

Sharing the Load

The comprehensive and provocative working ‘non-paper’ submitted by Sarah de Zoeten of Australia was the basis of a vigorous and wide-ranging discussion by BMS delegates on International Cooperation and Assistance. Discussion focused largely on the ways and means for states and the international community to support both the PoA and, more importantly, efforts by individual governments and regional bodies to stem the traffic in illicit small arms and light weapons. There was some concern raised regarding the precise requirements in the PoA for such support, but most delegations affirmed both the basic contours of the PoA and the need for greater levels of capacity building both to assess state needs and to provide timely and high-quality assistance.

As a contribution to the general discussion on building capacity, some delegations shared examples of their particular national concerns and activities in the small arms area, including the Philippines’ collaboration with INTERPOL, Bangladesh’s ‘Small Arms Destruction Day’ and Switzerland’s examination of the effects of armed violence on the pursuit of Millennium Development Goals. Delegations suggested existing mechanisms, such as within ODA or the voluntary Group of Interested States process, which could both encourage and process applications from national and regional groups seeking support for initiatives to curb illicit arms. Others encouraged greater use of UNIDIR resources, more funding support from donor countries and more attention to the ‘best practices’ of important regional initiatives (including ECOWAS and the expanded security interests within MERCOSUR) focused on illicit weapons. In some instances, there was recognition by delegates that the abundant skills and capacities of civil society, located in diverse cultural settings and often without access to formal UN deliberations, are increasingly prepared to offer supplemental, critical, professional support to government agencies and international organizations in their efforts to stem the illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons.

Regarding the need for additional capacity, delegates made some important points about the need to closely link the needs of states and the availability of existing resources. In addition, and consistent with the PoA’s affirmation of the central role of states in combating illicit small arms, many delegates were clear that states soliciting assistance from the international community have an obligation to do more for themselves. Nigeria and Peru, for instance, talked about reducing overall arms expenditures to assist in poverty reduction. The U.S. and others called for rejuvenated ‘national focal points’ within member states to facilitate requests and offers of support. In remark after remark, the willingness of states to tie capacity requests to robust national and regional initiatives – existing or proposed -- was a welcome development.

But even more welcome was the willingness of many states, including smaller states – as individuals, in coalitions and from diverse global regions – to affirm that they indeed have much to contribute to global policy and practice on illicit small arms. States may in some instances be seekers of additional capacity, but they are also dispensers of capacity in the form of technical and diplomatic skills, ‘best practices’ and more. The willingness of so many states to step forward and declare not only what they are doing for themselves

but what they are prepared to contribute to ‘shared responsibility’ on small arms was a most encouraging sign. Among other things, this elevates prospects for revitalized forms of state leadership at the UN that take the security needs, aspirations and interests of diverse global regions into full account during all important policy deliberations.