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‘Small Arms’, A Humanitarian Issue Demands Action Medical And Humanitarian Action

Olive said it very correctly – “who cares of the people getting injured in Uganda?” Being in New York, I mean we really care and that’s what our message has been from the time that the Preparatory Commission started in the UN context for the Conference. We wanted the message to decision makers to be that it’s the human costs that count. It’s the people that get hurt – the children, the women, the civilians, military the same –those people and those injuries that should be at the center of discussion, and not the national security issues like Cate mentioned.

Whether we succeeded or not with this particular conference I think is open for debate. I’m sure everybody including the Chair, and I see Joao already looking up there as his Secretariat, everybody had our own disappointments, but still I think the whole conference and the energy that it channelled was definitely worthwhile. I’m seeing here as Cate mentioned as well the interest that it has created and the broader group that it tries to address for forming this broader movement in order to tackle the issues in the long run.

Brian asked me to talk as a humanitarian organization, so I will make it short. I just have two major points I want to address. Being humanitarian, at UNICEF we also have a developmental component in our work, and what I’m talking about here is also a little about what we have been doing in the humanitarian context. The ISC, which is the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, which is a bit of a complicated issue, involves more UN agencies and includes some of the broader steering committees of NGOs. So it’s a bit of a broader picture than only UNICEF.

As I mentioned we have been involved, and why have we been involved in the issue of small arms and light weapons? Well, like we just saw from Olive, the impact of those weapons are tremendous, and are tremendous in the field where we work. Our humanitarian workers and even developmental workers would mention over and over again how their work is being hindered, how the result of the projects that they have set up has been just totally destroyed by the use of small arms and light weapons and by the conflict it generates. So we were sort of forced to think about the issue, and to think
about it in two ways – first the advocacy level, and second the programmatic level, really countering the problem in the field itself.

Let me focus now on the advocacy level for a moment. Like I said the impacts are very broad. And at UNICEF we found that children, being especially vulnerable, have been extremely negatively effected by the proliferation of small arms. I’m not going to mention the specifics because they have been popping up in the different presentations, but of course it’s the human costs that count. We wanted to bring that message across, but we found it very difficult in the beginning to find a good way of doing so. We didn’t really know exactly what were the effects of small arms. We had a broad idea but we wanted to do some research. The Small Arms Survey was very helpful in trying to formulate the effects in a more concrete way, so we could actually convince the policy-makers of the harm those weapons inflict in the field. And now I think you come in as a medical group right away. Although we did some research I strongly feel that we need much more. We need much more data to understand the effects and to bring the message across in a stronger way. I especially feel we need more research on several issues, including the effect on mobility – what is the effect on the mobility of people in a community flooded by small arms. And I’m also particularly interested - and if you can through your organization or through your research tackle this type of research I would be really grateful - in the effect of proliferation of small arms on the social fabric of a society and the community. I honestly think we need to define that a bit better in order to understand ourselves what it is that we try to tackle. And this is useful both at the advocacy and the programmatic level.

I’m particularly interested also in your feedback on the issue because what I like about Olive’s presentation is that she could present clear-cut small arms effects. We have been trying to separate the effects of conflict in general on communities versus the effect of proliferation and presence of small arms on communities. And it’s very hard to make that distinction. Still I think we need that type of distinction in order to get the policy makers convinced that it’s the small arms – although they are just tools – that are worth tackling. I would like to urge you to think about the concept and if you do research in the field to make that distinction and try to see those lines and connect them clearly. We can sort of say “conflict situations are as such, proliferation of small arms and light weapons result in these types of effects.” I know it’s difficult, but if you are doing research I think it is very necessary.

Like I said we need clear data for advocacy reasons, and one of the topics of this panel is the preventive action. I think the preventive action for humanitarians like ourselves is very much in the area of advocacy: keeping the issue on the international agenda, keeping up the momentum which has been created by the UN Conference, making sure that we
enforce action from governments from the people and institutions that matter, and holding them accountable for whatever promises they have made and are going to make.

The advocacy part, although the UN Conference was not a big success in itself in respect to the outcome, I do think that advocacy has progressed quite considerably. I think it’s very important the issue that Cate just mentioned, that we have a broader coalition of humanitarian NGOs involved. Still I think we shouldn’t give up hope and think “what next?” “Did we succeed?” I think we did succeed, but it’s really an issue now of keeping up the momentum, and that means the involvement of a lot of people like yourselves. There’s a lot of talk about professional people involved, social mobilization, and both in the western side of the world as with the developing countries.

