

Conclusion

Small Arms Proliferation in Southern Africa: Towards Regional Action

Virginia Gamba

Introduction

In the first volume in this series entitled Society Under Siege: Crime, Violence and Illegal Weapons (October 1997), it was indicated that the glut of weapons, contained politically by the realities of the international context of the Cold War, was freed from its constraints as a direct result of the changing international environment resulting from the end of that war; and from the inclusion of different actors, driving forces, and vehicles for interaction in the international discourse in the 1990s.

At that time of change – when non-state actors became as primary as state actors and when alternative vehicles, often illegal, for interactions multiplied – the world was faced with extensive stockpiles of unused weapons, and even greater stockpiles of weapons that were used and then circulated by secondary or tertiary actors to other conflict areas in ever-widening circles of distribution. To compound the problem of this emergence of new actors (both legal and criminal), traditional states of the Cold War era – many of which became new democracies in the 1990s – found themselves independent, but financially strapped. As a result, they placed little emphasis on the conversion of their military industries, being reluctant to put a stop to any industry that provided revenue and employment to many at a time when, with no identified enemy on the scene, there was no longer a need for increased numbers of weapons for national defence. If anything, there was an incentive to export arms widely for the necessary foreign exchange. If this principle applied to industrialised countries in the nineties, it also applied to weaker developing nation-states which were recovering from decades of internal struggles, wars of liberation and civil wars. In the latter case, weapons were not so much owned by states as by individuals and gangs, who started trading them for money, food and other commodities.

Divorced from enemy images and clear political direction and utilised by weak state actors and emerging non-state organisations, such as transnational criminal cartels, light weapons flowed uncontrolled and uncontrollably from region to region. In Africa these unstemmable flows have reached alarming proportions and have begun to figure in various priority agendas across the region. Nevertheless, on this continent, the national capacity to control and reduce these flows depends on many variables: the lack of sufficient verifiable information on the extent of the problem in national territories which are vast and include long porous borders; the lack of human and financial resources to cover the areas and deal with the issue; the lack of national, inter-agency structures of co-ordination to combat the illicit, and better manage the licit, firearms trade; the lack of capacity, both technical and human, to grapple with the issue, even if the will and the co-ordination are present; the pervading presence of corruption; and finally, the impossibility of isolated actions being of any value, unless neighbouring states share the same willingness and means to fight against weapons proliferation in their own regions.

Because the issue of small arms proliferation in Africa is a product of past legacy and present demand for arms for specific political, security and criminal purposes, the possibilities for control and reduction must necessarily be multifaceted, addressing not only the reduction in local demand, but also that of existing stocks (legal and illegal) circulating in the region. Both tasks are monumental and cannot be accomplished by any one single actor.

To look at this issue in some depth, Volume 2 in the *Society under Siege* series addresses the status of, and potential for, international and regional co-operation on arms control, with particular emphasis on the controls of illicit small arms trafficking across borders in the region of Southern Africa.

The Co-ordination of International and Regional Initiatives for Controls

As pointed out by Meek in Chapter 1, *"The role of international organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, in weapons control depends largely on the function of each individual organisation."*¹ Thus, some organisations are well positioned to place the issue on the

agenda, while others are able to implement agenda recommendations. Unfortunately, not all organisations have the capacity to do both. For this reason, there is a third role for internationally-driven processes on the issue of arms control, that of assisting organisations either to place the item on their agendas, and/or assisting them in the implementation of practical actions to stem the flows.²

The recognition of the limitations of international and regional institutions for the pursuit of effective action on the control of arms, leads inevitably to the issue of co-ordination. Hence, this volume's chief concern is on identifying potential actors in international and regional initiatives, the structures with which they must operate, and the potential for joint and/or co-ordinated action. This refers not only to global initiatives and actors, such as the UN (see Chapter 3), but also regional initiatives which could influence the development of bi-regional co-operation and consultation mechanisms, as explored in relation to the OAS initiative (see Chapter 4) and the EU initiative to combat illicit small arms trafficking (see Chapter 1, *et al.*).

