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Civil society participation in firearms collection and destruction in non-conflict scenarios



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INTRODUCTION

Globally, in 2018, 610 victims were killed every day (223,000/year) because of violence committed with firearms¹ in conflict and non-conflict contexts.

It is estimated that 85% of the one billion firearms in global circulation as of 2017 are in civilian hands (857 million) a significant increase compared to 2006, when civilian holdings were estimated at 650 million². This way, decreasing firearms and ammunition civilian holdings are an important step to reduce the aforementioned context. Civil Disarmament Initiatives (CDI) are one of the strategies to accomplish this goal. State-led efforts, mainly by the military sector, usually dominate CDI. However, there are several good experiences in which the involvement of civil society has supported CDI design and execution, improving effectiveness, increasing sustainability, and attaching legitimacy and transparency to them.

This briefing paper highlights the involvement of civil society in CDI, offering recommendations for its involvement in partnership with governments in firearms collection and destruction in non-conflict scenarios. The examples were drawn from five of the largest CDI worldwide (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Mexico and the United Kingdom). The first section presents the definition of civil disarmament within its initiatives categories. The second explains CDI's main characteristics, and the third offers recommendations for conducting CDI. The fourth section exemplifies, in practical terms, the gains and how civil society can support CDI achievements. Finally, the last section provides further resources on the subject.

1. What is civil disarmament (CD)?

Civil disarmament (CD) consists of the removal and destruction of small arms and ammunition from the civilian population, decreasing their availability and demand to reduce urban, gang, or post-conflict violence and encourage a culture of peace. Even though "disarmament" may suggest a compulsory action (in response to a mandatory command of the State) most of the initiatives highlighted in this briefing paper relied on civilians' voluntary compliance³. CDI usually involve campaigning efforts followed by a structured strategy for collecting and destroying firearms and ammunition in conflict or non-conflict contexts. CDI impact distinct dimensions of public security policies by reducing gun and ammunition availability, proliferation, and usage in violent contexts, restricting one of the illicit market potential sources, and influencing people's motivation to possess weapons⁴.

2. CDI's main characteristics

CDI can take place at the local, regional or national levels; being a stand-alone initiative or part of a broader set of gun control measures. Initiatives with greater scale, scope, and duration usually require the involvement of the State. Concerning the stakeholders leading CDI, three groups stand out:

- Governments can carry it out alone (without civil society participation);

¹ Hideg and Frate, 2021, p.9.

² Small Arms Survey, 2020.

³ Faltas, 2018, p.8.

⁴ Fleitas, 2010.

- Civil society can carry out the CDI on their own;
- Both the government and civil society can partner to work together.
 - In this case, there can be different participation's levels. For example, in Brazil, civil society was involved at almost all stages, from designing to witnessing and organizing public events for the destruction process.

Depending on the objectives it wants to achieve, CDI can have different formats. This set of goals will shape the type of firearms and ammunition to be collected and the groups targeted, which impacts the structure and campaign strategies. There are three main objectives:

- to prevent and reduce gun-related deaths;
- to decrease the firearms demand;
- to prevent firearms diversion.

Most frequently, initiatives focus on the first objective. For example, the first Australian buyback program's (1996) main goal was to end the mass shootings and collect higher caliber handguns, ammunition and accessories from legal owners, dealers and businesses. Reducing the population's demand for firearms and ammunition can also be an objective of CDI. In such cases, SALW collection can reach any firearms type and all the population. The third objective is related to diversion prevention when the collection campaign focuses on reaching guns with poor custody and with higher chances to migrate to the illicit market (some examples could be firearms owned by recently deceased relatives⁵, private security companies which went bankrupt, firearms collections, etc.)⁶.



(Source: IM Sweden – Humanium Metal Initiative, 2022)

⁵ For an example of how to mitigate the risk of diversion in this situation, refer to the [Californian regulation on the inheritance of guns](#).

⁶ Tracing seized weapons and studying firearms thefts can also highlight the most risk groups and the main sources of diversion. For a recent example, see “[Desvio Fatal: vazamento de armas do mercado legal para o ilegal no estado de São Paulo](#)” (Sou da Paz Institute, 2022). (Accessed: 10 May 2022). Another good example of tracing to uncover channels of illicit supply of firearms is the report: “Following the Gun: Enforcing Federal Laws Against Firearms Traffickers”. (Accessed 12 May 2022).

