

Beyond Weapons Collection: Promoting Safe and Responsible SA/LW Management

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While the traditional focuses of many small-arms/light-weapons programs have been weapons collection and curbing proliferation, some humanitarian organizations—like Geneva Call and Danish Demining Group—advocate a model based on the promotion of safe and responsible weapons management. As illustrated by the experience of DDG with communities in Somaliland and by Geneva Call’s efforts with armed non-state actors, a participatory approach to weapons regulation and management offers promising alternatives to traditional weapons-control initiatives.

Conflict and post-conflict zones are particularly challenging environments for small-arms/light-weapons-control initiatives, such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants, weapons for development and firearm-registration programs. Common challenges have included the fact that perceived security levels remain too low for armed individuals or actors to feel comfortable surrendering or registering their weapons. The effectiveness of weapons-collection programs has also been hampered by the difficulty of establishing the number and distribution of weapons circulating during and after conflict. Existing SA/LW projects, which tend to focus on providing economic or material incentives for surrendering arms, can also have unintended negative effects. Incentives can actually increase the local price of weapons and create greater demand for traffickers. Furthermore, weapons hand-over programs run the risk of leaving people defenseless in volatile environments.

Humanitarian and mine-action nongovernmental organizations have important contributions to make in efforts aimed to curb the proliferation and enhance the regulation of SA/LW in conflict and post-conflict settings. Analysts have generally concluded that the synergies between SA/LW and mine-action initiatives are limited to specific technical aspects of SA/LW control, such as ammunition-stockpile management and weapons destruction.¹ This article, however, argues that mine-action NGOs’ extensive experience working with communities and armed non-state actors—as illustrated through the work of Danish Demining Group² and Geneva Call³—offers additional avenues for cooperation, particularly in the area of promoting safer and responsible SA/LW management.

DDG in Somaliland

Following the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990s, the past two decades in Somalia have been characterized by large-scale conflict resulting in a significant displacement of populations, a massive proliferation of SA/LW, the widespread use of landmines, and the build-up of armament and ammunition stockpiles. After the fall of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, the northwest region of the country declared itself independent as the Republic of Somaliland, establishing the framework of an administration and shaping a constitution. Inter-clan rivalries beset the region for some time, but since 1997 Somaliland has enjoyed relative peace and stability.⁴ The region still suffers from an excess of uncontrolled arms and ammunition, however,

which all too often exacerbates the seriousness of low-level disagreements. A 2007 DDG community attitudes survey of approximately 1,800 household members found that approximately 80 percent of the households in Somaliland owned at least one firearm.⁵

Ownership and use of weapons is deeply ingrained in the Somali culture. Furthermore, personal and community protection remains the highest priority within the vacuum created by the lack of strong rule of law and state policing. Therefore, DDG designed a program that respects individuals' and communities' perceived right to self-protection and need to maintain ownership and control over their firearms. Thus, building upon humanitarian mine-action programming elements like intensive data collection, community liaison, education and ammunition disposal, a program was designed that aims not to disarm Somalis, but to facilitate and promote improved SA/LW management at the community level.

In order to achieve a high degree of local "buy in" and confidence, DDG has adopted a grassroots, community-driven approach. Thus, after the implementation of a thorough baseline study in the target area, a community safety plan process is initiated. Through this process, DDG helps communities assess their safety situation, define and prioritize their safety-related needs, and identify their own resources, as well as external resources to address these needs. Based on this community safety plan, DDG makes an action plan for addressing the safety needs that fall within the organization's mandate. Interventions can include the following activities:

- Advocacy for the importance of reduction of armed violence and crime, cooperation with the police, safe handling and storage of firearms, registration of firearms, handover and destruction of explosive remnants of war,⁶ and excess ammunition and SA/LW.
- Firearms safety education for owners and dependents to encourage safe behavior when handling and storing firearms. This training aims to reduce accidents due to negligent and accidental discharge and foster a wider ethos of responsibility.
- Conflict-management education for community members to provide them with skills and ability to settle minor conflicts in a constructive and peaceful manner, rather than turning to the use of armed violence.
- Production and distribution of safe storage devices for firearms to introduce a systematic and safe firearmsmanagement regime into communities to restrict the accessibility of firearms and, in effect, reduce firearms theft, remove immediate access from those who lack either the responsibility or the technical skills to handle firearms in a safe manner and help reduce spontaneous assaults by creating both a physical and time barrier between a would-be assailant and his victim.
- Removal and on-site destruction of ERW that either have been abandoned or are in formal or private storage, as well as removal and disposal of any ammunition and SA/LW that communities feel are in excess to their requirements.
- Mine-risk education for community members of all ages, genders and socioeconomic groups to teach them safe behavior in potentially contaminated areas.