A Sub-regional Organisation to Develop and Implement Policy on Small Arms

Quintessential to the creation of an effective sub-regional mechanism for small arms controls in Southern Africa is a study of the existing structures in the region that might carry out an integrated and co-ordinated approach, leading to a regional initiative to address demand and cut off supply of new and existing stocks of small arms. To this end, Volume 2 explores the potential that the OAU has for prioritising the inclusion of small arms proliferation in the African agenda, and that which sub-regional organisations, such as the SADC, its Organ for Politics, Defence and Security, the ISDSC and SARPCCO have for seconding, adapting and implementing such an agenda in Southern Africa.

Chapters 5 and 6 of this volume, therefore, explore the structure and mandate of each one of these African organisations for the purpose of identifying the vehicles which could be utilised and, if necessary, enhanced to implement a plan of action for the control of small arms flows in Southern Africa. Although, as pointed out by Cornwell and Cilliers and

Solomon in these two chapters, the organisations do exist and – in theory – have the mandate to examine security issues in the region, not all of them have identified the proliferation of small arms as being primary to their security concerns. This is the case because the impact of small arms on African societies is unbalanced. Some African countries are sources for weapons (not necessarily producers); others have weapons moving through their regions – often illegally – and therefore serve, whether they like it or not, as transit countries; and, finally, there are those who suffer directly the effects of this massive input of weapons on their own societies. It is the latter who are naturally more concerned with the situation and it is their task to try to convince their neighbours and regional partners to share the responsibility of controls, despite the fact that the brunt of the effect of small arms proliferation might not be felt in those other countries.

From an analysis of the existing structures of co-operation in Southern Africa, it is possible to infer that although the natural sub-regional political body to direct an initiative for co-ordinating small arms controls is the SADC forum, the ongoing debate on the decision to divorce the security and developmental elements of this organisation has, by creating two agencies (SADC and the Organ for Politics, Defence and Security) – instead of one – seriously hampered co-ordination of small arms control, as well as other safety and security imperatives of the region. The impasse thus created has had a dual effect: first it has ignored the need to look at security and development as an integrated whole; and secondly, it has thrust such pressures on co-operation processes located at lower levels that they have been forced into play. Two such *ad hoc* processes are a military co-operation forum and a police co-operation forum: the ISDSC and the SARPCCO. The ISDSC has become institutionalised as a sub-committee of the Organ for Politics, Defence and Security and does not currently discuss issues relating to small arms control. This leaves SARPCCO, which is envisaged to become a sub-committee of the ISDSC, but currently operates separately.

A Vehicle for Action: SARPCCO

It is interesting to look more closely at SARPCCO. As shown by Cilliers and Solomon in Chapter 6, due to the increasingly transnational nature of crime and criminal syndicates across borders, the police commissioners of

various countries in Southern Africa (all SADC members) opted to pursue a regional approach to the combating of crime. This resulted in the establishment, by police chiefs of Southern African countries, of SARPCCO in 1995.

Most actions and concerns relating to action programmes for the containment of the weapons flows have occurred either at bilateral levels (as shown by the agreements between South Africa and Mozambique on joint operations to locate and destroy arms caches, for example) or under the umbrella of SARPCCO, given the strong links crime has with illicit small arms trafficking in particular.

Strengthening the Sub-regional Mechanisms for Dealing with Small Arms Control

An initial look at the structures with potential to carry out small arms control initiatives in Southern Africa permits a dispassionate analysis of what is still needed in this respect:

- First, the Southern African heads of state must return to the concept of integrated security (or a ‘security first’ approach). Although this is a concept they espoused, and the creation of the Organ for Politics, Defence and Security within SADC emphasised this approach, they have unwittingly undermined it by permitting the unfolding of the debate on the separation between the functions of SADC and the Organ. Only an integrated approach, conducted by whatever the organisation in the region, can address not only the means of changing local demand for arms but also limit the existing spread of illicit and licit arms throughout the region. A mix of improved policing, transparency, restraint, co-ordinated legislation, information sharing, education, development and the creation of effective criminal justice systems is, in the long-term, the only approach which can make an impact on the scourge of weapons and violence in the region.
- Secondly, the Southern African region – utilising the SADC forum for its discussions – must not only meet as a region but also begin to think as a region. Due to the years of confrontation among present member states in the Southern African community, during the apartheid era, regional actors place more value in presenting themselves as a region,

than in developing a regional dimension to their national thinking. The original SADCC structure of the 1980s, as indicated by Cilliers and Solomon, had as its aim to “*reduce members’ external economic dependence, mainly – though not exclusively – on apartheid South Africa, and to promote development*”.³ Since South Africa joined the group and most Southern African wars ended in the 1990s, the organisation has maintained the trappings of a club of nations. What it lacks, however, is a uniform regional objective for actions benefiting all of the security and developmental needs of the region. ‘Thinking regionally’ must become a priority of SADC member states.