3. How can civil disarmament and SALW destruction efforts be executed?

The following recommendations were taken from the study of five CDI in the countries listed above in the introduction. The following table presents the number of firearms collected and destroyed in each country, selecting the period with the highest collection:

CD Initiative	Period with the highest firearms collection	Total firearms collected in the period	Source
Argentina	Jul 2007 to Dec 2008 (17 months)	107,761	(Concaro, 2012)
Australia	Oct 1996 to Sep 1997 (12 months)	700,000	(Chapman et al., 2006)
Brazil	2004–2005 (24 months)	472,855	(ISP, 2011)
Mexico DF	Dec 2012 to Jun 2013 (6 months)	4,844	(López and García, 2004)
United Kingdom	July to Sep 1997 (3 months)	162,198	(Reuter & Mouzos, 2003)

Data compilation (Langeani, 2022)

Diagnostic

Accurate diagnostics provide information to define effective objectives for reducing possible resistance or difficulties in the surrender of firearms and ammunition by civilians, and also select the priority areas and target population. Specific research to gather data would better support the diagnostic and the planning phases. However, all studied initiatives were conducted without the diagnostic phase having taken place either due to the lack of resources, or because the CDI was answering to a time-sensitive matter. In those cases, it was possible to use existing research, public sources⁷ and civil society inputs to formulate more data-based and assertive diagnoses.

Although none of the five initiatives listed above conducted specific research or diagnostics to plan and implement their CDI, it should ideally be done considering at least the following aspects:

- Considering the target groups' specificities and context of violence to define collection and key initiative dates:
 - Space: a hotspot data for gun crime should be used to define the priority regions.
 - Time: consider important cultural dates linked to firearms use to strengthen awareness and stimulate the surrender. The Mexico DF Government chose campaign dates near Patron Saints festivities when lots of accidents and deaths happened due to celebratory gunfire⁸.
 - Opening hours: considering the target audience's routine and schedules (such as working hours and school and nursery hours). Alternatives should be offered on weekends when usually people are not working.

⁷ Crime and Victimization surveys can be used to decide the areas with higher prevalence of gun crime and insecurity. Existing databases of gun owners can be used to understand the profile of civilians with guns and to customize the campaign and its messages.

⁸ Cesup, 2014, p.11.

- Flexible structures with itinerary points should be available for exceptional circumstances of collection.
- Taking account of the different needs and perceptions of women and men on the subject. Even in a context in which women are not the gun holder or primary direct victims, the effects on women might be considerable and need to be assessed carefully⁹.
- Collecting firearms and ammunition use and violence data to define what types of firearms must be collected and where.
- Mapping the most important political, civil and technical stakeholders to be involved.
 - For instance, even though men were the main firearms owners and users in Mexico DF and Brazil, awareness campaigns targeting wives and girlfriends were conducted as they influenced their husbands' and boyfriends' decisions.
 - In several other contexts, community and religious leaders played an essential role in convincing their community to participate.
- Mapping conventional and unconventional communication and influence channels according to the target group's specificities, online and offline¹⁰.
- Accessing the underlying motivation for the decision of gun purchase by conducting specific research or looking into the populational census, academia and civil society organisations research data. Hearing from civil society which segments of the population may be willing to give up their weapons or which motives could make someone hand in the weapon¹¹ can enable a more tailored and effective communication material.
- Determine clear and realistic objectives to help targeted groups' engagement and confidence in the campaign and the campaign's effective monitoring.

Planning

Accurate planning helps develop realistic and achievable program objectives, sets a baseline of relevant performance measures to monitor its effectiveness¹² and strengthen the campaign's legitimacy. It is recommended to:

- Establish safe procedures for firearms and ammunition collection and disposal;
- Include ammunition¹³ in the surrender;

⁹ For instance, even when the weapon is not fired, it can be used in the house to threaten and perpetuate a situation of domestic abuse against women and children. In cases where the men are targeted, apart from the human suffering, women will have to take additional responsibilities to raise the children, usually with a loss of income.

¹⁰ Use of social media is a good example on how to actively reach out to specific groups.

