

A Brief Reprise

The 4th BMS is history and ODA officials, diplomats and civil society representatives now have a few days to answer email, do laundry and reintroduce themselves to their families before returning for the last part of the UN's 2010 'disarmament trilogy.' Formal negotiations on an Arms Trade Treaty will begin in mid-July, and while there is significant diplomatic insistence that this is 'not a disarmament treaty,' it is clear to many that the regulatory coherence provided by such a treaty could prove invaluable in efforts to ensure that arms transfers have maximum transparency and are used in a manner consistent with other state interests to protect human rights and protect civilian populations.

In several ways, the BMS debate previewed the ATT agenda. Both drying up existing stockpiles of older weapons and eliminating the potential for new traffic in illicit small arms was clearly on the minds of delegates during the long five day sessions of the BMS. An ATT, of course, would do little in the immediate term to address the problem of societies that are awash in older, but still quite lethal weapons. But the fact that so many of the representatives to the ATT will have been at the BMS improves prospects for government-sponsored resolutions that insist on regulation of the trade of small arms while doing more to dry up the still massive stocks of illicit arms that continue to fuel criminal and other abusive behavior.

Despite the long hours and efforts to build consensus (highlighted by warm applause for the representative of Liberia for overcoming his frustrations to support a consensus outcome), the final document for the 4th BMS was notable for its numerous omissions and sometimes narrow priorities. Not surprisingly, many NGOs were more supportive of government positions that could not reach the level of consensus – including illicit manufacturing, civilian protection, gender concerns, victim assistance, and security sector reform -- than with many of the consensus provisions. Many of us were also intrigued by those government statements that endorsed 'culture of peace' priorities and recognized the links between illicit arms and social development. While we were realistic about the limits of consensus at this BMS, we (and this includes many diplomats) had hoped for a document that we could more easily 'shop' to constituents eager for policy movement on small arms as one tangible recognition by the international community of the many human victims and social disruptions that illicit arms has created and continues to create.

There will likely be much comment on the final outcome document over these next weeks. For us, two things stand out. First, despite the fine work of Federico Perazza, the borders consensus produced overly technical and enforcement-driven priorities with little commentary (and that merely a reference to 'social and economic integration') to indicate that delegates understand the urgent need to preserve the many human interactions that require accessible borders while governments and regional organizations also seek to address border 'porosity.'

In addition, and again in recognition of the fine work of Sarah de Zoeten, the 'cooperation' consensus was almost entirely driven by state priorities and state actors.

Not only was civil society nearly absent from the final document (aside from some references to our capacity to support governments and suggest good ‘matches’ for assistance), there was virtually no reference to the specific skills of civil society in diverse global regions that can serve as a supplement to state-sponsored initiatives. This is not about ‘culture of peace’ activities alone, nor is it solely about having NGOs present in the negotiating rooms. Rather it is about mediators, conflict resolution experts, victims’ services personnel, women’s rights advocates and other civil society leaders who are able to train and involve citizens to do more locally to identify, highlight, remove and help repair the damage from illicit weapons. The excellent language in the document pertaining to cooperation and coordinated action with regional and international bodies could well have been enhanced by adding civil society to the core list of collaborators.

The process of strengthening follow-up mechanisms suggested in large part by Ambassador Macedo will indeed be enhanced by timely government reporting on their efforts to implement the PoA, by a review of and commitment to the use of new UN and other tools and mechanisms, and by preparations for 2011 and 2012 that highlight key issues and agenda items in a timely manner and with sufficiently lengthy formal meetings to allow discussions and negotiations on agreements that are both more inclusive and more binding.

At the same time, as mandated by the GA, cooperation and assistance will remain front and center for delegates responsible for small arms negotiations. After we’ve all caught our breath, we should strive together to create a more workable relationship for civil society that puts new skills and fresh perspectives into the policy and action mix.