms Survey*, subtitled “Unfinished Business”, looks at some of the challenges the international community must confront over the coming years if it is to have any success in tackling the small arms problem.

These challenges are interrelated. They are as much about sustaining existing efforts as expanding those efforts to embrace new areas.

Implementation

The recent UN Conference to review the implementation of the *UN Programme of Action* failed to reach agreement on a final outcome document. This puts something of a question mark next to the *Programme of Action* process, though several UN initiatives, including an experts group on brokering, are nevertheless moving forward. The UN General Assembly's First Committee, which deals with disarmament and international security, is meeting in New York this month. It remains to be seen if it can make any progress on the issues that divided states at the Review Conference.

Whatever progress the UN makes in the development of new small arms norms, the need for full and prompt implementation of existing norms and instruments remains just as pressing as ever.

The 2006 *Small Arms Survey* underlines this point in relation to the new *International Tracing Instrument*. Since its adoption by the General Assembly last December, the *Tracing Instrument* applies to all UN member states. However, it has its limitation: It is political – not legal – in nature. Nor does it cover ammunition. It nevertheless constitutes a significant step forward in global efforts to address the small arms problem. The *Tracing Instrument* reinforces key standards in the areas of weapons marking and record-keeping, while its modalities for practical tracing cooperation go well beyond existing norms.

The *Instrument* provides states with an important tool in the fight against illicit small arms and light weapons. But, of course, if it is to have any impact, states must use it. The Survey's initial assessment of national preparations for the instrument's implementation, conducted late last year, revealed that many states were in fact moving quite slowly in this regard. New instruments and new norms will not mean much if they are not implemented.

The Supply Side

While, in a few minutes, I will argue that the international community needs to expand its focus somewhat, to take account of the broader, social factors that drive small arms acquisition and misuse, I prefer to first underline the continuing need to control the supply of small arms and light weapons.

As in previous years, the 2006 *Small Arms Survey* looks at legal stockpiles, production and transfers, underlining the importance of greater transparency, accountability and government oversight in each of these areas.

Stockpiles

Government-owned small arms constitute the largest coherent stockpiles in the world. In contrast to civilian guns, typically dispersed among millions of individual owners, government weapons are concentrated in a relatively small number of locations and custodians. Government stocks are thus tempting targets for theft or other forms of diversion to the illicit market. In some cases, state arsenals can disintegrate completely, flooding society with hundreds of thousands or millions of weapons. Control over these inventories is therefore crucial.

In 2006, the *Survey* has zoomed in on government-held small arms to gain a better understanding of their numbers and geographic distribution. Overall, the Survey estimates that there are at least 26 million law enforcement firearms around the world. It appears that government armed forces own an additional 200 million modern firearms. A mere ten countries hold almost two-thirds of these 200 million military firearms (128 million), with the top twenty states accounting for approximately three-quarters of the total (155 million).

These figures are estimates, based on partial information. Only eight per cent of the estimated 200 million military firearms have been publicly

acknowledged by their governments. This is still an improvement. Before 2000, almost no state made data on its total military small arms inventories publicly available. Nevertheless, the current low level of reporting indicates that we still have a long way to go. The Small Arms Survey strongly encourages governments to provide better information on their national holdings. This will serve to build confidence that legally-held weapons remain in the right hands and are appropriately secured, managed and controlled.

Production

This year's chapter on arms production focuses on future procurement trends. It shows that demand for arms by military forces is cyclical, with annual military production fluctuating considerably as a result. France and Britain, for example, launch major small arms procurement drives at approximately 20-year intervals. The Survey's research shows that in the next 10 to 15 years, global production will increase by around 10 million new weapons to meet the demands of modernizing militaries. The key question for the next two decades is what will happen to the arms that these new weapons replace? Many less wealthy states, including some involved in armed conflict, receive mainly surplus weapons that are displaced as wealthy countries procure new weapons.

This "cascade effect" provides the developing world with a steady source of arms, whether sold or transferred in military aid programmes. The temptation to transfer surplus stocks is strong as this can partially offset modernization costs or help to cement a political or security relationship. If, however, a country wants to ensure that it does not add to the global pool of problem weapons, it has a clear interest in destroying – rather than transferring – weapons that are surplus to national requirements. In recent years, many states have destroyed surplus weapons stocks. Others have taken concrete steps to improve the security of their stockpiles. Overall, however, it remains unclear whether states are fulfilling their commitments under the *UN Programme of Action* to identify surpluses and properly manage and secure their small arms stocks (sec. II, para. 17–19).