¹¹ In 2012, Sou da Paz Institute, supported by the Paulo Montenegro Institute, trained a group of teenagers to design and conduct a poll with their peers in one of the most violent neighborhoods in the south zone of São Paulo. The poll helped to measure the exposure to firearms and what were the most convincing arguments to make someone hand the weapon (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2012, p.27-28).

¹² Reeve and Lewis, 1997.

¹³ Ammunition frequently receives less attention than weapons. However, reducing ammunition availability may bring short-term results once it is a product that has to be routinely replaced and has a lower shelf-life. (Baldo and Miralles, 2020, p.8).

- Design a short and safe chain of custody of the collected items, defining the most appropriate storage and destruction methods according to the items' specificities;
- Build a tailored and safe computerized system for the campaign (to allow for the correct registration, traceability and audibility of weapons).

Incentives and compensation¹⁴

- The CDI targeted and priority items should guide the definition of which financial incentives will be offered, and among those which will receive higher values.
 - Although it is not common, offering financial incentives also for the ammunition increases their delivery¹⁵.
- Financial incentives and compensation are the most effective.
 - For example, in December 2012, the Mexico DF CDI changed the incentives from goods and vouchers to cash. In the first six months, 4,446 handguns were collected, around three times more compared to all the firearms collected in the 12 months of 2011.
- Payment method
 - For the financial incentives, there are several possibilities: payment in cash, check, bank deposits, or a voucher associated with a password generated by the citizen (allowing the compensation to be cashed anonymously at an ATM¹⁶).
 - Bank deposits have the downside of undermining anonymity¹⁷ and usually generate delays which would decrease the population's confidence in the campaign, like in the UK and Brazilian experience's beginning¹⁸.
 - When compensation depends on banks (to cash the check or withdraw money from an ATM), it is important to seek bank institutions with good territorial coverage.

Firearms and ammunition delivery and collection

Guarantees for delivery

It is recommended that CDI are anchored in specific legislation which contemplates guarantees for the firearms and ammunition delivery and for receiving incentives to minimize possible civilian resistance to surrendering, as listed:

- Guarantee anonymity both for the delivery and for receiving the incentives;
- Accept registered and unregistered, legal and illegal firearms. Including firearms with expired holding licenses, restricted use and items with obliterated serial numbers;
- Offer amnesty for firearms owners to surrender their guns without fear of reprisal or fines;

¹⁴ The term compensation is more suitable to describe the payment for mandatory handing of guns. The value offered will have to be closer to the market value of the good (firearms or accessories, for example).

¹⁵ As shown by the Argentina's experience.

¹⁶ In Brazil, where this method was implemented with great success, the strategy was made easier with the use of a public Federal Bank with presence in the whole country.

¹⁷ Argentina's campaign used a check without indicating the beneficiary and the need to verify the person's identity cashing on the counter.

¹⁸ Complaints related to delays in the payment, or even lack of payments were registered in the beginning of the Brazilian campaign, a negative publicity that can undermine the campaigns.

- Allow and encourage the delivery of weapons from other people such as parents, friends and neighbours;
- Do not question the provenance of the weapons and ammunition;
- Do not require proof of property of any kind;
- To offer closed and reserved space for the collection points creates a safer area for persons surrendering their weapons, reducing the population's fear of judicial reprisal if they surrender their guns.¹⁹

Collection points

It is crucial to find a balance between the campaign objectives, target groups' preferences, available resources and security when deciding where to place and how to organize the collection points operation.

- Considering neutral territories as collection points allows for greater capillarity and lower resistance, especially in countries or regions where the confidence in the government and public security institutions is low.
 - For example, in the UK and Australia, with high confidence in the government institutions and security forces, the police stations were appropriate, while in Mexico DF and Brazil, using churches and community centres as permanent or temporary collection points increased the number of collected firearms.
- Decentralizing collection points can reach more citizens.
- Guaranteeing minimum collection points in distinct regions of the country (e.g.: cities and rural areas) and providing mobile collection points to reach distant places or special situations (such as a gun collector who needs to hand dozens of weapons at once).

Reception practices

- A website with an online form with the weapon's info (manufacturer, calibre, etc.) and the collection point's postal address, is a safe guarantee for the gun holder, in case they are stopped by the police asking them to justify being in possession of an illegal weapon.
- Instruct operators to respect guarantees and not ask for or collect personal information.
- At all the collection points, an authorized and trained governmental agent must ensure the weapon is unloaded and safe and identify its type and model. A safe room for this procedure, with a sandbox for unloading weapons safely, is a plus.