Now I just want to quickly mention two other things about advocacy. One of the things that I thought was very useful also was to link to other campaigns and issues that are currently on the international agenda. One of the issues for example is child soldiers. It’s a big campaign and coalition which has sort of shifted gear because they actually got their optional protocol onto the Convention of the Rights of the Child. It’s a bit complicated, but we can learn a lot from them. I think we should use their energy and put it behind our campaign against small arms. Another thing I wanted to mention is that although I think we should make a distinction between the effects of small arms and conflict in general, the issue of children and armed conflict is very high on the agenda in the international arena. This is a book “The Impact of War on Children” written by Graca Machel. Maybe you are aware that she is from Mozambique. This book is very easy to read and it’s very good to have the advocacy there and it will also give you more of a picture about the other issues on the agenda at this moment. You can get it on the internet.

The last remark about advocacy is that it helps to keep pushing. I’m saying that because – and Joao is here now – we just had an open debate in the Security Council which is in New York, and I know it’s very far away from what Olive is dealing with, but I think it eventually will have an effect in the field. But the Security Council had an open debate on small arms and there was a Presidential Statement adopted which calls for reporting on the humanitarian impact of small arms and the relevant reports to the Security Council. I think this is a big step forward. And I’m sure we hadn’t expected a year ago that they would have agreed on this particular issue. It does open the door for further lobbying from both NGOs and the UN towards the Security Council which is an important body, although you may say that it’s a security body again but nevertheless.

Anyway then I want to just quickly go towards the second point of my intervention here: the programming in the field. I know the humanitarians including UNICEF try now very hard to connect our advocacy efforts with whatever we’re doing in the field. I personally
find it very challenging. We are looking at a very complex, holistic issue that has to be tackled in many ways in order to be effective. I am still very motivated and I think we have a way forward. On the other hand I feel sometimes very challenged by the enormous tasks ahead of us. In the several working groups that I attended over the last several days it came up over and over again, including the one on human security yesterday, that the issues are so complex that it is very hard to isolate one activity and say “ok, then we have a direct relation to reduction of harm of small arms in this particular community.” Nevertheless we are trying very hard. Some of the issues that we are trying to tackle as humanitarian/development agencies are: security sector reform, good governance activities, disparities in society which as we’ve just heard has a trigger effect to violence. All those measures are just developmental goals in themselves, so those activities will take ages to change the society, and that’s why I feel that the next challenge we have to address is to come up with a medium term approach that tackles the issue in a less developmental way. Although we still of course have to do the development work such as good governance, security sector reform, they are absolutely essential, we still have to find a middle way in order to make sure that we have some mid-term if not short term progress in this area.

[Break in the recording]

…Then we have what Robert just mentioned in his short presentations. We as humanitarians do have some activities in the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugee camps in order to diminish the presence of small arms and light weapons in those settings, and also through mitigated impact. There are some progressive results. One of the issues is to train and monitor the protection standards of the host community that hosts those camps, whether it’s security, police, or national authorities of the country itself, and create gun free zones in those camps.

Then, what we are also trying to do is community peacebuilding and education. Even there I feel it’s a long term issue but we can make a start. In comparison to the landmine awareness type of set-up. UNICEF has a number of projects there. Cora Weiss mentioned that the Hague Appeal for Peace is starting a project with the Department of Disarmament Affairs as well. So movement is going on in that area, but we have yet to learn a lot. And I think we can learn a lot from the experience in the landmine campaign. So we should focus there.

Of course the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DD&R) of former combatants, both adult and children. UNICEF is especially active and interested in the child soldier area, but not limited to child soldiers. The idea is to reintegrate those children into society, give them a possibility for the future, give them vocational training.
It’s like our colleague from Viva Rio said, to make sure that they have their minimum education standards in order to have a future on their own, and to provide them with counselling where necessary – which is almost everywhere, unfortunately. So that’s something very concrete and in which we’re quite experienced, but nevertheless of course it’s always in very small numbers.

A point on voluntary weapons collection programs, I think we’re struggling with that issue. It still has to be developed through exchange of our experiences there. I know the UN Development Program, UNDP, is quite big in it and also very much learning. UNICEF is trying to have their added value in the education part hand-in-hand with voluntary weapons collection programs, or weapons for development programs. I think it’s a very important issue if not for confidence building. We have to learn much more in that area, and probably the way forward is through trial and error. I’ve been studying this issue now for a year, and more and more I am convinced that we should just have good pilot projects, good monitoring systems, and that we apply our lessons learned to the next round.

If you have more information – I’ve spoken with some of you individually – but if you have more information please share that with me.

So I’ve covered a little bit about what the humanitarian organizations are doing and are planning to do, and the gaps that I have seen in the last year. Again I would like to emphasize that it’s a battle and struggle but it’s moving forward and I’m very happy to see all of you interested in the issue. And that’s really the way to do it, mobilizing, being together, and discussing this issue. Thank you.