



# Addressing Small Arms and Light Weapons Issues in the Sahel Region: Expanding and Utilizing Local Capacities

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## SUMMARY

*This policy brief highlights the detrimental effects of the proliferation and smuggling of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Sahel Region, where it is difficult for the governments alone to bring it under full control. It focuses particularly on the potential of civil society to complement the role of the government in addressing these issues.*

## Introduction

Today, small arms and light weapons (SALW) are a serious menace to human security. With their easy availability, ease of use and longevity, the proliferation, circulation and misuse of these weapons has greatly contributed to the aggravation of armed violence, not only in times of violent conflict but also in peace time. The death toll due to small arms violence per day amounts to over 1,000 victims, many of whom are civilians.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, SALW are connected with other issues including development, public health, gender, youth and crime, which have wider, long-term and devastating effects on peoples' lives.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, measures against SALW proliferation are critical at international, regional

and national levels, including the Arms Trade Treaty and other instruments on border control, weapons and ammunition marking and tracing. However, those measures do not resolve the root causes. For example, there are always implementation problems which create loopholes for traders and terrorist/criminal groups, especially in the countryside where the state's presence and capacities are weak. The Sahel region provides a typical context for the above challenges. The region is a semi-arid area of barren, sandy and rock-strewn land, a large part of which is not suitable to sustain human settlement. Added to this, with the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the influence of the ongoing political crisis in Mali, the Sahel is severely threatened by SALW proliferation issues.

This policy brief seeks to draw attention to the critical role of civil society in addressing SALW issues in the Sahel region. It discusses the significance of the government as a frontline actor in SALW control while arguing for a deeper role for

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (2012). Small Arms and Light Weapons: Africa. Available at: [http://www.un.org/disarmament/education/docs/SALW\\_Africa.pdf](http://www.un.org/disarmament/education/docs/SALW_Africa.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

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civil society, especially in the spheres that the government cannot fully cover. Thus the two actors can complement each other by cooperating properly. The brief argues that more attention should be paid to local and grassroots levels with more direct interaction with potential actors concerning the circulation and use of SALW in order to decrease the number of victims of armed violence.

### Limitations of International, Regional and National SALW Control Regimes: Focus on the Grassroots Level

While international laws, treaties and standards are without doubt necessary, these approaches are often criticized for their extensive focus on supply-side disarmament issues such as trade controls, weapon embargos,<sup>3</sup> disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and weapons collection schemes. The above approaches leave out other dimensions of SALW control including the socio-cultural and historical issues that facilitate SALW misuse and abuse.

Even if the Sahelian states have the political will to regulate the arms trade, there is a question of the globalized illicit networks which are capable of outwitting any carefully crafted legal framework. For example, in the Sahel region, underlying conditions of vast and porous borders, insurgency activities, weak governance including various forms of corrupt practices and insufficient state capacity, make it easy for illicit arms circulation to thrive. Sahel border agencies in particular are usually constrained in terms of equipment supply and the motivation of officers, which impedes effective and efficient work.<sup>4</sup>

Small arms can be trafficked by car, bicycle or even on foot across borders. There is increasing

transfer of SALW from Libya and Chad into Mali, northern Nigeria and other parts of Sahelian West Africa. Additionally, arms may be stolen from state arsenals, or passed on from corrupt officers into the hands of militant groups. SALW are also produced locally.<sup>5</sup> Once these arms get into illicit circulation, it becomes very difficult to trace and collect them. It is also significant to note that sometimes the amount of weapons retrieved from DDR and arms collection programmes tends to have little practical effect on security because it is often only surplus or redundant weapon stocks that are handed over,<sup>6</sup> which means that significant numbers of arms remain in the hands of potential users. The general reason is that when people feel insecure and distrustful of the authority, they are unlikely to part with their arms.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, it is critical to tackle the other aspects of the weapons problem, namely demand and misuse alongside supply and possession of SALW in order to effectively reduce SALW proliferation problems in the Sahel. It is worth noting here that to guarantee success, every community needs tailored measures that are context specific. For instance, while in a relatively peaceful context, what must be prioritized may be the supply and possession of weapons rather than demand and misuse, in an immediate post-conflict context, it might be better to address all the four aspects simultaneously.<sup>8</sup> This calls for accurate information about local conditions that the political authorities usually lack.

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<sup>3</sup> Cooper, N. (2006). What's the point of arms transfer controls? *Contemporary Security Policy*, 27(1), p. 118-137.

<sup>4</sup> Lamptey, A.A. (2013) Rethinking Border Management Strategies in West Africa: Experiences from the Sahel. Available at: <http://www.kaiptc.org/Publications/Policy-Briefs.aspx>.

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<sup>5</sup> Cooper (2006). Indeed, in Bougainville, more than half of the weapons surrendered to peace monitors were home-made.

<sup>6</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (2005). *Small Arms and Light Weapons, Strategic Comments*, 11(4), pp. 1-2

<sup>7</sup> Muggah, R. (2010). Rethinking Small Arms Control in Africa: It is Time to Set an Armed Violence Reduction Agenda. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 10(2), pp. 217-238.

<sup>8</sup> Faltas, S. et al. (2001). Removing Small Arms from Society: A Review of Weapons Collection and Destruction Programmes. Available at: <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/occasional-papers.html>

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### Capacity Building in Local Communities

There is a growing awareness of the potential contribution of civil society and the need to involve it in addressing SALW issues. This has been reflected and reconfirmed in a number of international, regional and national declarations, agreements and guidelines, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2117 (2013) which is dedicated exclusively to the issue of SALW, the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms (2001) and its review conferences and reports, and the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials (2006).