¹⁹ Faltas, 2018.



Figure 1. Sandbox for safely unloading weapons, used in a military collection point in Mexico (Source: CDMX, 2022).

- Insert the weapon's information (type, calibre, manufacturer, and serial number) and picture into an online system tailored for the disarmament campaign, which will generate a delivery code to be used during the transfer of the weapon until it is in the custody of the government.
- The agent must hand to the citizen a numbered receipt attesting to the surrender of the weapon, which guarantees the chain of custody after the handout.
- The agent should conduct a pre-destruction of the weapons in front of the citizen during the surrender. Common methods of pre-destruction include: hand and hydraulic press, oxy/acetylene torch (to cut weapon in big pieces²⁰) or simpler methods of metal box and sledgehammer (to destroy key components as triggers or firing mechanism).



Figure 2. Example of sledgehammer and iron box donated by a São Paulo NGO to the municipal police of São Paulo to conduct pre-destruction of weapons at the collection points. (Source: Sou da Paz Institute)

²⁰ US ATF has good [guidelines on how to permanently disable different types of weapons](#) (handguns, rifles, etc) with torches. (Accessed 05 May 2022).

- The unserviceable firearm should then be sealed inside an ID bag or (in case of larger weapons) be provided with a numbered tag to identify them.
- Define tailored protocols for large possessors (e.g.: dealers, collectors, bankrupt companies and stores) or heavy weapons (e.g.: machine guns and rifles).

Storage²¹

- At collection points held in law enforcement or military buildings or other places with good security conditions, a report of all the weapons collected should be issued daily and signed by different stakeholders to increase legitimacy.
- The weapons should then be transferred to a padlocked crate and stored in the armory or equivalent. The State should have a protocol for periodic transfer of the weapons to the destruction site.
- Collection points with no pre-destruction structure or held in civilian buildings should have military or law-enforcement protection during opening hours, and staff should be in charge of removing the weapons from collection points at the end of each day.

Destruction

Destruction is the best practice for the collected firearms and ammunition for several reasons, such as safety and confidence in the program. The usual chain of events used in the countries studied were:

- Define an effective destruction plan involving distinct stakeholders with technical knowledge and political influence, which includes civil society actors, considering²²:
 - The quantities, types and conditions of weapons and ammunition to be destroyed;
 - The location of the items to be destroyed (e.g.: they need to be gathered to a central location for inventorying and prepared for destruction, or they have already been inventoried and prepared in the collection point).
 - Armed convoys for transporting collected items;
 - Definition of the destruction method²³ to be used for firearms and ammunition.²⁴
- Communicate the information about the destruction (before, during and after) transparently to increase public trust,²⁵ and engagement in the firearm collection program;
- Public destruction ceremonies (using a crushing vehicle for example) can help increase the transparency and confidence of the population but could be risky in some contexts;
- Conduct internal and external audits to guarantee all the collected items would be destroyed.

