Plenary Contribution to IPPNW Conference “Aiming for Prevention: International Medical Conference on Small Arms, Gun Violence, and Injury.”
Helsinki, Finland, 28-30 September 2001

Report from the working group on Vulnerable Populations: Women, Children and Refugees

Chair: Dr. Olive Kobusingye
Rapporteur: Mr. Robert Muggah

Mr. Robert Muggah, Researcher, Small Arms Survey, Geneva

Like the previous presenter our feedback will be relatively short. Our question could be divided into two questions. The first one was “how are small arms affecting key social groups, or vulnerable groups?” and the second part was, “how are such sectors, presumably the groups that are involved in responding to those vulnerable groups, responding to reduce the effects of small arms?”

What’s difficult in any short feedback session is reconciling an extraordinary breadth of experience in the room with time constraints. So we certainly felt that in trying to answer these questions.

The discussion was free ranging, and we tried to provide some order, but I think we were trying to explore again the experiences from the group. We had some people from former Yugoslavia, Georgia, from throughout Africa, and Finland, Germany, and Canada. So we had a rich array of experience to draw on.

One of the first things that came up was “what is a vulnerable group?” We conveniently had women, refugees, and children. Immediately there was discussion over refugees, and the fact that you have within refugees a broad category of displaced people. What wasn’t included were IDPs, internally displaced people, who are particularly vulnerable to small arms because they lack the regulatory and legal regime that refugees are entitled to. I’ll go into that when I talk about refugees.

Another issue that came up was that the category of vulnerable group probably depends on context. In different regions different groups can be considered vulnerable and it’s very difficult to have a broad-brush approach.

The second thing that came up in terms of us trying to figure out how to talk about the issue were the different approaches to assessing the effects, and we had discussion over a public health approach, an organic approach, somewhat similar to what Etienne was presenting the other day, grouping into broad clusters. And so we had some difficulty in terms of trying to conceptualize the issue.

So with that we launched into a free-ranging discussion on the different sectors.

Looking at women in particular, we spoke about sexual violence as being an objective, measurable impact, and measuring rates of sexual assault, of rape committed with firearms. And there have been a whole series of surveys, particularly in the Balkans and the Caucasus, of women who have been particularly or acutely effected by sexual violence with small arms. Tied to that were difficult indicators of the subjective fear that women register as a result of small arms or the availability of small arms. And more difficult to measure quantitatively.
Immediately what came up was a secondary impact relating to increased workloads. The absence, in this case, of the man who might have been killed as the result of a small arm, results in an increased workload for the women. The absence of children. So this was something that had measurable quantitative effects on the socio-economics and the profile of a particular household.

Which relates then to the third indicator which was the changing household roles. You can measure the increase in widows, or female headed households, in a particular community that was affected by small arms. This in turn results in, again, a changing dynamic within a household. The psycho-social or psychological trauma, short and long-term depression, these are all impacts that women in the group spoke about as being particularly harmful.

One that we didn’t explore as much as we would have liked to was the change of social status and stigmatization among women, or marginalization as a result of small arms use. Just a personal aside, we did a study with a group in South Africa with households who had been injured or wounded by a small arm. Some were small traders, some were working in vending stalls, or working in the private sector. And a lot of them, when doing assessments after the incident, a lot of them registered above and beyond anything to do with the lesion and acute trauma from the bullet. They talked a lot about being marginalized within the community and being afraid of going out. Being afraid of engaging in business, being afraid of being seen as a victim. And this was something that was discussed again and again. And it’s rather more difficult to measure.

We sort of looked at all three groups at once, so we were moving from group to group. So if I move into children, obviously injuries, disabilities, mortalities are effects. People from Georgia and the former Yugoslavia spoke a lot about accidental shootings as a serious impact especially among children. Celebration shooting, the bullet being shot during a wedding or a festival, and the bullet’s actually falling back down and landing on people is a serious problem in the region.

