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Demand Dimensions of Small-Arms Abuse

by Alejandro Bendaña

International humanitarian attention has underscored the importance of confronting the proliferation, accumulation, and misuse of small arms. The humanitarian imperative, however, often tends to sideline, purposefully or not, the more contentious political issues involved. Three questions have to be placed squarely on the table. First, are we avoiding a deeper (and much needed) consideration of the supply and production dimension? Secondly, have we decided not to address the underlying and systemic causes of violence? As Bobi Perseyedi notes, “it could . . . be argued that the growing international interest in small arms is due, to a large extent, to the lack of political will on the part of the international community to address the underlying causes of internal conflicts.”¹ Thirdly, should we address the demand side of the problem from a security or a development/peacebuilding perspective?

WHICH DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK?

Before addressing these questions, there is a more general concern that requires acknowledgement. Not only the content of but also the very framework for discussion can be problematic or partial. This refers to the very decision to organize single-issue campaigns that, in and of themselves, may deflect political attention and organizational resources away from a broader understanding of (and action upon) direct and economic violence.

Civil society campaigns argue that a well-defined focus and specialization is critical to effective advocacy and policy reform. But is this policy at the expense of politics (let alone power and paradigms)? Governments have their own reasons for compartmentalizing the issue—the more “independent” the demand problem, the smaller the embarrassment over the lack of political will to address the production dimension and the causal factors.

Of course, the silence of arms producers is explainable. However, by extension, corporate investors in certain industries may not wish to be reminded of how their decisions exacerbate the social problems that create crime—for example, poverty and joblessness—and transform the workings of the global economy to make it easier for arms pushers to move their money. Expanding the parameters of our analysis (and action) may well reveal that many of the rich countries do not stand above the problem but indeed are a part of it. The point, therefore, is not to expand but to contract those parameters.

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Most of us would agree that it is better to address an issue such as small arms in a compartmentalized and partial way than not to address it at all. What is problematic is that so long as we deal with such problems at the level of symptoms and not their essence, we may be simply legitimizing, and thereby reinforcing, the macro power structures and thinking that produce violence.

BLAME THE VICTIM

Does weapons availability help trigger violent behavior? The question is academic in regions such as Central America or Central Asia, where it seems that weapons, like the poor, shall always be with us. The cold war made small arms and light weapons widely available, and technology has made them cheap, maintainable, and easy to transport—ensuring that they will remain instruments not simply of the military but of militarized crime and economic survival or rebellion.

Small arms are not merely symptoms of the loss of “values.” Governments often prefer to blame crime on the criminals rather than to address another discernible component of the small arms problem: namely, the relationship between small arms proliferation and the character of economic, social, and political development. The law-and-order and security approach tends to reduce to police actions pitting “good guys” against “bad guys.” The national security “guns and thugs” approach can be as narrow as it is opportunistic. Proliferation and abuse are linked, of course, but, as the examples of Switzerland or Texas would show, the first does not necessarily lead to the second.

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Widespread gun ownership and use raises important questions about fundamental relationships between state and society. It is more than a question of “governance”—a blanket term often used to blame national governments for conflict. The character of the state helps to shape social behaviors. Where repression is the official norm, and where people are seeking to build more democratic societies and movements and wish to gain access to power, the implications regarding gun supply and demand are obvious: people’s guns against government thugs.

Drugs, Thugs, Greed, and Grievance. One must be wary of the recent trend to analyze the economic agendas of competing factions in violent conflicts. Once again, the policy prescription should focus on affecting the behavior of national elites and their regional networks.² However, the analysis and responses should also examine how globalized privatization creates new opportunities for particular groups to multiply their capital by engaging in multifaceted national and international trade that includes weapons. In certain countries, these are private-sector firms that under the rules of liberalized banking and diminished capital controls can freely move the money that moves the weapons (or drugs, diamonds, etc.).

Conflict entrepreneurs are more of a by-product of wars, although they may feature prominently in a war’s perpetuation. People do learn new means of survival in

militarized economies, and sometimes it is difficult to unlearn the use of weapons as instruments of economic subsistence. Development aid conditionality and international police repression are not the answers. Effectively contesting the pain produced by war and weapons will be the product of a long-term and incremental process of organizing social energy, referred to by some as “social capital” or “civil society.”

State and Security. Citizen insecurity (and with it gun proliferation) may be as much the product of a repressive and corrupt authority as of a nonexistent or ineffective one. We must examine the contentious connection between a so-called failing or failed state on the one hand and the need of a community to assume its own security on the other.