- Establishment of community-based policing mechanisms (in target areas with a police presence) aimed at improving dialogue, mutual trust and collaboration between the community and the police.

Enhancing community safety through these peacebuilding and armed-violence-reduction activities is a precondition for establishing sustained peace, because it reduces the demand for SA/LW. It will further increase the impact of other humanitarian and development groups working for a sustainable social and economic development.

The implementation of the project has recently begun in a temporary urban settlement in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland. Initial results from the community safety plan process show that the target community is eager to take responsibility for creating safety and security in its area. Furthermore, community members have expressed appreciation for the participatory and bottom-up approach to project implementation taken by DDG. This NGO is expecting to expand the project into more areas in Somaliland in 2009 and is looking at implementing similar projects elsewhere in East Africa.

NSAs and SA/LW Control

NGOs, led by Geneva Call, have developed innovative strategies to promote the anti-personnel mine ban among NSAs. In particular, NSAs have been encouraged to sign Geneva Call's *Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action*.³ In signing, NSAs commit to the same norms as contained in the *Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention*,⁷ starting with the total prohibition of use, transfer and production, as well as cooperation in mine-action activities and external monitoring of compliance by Geneva Call and its partners. To date, 39 NSAs have signed the Deed of Commitment and several additional groups have made unilateral declarations in support of the Mine Ban.⁸

Advocating a total ban on SA/LW among NSAs is clearly unrealistic, as it would essentially require NSAs to lay down their arms altogether. While this is a legitimate conflict resolution and peace-making objective, it is not part of the humanitarian agenda and beyond the scope of the mine-action community. Perhaps with the exception of decaying ammunition and weapon stocks, NSAs will not surrender SA/LW before peace has been achieved and consolidated.

There is, however, a largely unexplored opportunity to engage NSAs in the prevention of SA/LW misuse, defined as use contradictory to international humanitarian law or human rights law standards. Currently, the dissemination of international humanitarian law among NSAs by the International Committee of the Red Cross and other organizations indirectly serves this purpose, although such dissemination usually refers to the Geneva Conventions as a whole and is not weapon-specific. Some international principles do exist to regulate the management and use of SA/LW by state security forces and could theoretically be advocated for use among NSAs. The *Principles on the Prevention of Human Rights Violations Committed with Small Arms*⁹ of the Human Rights Council Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, for instance, calls on states to adopt and maintain safe and responsible weapons-management procedures. The United Nations' *Basic*

*Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials*¹⁰ provides restrictions on the use of SA/LW in the context of law enforcement. Although not directly relevant to situations of armed conflict, these principles could be promoted in contexts where NSAs seek to control criminality in their areas of operation.¹¹



Safe gun clamp designed by DDG for use by communities in Somaliland.
Photo courtesy of DDG-Somaliland

Although promoting more responsible use and stockpiling of SA/LW among NSAs may be seen as politically sensitive, DDG’s experience in Somaliland suggests that advocating safer weapons management among armed communities unwilling to totally surrender their arms may yield positive humanitarian benefits. Such efforts have the potential not only to prevent indiscriminate use, diversion, and accidents, but can also help improve the efficiency of subsequent disarmament programs, as weapons will be better accounted for and thus easier to retrieve and collect.

It should be noted that some NSAs appear to take weapons management and use, and their potential humanitarian impacts, rather seriously. Several NSAs, for example, have made written commitments not to carry out attacks against civilians.¹² Others have gone further by adopting weapons specific measures that can have a positive humanitarian effect. In the early 1990s, for instance, rebels in northern Mali applied strict accounting of their weapons and ammunition stockpiles, a form of responsible management that analysts believe may have contributed to the relatively low number of civilian casualties in the early phases of the conflict.¹³ Practical measures taken by these NSAs included placing assault rifles on single-shot mode, thereby limiting the risk of stray bullets hitting civilians, and implementing tough sanctions for group members who lost weaponry.

Another example is the African National Congress in South Africa, which developed detailed “Rules and Regulations Covering the Handling of Weapons and Explosives of our Movement” as part of its *1985 Constitutional Guidelines and Codes of Conduct*.¹⁴ Measures of particular interest include the mandatory record keeping and inventory of all military equipment, the provision of sanctions for members carrying unauthorized weapons and a prohibition against drinking alcoholic beverages while handling arms.

Advocating safer weapons management by NSAs, with the specific aim of reducing the risk of indiscriminate use and accidents, appears to be an undertaking that advocacy NGOs would be well-placed to fulfill. While not all NSAs may be responsive to the humanitarian cause, the experience of the mine-action movement and the examples of the NSAs listed above indicate that such advocacy has the potential to reduce the deleterious impacts of SA/LW misuse in conflict.

