

TACKLING PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS IN EAST AFRICA

By Coalition for Peace in Africa (COPA) members

The 13th-19th of June was the Global Week of Action against Gun Violence. As part of the activities, COPA gave the chance to anyone interested to share their ideas on the way forward towards tackling the proliferation of illicit arms in East Africa. This month's policy brief is summarising the views and opinions as expressed by grassroots organisations representatives and COPA members.

The existence of illicit small arms and light weapons is one of the greatest concerns in the African continent. Factors such as mismanagement, poor leadership and tribalism allow for their proliferation and contribute to their misuse. Easy accesses to illicit arms combined with the existing socio-economic conditions in the continent, are increasing further the probability of gun violence and armed conflict.

Implementation and reinforcement of measures to control proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons is essential at national, regional and international level. Addressing the distribution side though is not enough. Controlling the supply of weapons should go hand in hand with addressing the issues linked to their demand.

Youth and violent conflict

Illicit arms are captured by powerful individuals who in order to achieve their own agenda do not hesitate to manipulate and use children and youth involving them with violent activity. Lack of opportunities for young people combined with poverty makes them more vulnerable to such manipulation. In some African countries the situation is worse than others; still cross country, access to illicit arms is easy and youth due to their active nature tend to get involved in such activities.

In cases of post conflict countries where no proper disarmament has taken place, youth have guns in their possession. When there is tension at community or family level, youth are making use of these guns without having necessarily a specific purpose. Consequently in many cases they hurt others as well as themselves. The reason behind is the high levels of employment and lack of realisation of the rule of law. 'It is sad yet not rare in some African countries to see a boy under 15 years old having a gun' *CBO representative Northern Uganda*. Africa should therefore "Stand up", as it is time for peace not for war.

Case of Karamoja region in Uganda

According to organisations operating in the region of Karamoja, guns have been a source of wealth in both terms of ownership and illegal trade between neighbouring districts. Gun possession among youth is quite common. The culture of owing cattle which is dominant in the area puts pressure on these people to possess greater number of cattle which in turn will enable them to marry many wives as well as been respected within their society. Poverty and the cattle keeping culture in combination with the easy access to illicit arms drives young people and members of gangs living in the area to raiding castles.

Based on interviews with youth from the Kotido district, the government has currently implemented a disarmament programme. However the youth interviewed is concerned as the programme does not address the issues of alternative peaceful income generating activities for the disarmed individuals. Most of these youth are pastoralists who currently own a small number of cattle.

Those who are depending on gun related activities are not given an alternative. The chances of them feeling disillusioned and disempowered and decide to go back to violence are quite high. Thereby as much as disarmament is important equally is rehabilitation of ex soldiers and members of gangs. According to the organisations operating in the area, the solution can and should be given by government initiatives, which will efficiently tackle the problem.

Actions against gun violence

During the global Week of Action against Gun Violence, many organisations joined the global campaign and are working towards lobbying the government to take action. Common message of all during the Week: Commitment and political goodwill is required so as to take strong and efficient measures and tackle proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The government has to adopt and reinforce adequate measures so as to ensure that small arms do not end up in the wrong hands fuelling political wars. Struggles over power must end and impunity should not be encouraged.

Interventions should exist at all stages from marking and mapping of arms during production, to the control of their distribution, transportation and use. Cooperation of all relevant entities at national, regional and international level is essential for the efficient control of gun trafficking. But closing the distribution 'tab' only is not the solution.

Efforts need to take place from the civil society, international institution and national governments to deal with the reasons which are contributing to the demand for arms, whether the underlying cause is poverty, fear, protection of life and property or greed. Thereby introduction of alternative income generating activities for rehabilitated soldiers/gang members and youth, free access to education for all, tackling poverty and eradicating ignorance and tribalism are essential. For this to be achieved collaboration of national and private institutions is important.

Responsibility of all

The role a powerful government and national and international policy makers have to play is important. However, campaigning to stop the proliferation of illicit guns is also in the hands of civilians who ought to be actively involved in the process and contribute towards identifying the way forward. We should all work together towards addressing poverty, tribalism, and thereby reducing demand for weapons, improving national firearm regulation and strengthening controls on arms transfers.

References:

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as well as campaign messages of different organisations who participated in the Global Week of Action Against Gun Violence 2011.