- Thirdly, even if thinking regionally and in an integrated manner should come about in Southern Africa, a conscious effort to prioritise the control of small arms must occur. Currently small arms are seen as an element of cross-border security issues by those organisations and countries that have given some priority to cross-border issues, including: car theft, drugs, endangered species, crime and smuggling. The issue of small arms, in most cases, is at the bottom of the list of priorities, despite the fact that the threats to national and regional security mentioned above use arms as the tools of their trade. Thus, a third priority for an effective regional initiative on the control of arms would be to raise the preference given to small arms.
- Fourthly, because the problem of small arms proliferation will not be resolved in Southern Africa until the right instrument is in place and the regional will has emerged at equal priority levels on this issue, much more must be done to strengthen the capacity of *ad hoc* and other mechanisms to contain the problem as it occurs. This means that, in the short term and pending an integrated regional strategy for action, police co-operation across borders must be enhanced. The natural consequence of this would be the augmenting of SARPCCO’s capacity to deal with small arms control and information sharing. It is, therefore, vitally important that the firearms division of SARPCCO’s operation be improved and enhanced, since it will have to act at levels where neither individual member states, nor the SADC community as a whole, is able to act at this time.

If these four considerations were met, it would then be possible to look at ways in which small arms trafficking and proliferation in the region could

be controlled. To achieve this, as indicated in Chapter 2 of this volume, countries in the region would have to work towards ten specific goals:

- Identification of source, transit and end-user countries in the region.
- Identification of supply and demand factors and actions to be taken regionally to address both.
- Enhancement of existing structures (bilateral and subregional) to address more effectively the problems associated with small arms controls across borders and the reduction of arms flows.
- Creation of an early warning system for light weapons which would include a number of information gathering mechanisms that would allow for regional monitoring of:
 - 1) location, collection and disposal of weapons in post-conflict situations;
 - 2) management and destruction of weapons stock (obsolete, surplus and seized);
 - 3) internal controls over state owned stocks (defence and police);
 - 4) corruption in oversight and distribution;
 - 5) smuggling networks and black market (pricing) operations;
 - 6) borders and border controls;
 - 7) government policies;
 - 8) demobilisation and disarmament programmes.
- Encouragement for the creation of offices for lessons learnt and information exchange at subregional secretariat level on issues of small arms, particularly SADC, SARPCCO, and within the OAU.
- Undertaking of a review of national needs and priorities for the control of light weapons which might include any or all of the following:
 - 1) improving national assessments and national legislation;
 - 2) generating surveys and statistics with a focus on weapons and violence in rural and urban environments;
 - 3) controlling and reducing state armouries and ensuring the destruction of surplus and seized stocks of small arms;
 - 4) improving capacity for border controls and for the monitoring of goods in transit;
 - 5) capacity building and training of specialised border inspection teams at interagency level;

- 6) research into the development of improved technologies for inspections at entry points.
- Undertaking research into the dynamics of transnational criminal organisations operating in the area.
- Studying patterns of, and connections between, the operations of private security companies and the proliferation of illicit arms.
- Undertaking feasibility studies for the destruction of surplus stocks of light weapons in national armouries and in post-conflict collection programmes.
- Undertaking feasibility studies for conversion programmes when applicable on weapons manufacturing in Southern Africa.