Conclusion

Humanitarian and mine-action NGOs' focus on reducing and eradicating the impacts of weaponry, and their extensive experience operating in conflict and post-conflict contexts, can help SA/LW-control efforts move beyond the currently predominant arms-collection and -destruction programs. This is the case in Somaliland, where DDG is piloting a community-safety project aimed not at collecting weapons, but rather at enhancing the safe storage of arms and educating armed communities in firearms safety and basic conflict management techniques. The community-safety approach does not exclude weapons destruction in a later stage, but puts reintegration before disarmament and demobilization, based on lessons learned from a number of DDR experiences in Africa and the analysis of the specific cultural context. Moreover, NGOs such as Geneva Call have acquired significant experience engaging NSAs on arms and international-humanitarian law issues. Since SA/LW are the weapons of choice of NSAs, engaging the actors of conflict on safer management practices will also help reduce the negative effects of SA/LW. 📌

Biographies



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Endnotes

1. Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, 2006, *Identifying Synergies between Mine Action and Small Arms and Light Weapons*, 3, 62–63.
2. Danish Demining Group is a Humanitarian Mine Action unit in the Danish Refugee Council. Since 1997, DDG has been working to recreate an environment free from threat of landmines, unexploded ordnance and other remnants of wars. DDG is currently active in seven countries creating pre-conditions for durable returns and sustainable development. In early 2008 DDG began implementing an SA/LW program in Somaliland, and is opening a regional office in Nairobi in 2009 to enhance programming in SA/LW and Armed Violence Reduction in Africa. See www.drc.dk. Accessed 22 January 2009.
3. Geneva Call has been engaging armed non-state actors in a landmine ban since 2000. The Swiss-based nongovernmental organization was created in response to the realization that the landmine problem could only be comprehensively addressed if NSAs, who are the primary users of such weapons today, were included in the solution. To facilitate the process, Geneva Call has developed an innovative mechanism—the *Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action*—that enables NSAs, who cannot accede to the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention, to undertake to respect its norms. <http://www.genevacall.org/home.htm>. Accessed 22 January 2009.
4. The coordinated bombings in Hargeisa on 29 October 2008, are a cruel reminder of the fragility of the situation, however. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7696986.stm>. Accessed 22 January 2009.
5. *A Baseline Survey of Community Attitudes Toward Small Arms & Light Weapons (SALW) in North West Somalia (Somaliland)*, Danish Demining Group and Danish Refugee Council. October 2007.
6. **Editor's Note:** Some organizations consider mines and ERW to be two separate entities, since they are regulated by different legal documents (the former by the Ottawa Convention and Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the latter by CCW Protocol V). However, since mines are explosive devices that have similar effects to other ERW and it is often impossible to separate the two during clearance operations, some in

- the community have adopted a "working definition" (as opposed to a legal one) of ERW in which it is a blanket term that includes mines, UXO, abandoned explosive ordnance and other explosive devices.
7. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*, Oslo, Norway. 18 September 1997. The document was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, 3 December 1997, commonly known as the Ottawa Convention. www.icbl.org/treaty/text/english. Accessed 22 January 2009.
 8. For an overview of progress made in engaging NSAs on the anti-personnel mine ban, see *Engaging Armed Non-State Actors in a Landmine Ban: The Geneva Call Progress Report (2000–2007)*, Geneva Call, 2007, Geneva, at <http://www.genevacall.org/resources/testi-publications/gc-progress-report-07.htm>. Accessed 22 January 2009.
 9. Reproduced in *Human Rights Council, Adoption of the Report on the Fifty-Eighth Session to the Human Rights Council*, U.N. document A/HRC/Sub.1/58/L.11/Add.1, 24 August 2006, Annex, at <http://www.iansa.org/documents/>. Accessed 22 January 2009.
 10. *United Nations' Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials*, at http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/h_comp43.htm. Accessed 22 January 2009.
 11. Without commenting on the desirability or legality of NSAs assuming policing or other state-like functions, this article recognizes that such situations do arise in practice.
 12. See for instance the Africa National Congress (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/conf/kabcode.htm>), the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (<http://genevacall.org/resources/testi-reference-materials/testi-nsa-states/nsa-states-mar00.pdf>) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (<http://www.onlf.org/news.php>). Accessed 22 January 2009.
 13. See Nicolas Florquin and Stéphanie Pézard, 2005, "Insurgency, Disarmament, and Insecurity in Northern Mali, 1990–2004," in Nicolas Florquin and Eric G. Berman (eds), *Armed and Aimless: Armed Groups, Guns and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region*, Geneva, Small Arms Survey.
 14. These regulations can be found on the ANC's website at <http://www.anc.org.za>. Accessed January 2009.

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