I will be very short. While Wendy looked at the issue of small arms and crime, I look at the issue of small arms and conflict, how weapons availability may have an effect on conflict. I will try to make a few short comments in the hope that they will lead to some discussion.

First of all the approach which for example Wendy takes when looking at the issue of guns and crime is that the availability of small arms or the transfers of small arms are a triggering factor or a factor in the escalation of violence and the escalation of violent conflict. From that hypothesis we also heard yesterday a comparison about mosquitoes and malaria, and people with guns. Mosquitoes were the vectors, malaria the disease. This was compared to bullets or guns as being the disease and people as being the vectors. Now there is a bit of a problem there because I think the comparison is not entirely correct. The thing is that mosquitoes do not deliberately transmit malaria. That’s not their choice. It just happens to be that malaria is transmitted by them but they didn’t choose to do that. But persons do use guns for a reason, deliberately. The problem is of course, what is that reason?

I would like to change this comparison into another comparison which has to do with malaria and mosquitoes, which is to compare weapons to DDT. DDT is a dangerous substance. DDT has been abused a lot, and as far as I know it’s little used nowadays. But there are people who would say that under certain circumstances DDT can be very useful, and is needed. This brings us to the other perspective from which we can look at relation between the availability of weapons and conflict. That is a hypothesis that we find back in basically all the governmental documents, like the UN Action Programme on small arms. In these documents it is argued that small arms apparently can also be used in a legitimate way. They can be “legitimate instruments” for maintaining security and maintaining self-defense. Even in this UN Action Plan it is mentioned that people have the right to self-determination. The question there is what does this mean? When do we have responsible use and of particular importance in this session of the this conference, when do we have a responsible supply of weapons?

Let’s give an example. A country which has been very much pushing the small arms is the United Kingdom. The Foreign Minister of the United Kingdom has very often pointed at small arms being a “plague,” and a “scourge,” etc. At the same time, that same Minister initiated a policy in Sierra Leone where there is a horrible conflict going on. That
policy is to supply the government of Sierra Leone with weapons. That government is not known for its respect for human rights. However the idea is that the lesser evil is to supply the government of Sierra Leone with weapons in the hope that they can defeat the worse evil which is the rebels.

When are supplies of weapons responsible supplies of weapons? From our own perspective: most of us come from countries which at a certain time will have used weapons to defend its independence or to become independent, have used weapons to defend freedom. When can we really use weapons for that purpose, and whom can be supplied with weapons to do so? What are the consequences in the longer term of such supplies?

In Afghanistan we saw the same thing. The United States for a number of reasons supplied in the 1980s what they called “freedom fighters,” and now we’re still stuck with an enormous chaos in Afghanistan with all the possible consequences. From the perspective of physicians, and since this is a medical conference I bring this up, you can measure physical injury, you can measure if someone is wounded and what kind of trauma has occurred, you can measure the number of deaths. The problem is that you cannot measure an 'injury in freedom,' or an 'injury in political pride'. What is the balance? When is there a justifiable balance in injuries and death and on the other hand a struggle for freedom?

Those are very important questions which I think have to be addressed by a conference like this and which people have to address for themselves. How they want to use this and how they want to do research to understand these problems, and also how they want to use the outcome of their research for advocacy? How are you going to convince, lets say a member of the National Rifle Association that, yes, of course there might be instances that freedom is at stake but weapons are not always the most useful instruments to solve these problems.

I think these are very important questions, and I think we have to address them here.