Transfers

Work that the Survey and others have conducted shows how difficult it is to gain an accurate picture of trends in small arms transfers, and to assess adherence to international transfer norms. The Small Arms Trade Transparency Barometer has been included in the *Small Arms Survey* since 2004. It assesses the transparency of major small arms exporting states on a 25-point scale, drawing on information that states publish in national arms export reports and/or release to the UN COM trade database. Points are awarded for such things as timeliness, clarity and comprehensiveness of reporting.

The 2006 version of the Barometer ranks the United States, Germany and Italy as the most transparent arms exporting countries. The least transparent are Bulgaria, Iran, Israel, and North Korea, all of which get scores of zero. While the Barometer continues to note recent improvements in transparency, it also points out that some states, such as Belgium and South Africa, have seen their scores decline as they have become less transparent.

Overall levels of public transparency remain low – despite the fact that the major exporting countries have a special responsibility to show that they are abiding by their commitments under the *Programme of Action*. These include authorizing exports only when consistent with “relevant international law” and ensuring “effective control over the export and transit of small arms and light weapons” (sec. II, para. 11–12).

Ammunition

The 2005 *Small Arms Survey* included a chapter on the question of ammunition for small arms and light weapons. This year, in collaboration with several other partners, the Survey has followed up with a book-length study.³

³ Stéphanie Pézard and Holger Anders (eds), *Targeting Ammunition: A Primer* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2006).

Though often neglected by policymakers and practitioners alike, the book concludes that ammunition flows play a key role in sustaining crime and conflict. The availability of ammunition alters the intensity of armed violence, and the patterns of small arms use and misuse. Small arms and light weapons are durable goods. They can circulate between conflicts for many years. Ammunition, by contrast, is a consumable item. Depending on the intensity of battle and weapons rate of fire, stocks can quickly run out. This makes ammunition a potential choke point. Restricting the supply – and even the type – of ammunition can limit the scope and nature of armed violence. The case of the G3 rifle in East Africa offers one example of this: After supplies of NATO-standard G3 ammunition declined, the weapon became virtually obsolete in the region. Unfortunately, restricting the supply of other types of ammunition has proven more difficult.

Research conducted by the Small Arms Survey in Uganda shows that non-state actors in the country use roughly the same types of ammunition as Ugandan state security forces. Not for the first time, it appears that poor stockpile security has led to the diversion of government ammunition stocks to non-state actors.

Tracing ammunition found in conflict zones could help deter such proliferation and make states more accountable for their ammunition stocks. The 2007 *Small Arms Survey* will include a chapter on the tracing of small arms ammunition in Brazil and Uganda.

The Broader Picture

It is not enough to focus on weapons and their ammunition. In designing and implementing effective interventions, we must also take account of – and ultimately seek to influence – the social, economic and political factors that underpin armed violence. This year's *Small Arms Survey* highlights four issues that help fill in this broader picture: small arms demand, young men and guns, the costs of armed violence, and security sector reform.

Demand

For several years now, certain practitioners and much of the research community have highlighted the importance of demand in tackling the small arms problem. A case study on Papua New Guinea (PNG), featured in the 2006 *Survey*, provides compelling evidence of the role demand can play in feeding a cycle of violence. PNG's National Capital District and its Southern Highlands Province both suffer from high rates of armed violence and victimization. Research that the Survey conducted in partnership with the Australian National University and UNDP reveals a high level of demand for weapons in these areas, and unwillingness to consider disarmament measures without improvements in the provision of public security.

More than 40 percent of respondents in a large-scale household survey said that guns made them feel safe, while more than one third said they would acquire a firearm if they could. There is little public support for weapons collection or reduction programs. This is undoubtedly a natural response to a situation in which a fragile state is increasingly unable to combat armed violence and provide security for people and communities. A few statistics underline the enormity of the problem. Just over 50 percent of households were the victims of violent crime in the six months between December 2004 and May 2005. About one in five households reported some form of victimization involving a firearm.

Young Men

This year's Small Arms Survey also looks at the disproportionate role young men play in armed violence – both as victims and perpetrators. Young men aged 15-29 die from small arms violence at four times the global rate. They account for half of all firearm homicide victims around the world, which translates as 70,000 to 100,000 deaths annually. This trend applies across regions and countries experiencing different rates of violence. The table on page 296 of the 2006 *Survey* shows how concentrated this violence can be. The bar at the far left represents the

world average firearm mortality rate of 4 per 100,000. Moving to the right, we see: Brazil's national rate of 19 per 100,000; the rate in the city of Recife (57 per 100,000); the rate among men in Recife (125 per 100,000); and, finally, among Recife men aged 20-29 (327 per 100,000). This last figure is 17 times the national average and more than eighty times the world average. Such violence has significant human costs. In Colombia – the subject of a separate case study in the 2006 *Survey* – life expectancy for men has been reduced by more than three years as a result of armed violence. The perpetrators of armed violence are also, overwhelmingly, young men. Why do young men kill? There is no strong evidence for biological-based explanations; they are not “natural born killers”. Nor is there much evidence that societies with demographic bulges of young men will systematically experience high rates of armed violence.

