

## **Small Arms, the Global Arms Trade and Conflict Prevention: Integrating State and Community Responsibilities**

There are many organizations and governments represented here at this ATT with experience in conflict prevention, in ending impunity for conflict-related violations (especially against women) and in the control and elimination of illicit weapons. Their efforts are impressive, and they're mostly not shy about sharing their skills and materials.

However, in our view, the best efforts in conflict prevention are often and especially undermined in situations where there is a widespread lack of confidence in the security sector as well as a lack of complementarity between government policies on armaments and the aspirations of mostly civilian, community practitioners.

There are many venues in which illicit small arms proliferation could fuel conflict and security challenges:

We all know about organized crime and the drug trade, but there are also serious impacts on community and domestic violence. Uncontrolled weapons keep children from going to school and women from seeking a place at the policy table. These weapons keep elders from exercising leadership and everyday people from sharing their legitimate needs and concerns.

There is an implied contract with the state that must be raised in this context – we renounce our right to armed retribution on the assumption that the state can provide basic security, eliminate impunity, etc. In situations where the state is unable to exercise that control, or sometimes worse, where it exercises that control selectively in accordance with economic or ethnic prejudices, the incentive only grows for ordinary citizens, even those not involved with criminality, to acquire arms by any means.

Once arms possession in a community becomes widespread, opportunities for both use and misuse magnify. Our family used guns for sport and to supplement our food supply; guns were respected in my household, but not feared. At the same time, for some other families in our community, guns were used in a variety of contexts – allegedly to protect and defend, but clearly also to intimidate and even retaliate. In looking back, I'm sure our guns intimidated others as well. I'm also convinced that the role that small arms were alleged to have in preventing conflict was completely out of proportion to their actual value. The guns meant to prevent conflict exacerbated the potential for conflict more often than not.

I've had many occasions in my life, especially in Oklahoma in the 70s, Mindanao in the 80s, and Harlem in the 90s, to attempt to communicate with someone holding a gun in some sort of menacing position or other. It takes a great deal of discipline to concentrate on the person you are trying to communicate with and not their weapon. It takes a great deal of skill to take firm positions in situations where you can't trust the discipline or patience of the gun holder, especially when self-control has been impaired by narcotics or alcohol.

Where life-threatening weapons abound beyond legitimate state control, the risks of miscommunication are considerable; the stakes of misjudging your neighbor are simply too high.

The reality is that viable conflict prevention that adequately accounts for illicit small arms proliferation must combine skill building at community levels with security sector reform at policy levels. If the latter is neither competent nor unbiased, guns in communities are likely to fill security gaps and

complicate efforts to build local skills, empower local constituents, and challenge those who threaten local stability.

This is one of the places where the conflict prevention, small arms and ATT communities converge. Governments can do more to promote a more stable, predictable and non-abusive security environment, including the elimination of rogue weapons and unregulated stockpiles. And, of particular relevance to the this week's ATT Prep Com, we can also promote confidence in the security sector through more robust attention to questions of diversion in transfers – weapons traded legally that find their way to non-state actors, or are used to abuse human rights, or are re-gifted to reap profits for government officials. Each of these instances creates problems that have been well highlighted this week. As a general rule, unaddressed diversion creates insecurity and reduces public confidence – measures that are corrosive to efforts to build safer, more stable, less violent communities.

With armed conflict, there is often deep community weariness, but also diverse threats – not only to physical integrity but to prospects for full participation in society and even to the motivation of citizens to prevent conflict and build better communities.

From a conflict prevention standpoint, we are paying a very high price for diverted transfers and unregulated stockpiles. It is time to bring those costs down.