Civil society actors by definition, have relative autonomy from government interests and are rooted in the local community.– they are therefore able to enlist the help of prominent persons such as local chiefs and religious leaders as well as have a wide range of roles and advantages that can complement the efforts of governments at local level.<sup>9</sup> Regarding SALW issues in the Sahel, working with relevant civil society actors facilitates access to accurate local information. Sustained collaboration with civil society would enhance local confidence in SALW control processes.

Thus, in dealing with the demand-side aspects of SALW control, local civil society actors work towards demand reduction, misuse and prevention initiatives by supporting accurate information gathering efforts to identify sources of demand for SALW and then directly influencing attitudes, mind-sets and behaviours of the people towards the promotion of a culture of peace. Examples of these activities include awareness-raising workshops on SALW-related violence for the youth, women or pupils,<sup>10</sup> training in conflict-resolution skills as

<sup>9</sup> Saferworld (2012) Small Arms and Light Weapons Control: A Training Manual. Available at: [www.saferworld.org.uk/.../Small-arms-and-light-weapons-full.pdf](http://www.saferworld.org.uk/.../Small-arms-and-light-weapons-full.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> See publications of the International Action Network on Small Arms. Available at <http://iansa->

alternatives to force, and youth community police training.

The development of faith communities and youth communities merits more attention among civil society organizations (CSOs). On one hand, in Africa, where by and large people have a strong sense of their faith not only as a way of life but also as an arbitration mechanism, people would place greater trust in religious leaders and more willingly listen to their voice.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, young men are potential aggressors who misuse SALW. They use these arms to defy conventional power structures and usurp power in times of armed conflict, societal violence, and armed crime.<sup>12</sup> This happens specifically when they believe that political, economic or social change is possible only (or easily) by force and that it is socially acceptable.

Furthermore, young men are frequently targeted for recruitment by radical groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. These recruiters tend to aim at those who are more deprived and have grievances against society, offering them security, income and social services.<sup>13</sup> However, the reverse is also true: young people can be important contributors to the security of their communities. In many cases they are more capable of operating in limited conditions. For example, as members of militant and insurgent groups, they master the terrain in the woods, forests and mountains. Their knowledge of conflict zones often surpasses that of multinational contingents. These young men have the energy and will to help their community.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it would be effective

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[women.org/sites/default/files/newsviews/iansa\\_why\\_women\\_2011.pdf](http://www.women.org/sites/default/files/newsviews/iansa_why_women_2011.pdf) Accessed: 21 November 2014)

<sup>11</sup> Small Arms and Light Weapons: Africa

<sup>12</sup> IANSA, Oxfam, and Saferworld (2007). *Africa's missing billions*. Available at <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/282-africas-missing-billions>

<sup>13</sup> Ismail, O. (2013). 'Radicalization and violent extremism in West Africa: Implications for African and International Security' *Conflict, Security and Development Journal* Vol. 13, No. 2

<sup>14</sup> South Sudan Action Network on Small Arms (2014). *Security Is Everyone's Business*; Duk Dialogue May 2013.

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to train religious leaders in the community in peace advocacy to engage young people to focus on peaceful and developmental activities instead of criminal activities. In addition, by developing civil society, the sense of security in the community will become stronger, resulting in a reduction in the demand for SALW.

### Challenges to be Resolved

In West Africa, some CSOs have sought to push for the implementation of related regional and sub-regional instruments on SALW control. In particular, civil society groups in West Africa continue to seek the implementation of the ECOWAS strategy, policy and programme on SALW. Some of the civil society groups on the ground include the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), West African Action Network on Small Arms (WAANSA), African Security Sector Network (ASSN) to name a few. Some others have been successful in establishing grass-roots information networks on attacks and safer routes that reduce the impact of violence. Nevertheless, these organizations are not fully utilised by both ECOWAS and national governments, and the issue of coordination between CSOs as well as the government and CSOs has still not been resolved.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the prevailing challenges among civil society groups relate to rivalry over donor funding, exchange of information and national government suspicion of civil society initiatives.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, civil society itself must become more organized and professional.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Formal national and international actors (e.g. governments, regional organizations, UN agencies) and informal actors (e.g. international and domestic NGOs, local figures) have their own comparative advantages. To maximize the efficiency of their respective activities in addressing SALW issues in the Sahel, it is important to make the best of the advantages of each actor (vertical cooperation). Building up networks between formal actors and between informal actors (horizontal cooperation) is also useful as SALW-related issues are not confined within a community, let alone within a country.

The following recommendations can help address some of the SALW issues confronting the Sahel region;

- Reinforce the capacity of the state to implement international laws on Small Arms and Light Weapons.
- Develop civil society in local communities, especially by utilizing religious leaders/institutions and young people.
- Involve civil society more in initiatives led by formal actors.
- Strengthen vertical and horizontal cooperation between formal actors and civil society organizations.

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Available at: <http://ssansa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Securityis-Everyones-Business-Duk-County-Dialogue-May-2013.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> West Africa Insight (2012). Confronting the Challenges of Small Arms and Light Weapons. Available at: <http://westafricainsight.org/articles/view/187>

<sup>16</sup> Ekiyor, T. (2008). The role of civil society in conflict prevention: West African experiences. United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), *Disarmament Forum: The complex dynamics of small arms in West Africa*, 4, pp. 27-34.

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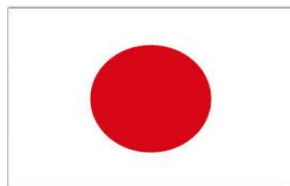
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