Assisting the Southern African Region to Arrive at a Feasible and Implementable Small Arms Initiative

The ‘mapping out’ of international developments with regard to existing structures and ongoing initiatives is a necessity, because the issue of small arms controls does not carry the same weight, nor is it given the same priority, globally or regionally. For some, the arms issue is still seen as a secondary priority; for others, it is all-encompassing. In these cases, the solution is to adopt a broader view on the issue of arms and their impact on societies. In some instances this argument is explored using the ‘security first’ approach, in others the terms ‘holistic’ or ‘integrated’ are used to refer to the way control of arms is dealt with. As this debate has not yet been resolved, Chapter 1 looks at initiatives for the control of arms viewed from three perspectives simultaneously: that of arms control, that of crime and justice and that of development and humanitarian perspectives. It becomes possible, with the aid of these categories, to look at international initiatives and see which can best serve the purpose of placing the issue of arms firmly on the agenda for action; which can implement such an agenda; and which can offer assistance.

As we have seen above, a discussion of small arms control in Africa, and in one region in particular – Southern Africa – cannot be undertaken until a prior identification of possible points of contact for international support has been made. Once this has been done it will be possible to reflect on two distinct but related matters. First, to offer general recommendations on practical approaches that the international community should take when it

considers furthering its small arms non-proliferation initiatives; and secondly, to offer a similar practical guide to African organisations - with particular emphasis on Southern African groupings - on how to prioritise and co-ordinate their actions to fight against the weapons scourge in Africa.

Of the existing international initiatives underway for the control of small arms, the ones from which the region of Southern Africa can obtain most support are those related to the OAS and the EU. The former because it is a regional process which might influence an Africa-wide decision on a policy for illicit weapons that could be agreed within the OAU forum and presented as an example of South-South co-operation. The latter, because of the European experience at achieving co-ordination and co-operation amongst erstwhile enemies; its years of integrated regional-thinking development; its recent decision to pursue a programme to combat illicit small arms trafficking that reaches over and beyond its own region; its recent decisions to look at development and security as an integrated whole, as part of its ‘security-first’ approach; its emphasis on practical measures for assisting development and disarmament processes abroad; and its ongoing debate on limiting and/or qualifying its own arms transfer policies, all of which can act as a direct reference for the experience and needs of Southern African nations in the fight against arms proliferation.

Europe, as well, should hold a special concern for Southern African countries. Unless both regions increase their co-operation and improve their understanding and interactions quickly, the likelihood of extended and new small arms flows into Africa from Europe in the medium term remains high. This could happen because, although EU countries as such are attempting to find ways of being more responsible in their arms policies, as well as more responsive to security and development needs in Africa, there is not an adequate grasp in Europe of the causes and effects of defence exports to other regions of the world. A case in point is the discussions of an expansion of NATO countries eastwards, accompanied by a set of conditions which includes standardisation of equipment.

Conclusion

Despite its infancy and the structural problems it has come up against, the Southern African community of countries has the potential for controlling

illicit small arms trafficking and bringing about the required reduction in existing stocks of weapons. This potential is manifest in the following facts: 1) most of the countries in the region genuinely desire peace and development, having seen first-hand the disruptive effect of conflict in their territories, Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Swaziland being clear examples; 2) there is a sub-regional structure, SADC, which generates a forum for high level discussion of common concerns; 3) there are reasonably efficient existing *ad hoc* organisations, by means of which small arms issues could be co-ordinated among member states, while the strategies and vehicles for long-term controls are finalised, e.g., SARPPCO; and 4) some countries in the region have already decided to prioritise policies related to the control of crime, violence and weapons availability in their own national strategies (i.e., South Africa and Mozambique).

With the growing willingness to co-operate on these issues regionally and the positioning of some structures for consultation, the Southern African community has, on the positive side, an advantage over other sub-regions in Africa for the control of illicit small arms trafficking. The more important question is how to go about making the existing structures operational and effective, not only in the short term but also in the longer term. On the negative side, there is as yet no compatibility in the region on the perception of each member state's responsibility in relation to controls on illicit small arms trafficking. Eventually this must come about. The process can, nevertheless, be accelerated if ongoing regional and international initiatives, such as those of the UN, OAS, EU and, eventually the OAU, undertake to share their experiences and responsibilities, co-ordinating their efforts to fit broad objectives as guideline generators, implementors or assistants to other ongoing processes. If this co-operative and co-ordinated approach to small arms is taken by all concerned, as indicated in Chapter 2 of this volume, much will accrue from the combined experience; each region will have something to teach the other; and controls will become a reality that might stand a chance of reducing this global scourge in the future.

Endnotes

- 1 Chapter 1, p. 8.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Chapter 6, p.79.