Where police and courts are ineffectual, where impunity is the norm, citizens will assume their own security. Security becomes privatized and security agencies proliferate, along with the demand and supply of weaponry. There are now abundant reports of criminal elements’ being better armed in quality and quantity than the legitimate forces of the state. While such a situation is, in part, the result of excessive availability, it is also the result of diminished capacity on the part of local security authorities.

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Capacity, in turn, cannot be divorced from privatization, budget-constricting frameworks, and state-debilitating consequences of global rules set down by the lending countries and institutions. In other words, the failure of a state in its elemental duties to provide security—let alone other human rights and equity—is also the failure and responsibility of the global rulemakers. Donors call for demand-side action with one voice, yet with another demand structural adjustment programs and external debt repayment, suspiciously oblivious to the connection between the two.

New Conditions and Interventions. What the South does not need is new conditions on rapidly diminishing aid flows. Many in the South, at both the national and local levels, feel that linking development assistance or debt relief to political behavior is in general a bad idea. Over and above the implications for domestic democratic processes, and whether “aid” is a matter of charity, self-interest, or justice, there is the question of whether the donors have the competency to impose or justify the imposition of governance- or security-related conditionalities.

MEANS OF ADDRESSING DEMAND

It is easy to point out the negatives of a demand-side focus, but we must also address the potentially positive ways to influence that focus.

Assuming a Development and Justice Perspective. Conceptual and policy horizons regarding gun abuse must be expanded to positively engage the external possibilities of affecting the demand dimension. Examples and research now abound showing how humanitarian assistance may have profoundly negative impacts on the dynamics

of conflict and small-arms demand. But the refrain “do no harm” is not enough. The question is how to do some good from the outside. Campaigns, particularly in the North, working from a development and justice perspective should raise fundamental questions about development assistance and humanitarian aid as a complement for efforts in the legal and normative realm.

Review Aid Policies Instead of Security Policies. There is a need to respond to small-arms abuse in a more coherent and coordinated manner with a view to long-term sustainability and capacity-building. Demand-side discussions and recommendations could benefit from ongoing reviews of the application of development assistance to violence prevention.³ It has been argued that in certain national and regional contexts, aid projects could be designed to contribute to conflict prevention, resolution, or reduction by building either the will or the capacity of the state and civil society to create an environment in which differences could be resolved without recourse to violence. Diminishing available stockpiles and restricting supply avenues is insufficient, at least from a humanitarian perspective.

Peace and Weapons Abuse Control—The Indispensable Linkage. In countries like Sri Lanka, Colombia, or Sierra Leone, the problem of small arms cannot be addressed without an understanding of the phenomena of “militarized violence.” Past or ongoing conventional military engagements between organized forces spill over, in time or geography, into abuses and paramilitarism. Perpetrators, not always men in uniform, or potential victims are both sources of “demand,” as institutions and society itself make all social, political, and economic problems a security problem as well.

There Is No Magic Bullet. That being said, the temptation should be resisted to make categorical statements or, worse yet, to devise programs drawing on “expertise” or experience from another conflict zone in another part of the world. Approaches should be situation-specific, as weapons proliferation affects different sectors in different ways in different regions, within and among countries.

Which Way Forward? Donors must come to grips with the gap—or, perhaps, the incompatibility—between addressing the small-arms problem in a comprehensive fashion and the workings of current structures, processes, and operating procedures regarding development and security policy. It may well be that many of the “givens” of market-driven corporate globalization are part of the problem. Gun abuse or violence prevention may therefore be less a question of methodologies or “tools” than a matter of approaches and genuine commitment to empowerment. We perhaps would do well to lend as much support to building local and national containment and prevention capacities as we do to international conferences and international conventions.

CONCLUSIONS

At the academic as well as practical levels, we need to understand and tap indigenuous, grassroots sources of arms abuse and violence prevention. This means enhancing local capacities for community-building, the tapping of social energies, commu-

nication and coalition networking, and peacebuilding in general. It just may be that the most effective means of controlling gun abuse will take the form of strengthened norms and networks of national civic engagement on the one hand, and democratic expansion of the national public sector diminished by financial entities on the other.



Notes

1 Bobi Perseyedi, *The Small Arms Problem in Central Asia: Features and Implications* (New York: UNDIR, 2000), p. 5.

2 See, for example, Mats Berdal and David M. Potter, *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (New York: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

3 See, for example, UK Overseas Development Administration (ODA) "Conflict Reduction Through the Aid Programme: A Briefing for Agencies Seeking Support for Conflict Reduction Activities (briefing paper), 1996.

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