Armed violence is, in fact, a highly concentrated phenomenon involving specific populations in specific locations. In all places, at all times, the vast majority of young men are not engaged in violence. This suggests that the problem is social in nature. The 2006 *Survey* underscores the importance of economic and social marginalization in violence committed by young men. It appears that many marginalized young men engage in violent behaviour as they search for security, income and respect, often as members of gangs or armed groups. Small arms resonate with young men who are tempted by violence. They are strongly associated with such attributes of masculinity as virility, power and strength. Violence reduction programmes need to target those young men that are most at risk – whether as victims or perpetrators. Initiatives that target illicit gun ownership in high crime areas often produce dramatic short-term reductions in levels of armed violence. In the long run, however, violence prevention efforts need to focus on the various protective factors that seem to prevent the majority of young men from becoming involved in armed violence. These include stable home environments, decent economic options, and alternative sources of respect within communities.

Costing

We know that armed violence is a leading cause of preventable death and injury. It is therefore important to develop practical tools that allow us to measure its costs. Estimates of the costs of violence can help highlight those areas where greater investment in the care and treatment of victims is needed. More broadly, such estimates provide policy-makers with important reference points for resource allocation and priority setting.

Establishing reliable cost estimates is difficult. The Small Arms Survey has worked with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop guidelines for such studies. These guidelines focus on the medical costs and the cost of lost earnings that can be attributed to armed violence. These two types of cost are only a small part of the problem, but they are easier to assess in low-income settings than more complex effects such as psychological costs or losses in quality of life.

This year's *Survey* presents pilot studies from Brazil and Colombia. Additional pilot studies are underway in Jamaica, South Africa and Thailand. This research confirms that small arms misuse makes a disproportionately high contribution to the overall costs of violence in society. In Brazil and Colombia, medical treatment of a gun injury is two to three times more expensive than that of a knife wound. The Survey estimates that firearms injuries cost the medical systems of Brazil and Colombia USD 88 million and USD 38 million per year, respectively, measured in purchasing power parity (PPP).

Firearm injuries tend to affect young, potentially productive segments of the population, which translates into considerable lost earnings. The Survey estimates the annual productivity losses resulting from gun-related injury or death at USD 10 billion in Brazil and USD 4 billion in Colombia (PPP). Adding both types of cost together, the Survey concludes that Brazil and Colombia lost 0.5 and 1.0 percent, respectively, of their annual national incomes as a result of small arms violence.

These findings are consistent with similar studies conducted in the United States and Canada.

Cambodia/SSR

The Survey's chapter on Cambodia underlines the dangers of focusing on the supply side of the small arms problem, while neglecting broader factors affecting human security. Since 2000, the international community has helped the Cambodian government to remove weapons from circulation and strengthen control over remaining governmental stocks. The Survey estimates that weapons collection programmes have removed 131,000 of the approximately 154,000 to 216,000 guns that circulated outside of government control in the early 1990s. This has had a positive impact on human security in Cambodia as guns are now less often used in violent incidents and homicides.

Unfortunately, these reduction and control efforts have not addressed all of the problems arising from gun use in Cambodia. With the removal of most guns from civilian hands, weapons possession is now largely restricted to high-ranking government officials, the police and military. Yet, there is considerable evidence that some of these officials are misusing their weapons. Reports from various sources, including the UN, indicate that some members of the Cambodian security forces are using firearms to commit serious human rights violations, and as tools of intimidation and coercion. The narrow focus on weapons collection and control, while useful, has proven insufficient. There is now a pressing need to accelerate and expand the modest efforts made so far to reform Cambodia's security sector.

Conclusion

Ten years ago, the small arms issue had just begun to attract international attention. Some steps had been taken to examine and address the problem, but this work was just beginning. In 2006, the

picture looks very different. A fairly extensive set of multilateral norms and instruments is now in place. Dozens of practical initiatives have been launched to deal with issues ranging from stockpile management to community safety. Despite these efforts, the human costs of armed violence remain unacceptably high. Global initiatives to tackle small arms, while significant, continue to fall short of what is needed. The full and prompt implementation of existing norms and instruments is one clear priority for the coming years. As for specific issues, it is impossible to pick and choose. International efforts on the supply side need to be sustained, indeed enhanced – especially in relation to ammunition. At the same time, there is a need to look beyond weapons and their ammunition to take account – and ultimately influence – the broader social, economic and political factors that underpin armed violence. The nature of the response must, in short, match the complexity of the problem. We have much work ahead of us.