One of the secondary impacts was the loss of parental care. Orphan as sort of the reverse side of the coin of the widow. Secondary impacts include lost education. Being treated after an injury or the fear of guns in school results in lost education, lower enrollment rates. The other one that we discussed more briefly were related to cultures of violence. The generational implications of children involved with or using, or exposed to small arms violence on a large scale. And this then results in the deterioration of community cohesion. Again, a useful way of finding appropriate indicators for some of these impacts would be by asking the community themselves “what do you feel?” “what impacts do you feel in the community as a result of small arms?” This is something we’ve been doing at the Small Arms Survey. Going into communities and, essentially, sitting people down, women and children, and men, and asking them. It’s sometimes the most obvious ways of registering impacts are right in front of us and we don’t even realize it. And you can do this through participatory assessments, PRA, PUA.

The third group were refugees and internally displaced persons, IDPs, and like I said we split the two. Refugees are entitled to certain protections under the 1951 convention. IDPs are not. There have been recent efforts within the international humanitarian community to try to codify existing rights for internally displaced people, but as it stands there’s no coordinating mechanism or organization that actually looks out particularly for the rights and interests of internally displaced people. As we’ve discussed, people who are displaced are particularly susceptible to state predation or state collapse, or government repression. This is an acutely vulnerable group, and that was agreed within our session.

The first thing that came out – I guess it was on everyone’s mind – was the militarization of refugee camps. People have an image of the small arms effects on people inside camps who are particularly exposed to small arms violence because they are reduced to a dependency state on the camp structures themselves. Related to that was the issue of host communities outside of refugee camps also being particularly exposed to violence. And we spoke about the situation for example up in
northern Kenya, which has come up again and again in the Horn, where refugees have come in from Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia, and often can’t leave their politics behind and bring their weapons with them. One of the things that happens is you have conflict and tension between refugees and host communities. In some cases the refugees, or people coming into the camps, have sold their weapons to host communities and are actually being targeted by the host communities. For these groups who rely on livestock within the camps, there’s been raiding into the camps themselves by host communities, to the point where the UN High Commission on Refugees, UNHCR, has had to shut down livestock herding and tending within the camp, which further reduces the livelihood strategies of these refugees.

So you have this inter-communal, intra-communal dynamic between refugees and host communities, which I guess you could record as the criminalization of the communities and the camps. You can record this through assaults – through attempted homicides, through homicide, and these are things that I think the UNHCR and other groups are starting to do.

One of the secondary impacts that was discussed was the escalation of child mortality rates within refugee and IDP populations. The amount of malnutrition as a result of people fleeing from violence, and the rise of preventable diseases within these populations. If you compare groups of refugees who are in areas of high arms availability, against those who aren’t you’ll find that actually levels of preventable diseases and child mortality rates are actually escalating within one country.

One of the things that we discussed is that there are obviously a lot of overlapping issues and impacts that effect all sectors, such as psycho-social trauma, injury rates, firearm-related mortality.

A lot of our time was spent essentially trading experiences from the different regions. There was a heated debate when we started speaking about responses as to whether it’s useful to reduce guns, focusing on the weapons themselves, or looking at the broader array of issues resulting in the demand for weapons in the first place. Some of the discussion revolved around the need for a broader, more holistic preventive development approach when trying to reduce weapons.

A couple of key areas in relation to responses. The first was education and I think we spoke about that previously. But education particularly targeted at children and spouses, and obviously a broad array of groups are involved in that, including UNICEF. Other responses were related to dialogue and the promotion of discussion within particular vulnerable groups on peaceful conflict resolution. One area of targeted intervention, I guess this is all preventive intervention, was recreational facilities for children, both in camps and in communities that are particularly affected. If you go to a refugee camp you’ll find there’s not much to do there, you’ll find in many cases. Particularly in areas that are saturated with weapons. And obviously kids who are sitting around idle with nothing to do are more at risk to taking up the weapon.

The creative arts, capitalizing on the capacities of the vulnerable groups themselves to send out messages through theater, poetry, drama. This is something that’s being taken up increasingly, and harness the capacity of people themselves to send out a message about small arms use. Harnessing the media, and focusing on campaigns, subjects that might be heightening or increasing a culture of violence.

And we were moving towards the curative aspects but we didn’t actually end up speaking about anything other than the preventative aspects. So that’s essentially what spoke about.