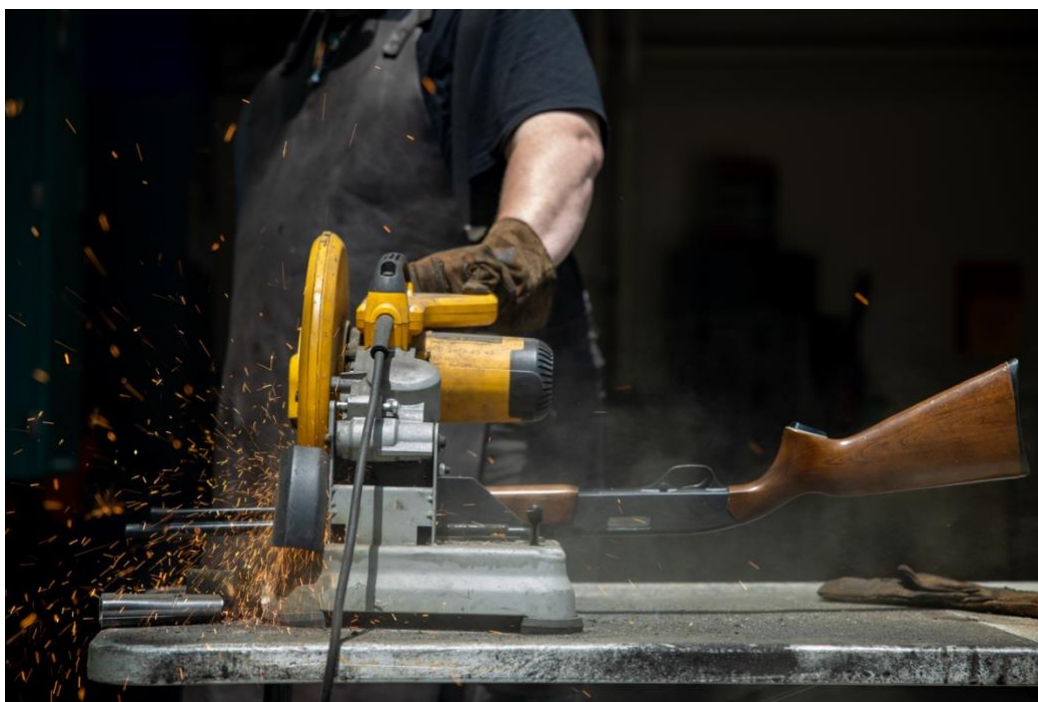
²¹ Both firearms and ammunition are sensitive materials for diversion and need adequate measures to prevent it. However, ammunition, for its explosion risk, should demand other mitigation and safety strategies.

²² Meek and Stott, 2004.

²³ Meek and Stott (2004, p.14) bring good criteria to help select the best method, more information can be found on [UNIDIR's webpage here](#).

²⁴ Saferworld has a very [comprehensive list of methods](#) varying from simple and cheap to other more sophisticated and sometimes costly forms (2012, pp.9-10). (Accessed 10 May 2022).

²⁵ Sou da Paz Institute and São Paulo City Hall Officials were invited by the Brazilian Army to witness the delivery and destruction process in July 2013. A new crushing machine was presented on the date. The pieces collected were then taken to a steel plant to be melted, completing the destruction process. [Full article here](#). (Accessed 2 May 2022).



(Source: IM Sweden – Humanium Metal Initiative, 2022)

Monitoring and transparency

Monitoring the campaign's indicators is essential to evaluate its impact²⁶ and improve accomplishing its objectives (in its course or for new campaigns). Transparently publicizing data and analysis supports engagement and confidence, and provides accountability.

- Evaluate indicators right before, during and after the campaign;
- Provide raw and consolidated data in one official system with public access;
- Provide official systematized reports publicly accessible (the UK's FCC – Federal Communications Commission's reports are good examples for long reports).
- The registration and publication of the serial number and other information about the destroyed weapons will send the message that these weapons are gone forever²⁷, and allow for flags to be raised in case diversion occurs;
- Inviting independent media and organizations to assess and audit the data can stimulate confidence and social oversight;
- Internal audits are also recommended (a good example would be the one conducted by the Australian National Audit Office in 1997).

²⁶ In Australia for example results suggest that the Gun Buyback program and gun control legislation significantly reduced homicide rate in the decade following the intervention (1997–2007) (Bartos et al., 2020).

²⁷ Faltas, 2018.

Communication and awareness campaigns

- Advertising in mass media channels, through partnerships or paid advertising, including a specific budget allocated to the campaign is recommended;
- Using unconventional communication strategies, such as lectures given by priests in Mexico DF and Brazil or Argentina's cultural events;
- Publicizing and communicate a simplified step-by-step protocol for firearms and ammunition surrender;
- Providing maximum publicity to CD and weapons destruction also demonstrates an effort from the State to reduce violence and insecurity;
- A CDI that is a part of a more extensive effort towards gun control policies, such as tackling illicit gun use and firearms and ammunition trafficking will help convince more people to adhere to surrender efforts.



ENTREGUE SUA ARMA DE FOGO

A campanha de entrega é **permanente, fácil, rápida e segura.**

▶ **Você:**
NÃO PRECISA SE IDENTIFICAR ou fornecer qualquer informação sobre a arma.
TEM DIREITO A UMA INDENIZAÇÃO entre R\$100,00 e R\$300,00, de acordo com o tipo de arma que entregar.

▶ **Onde posso entregar minha arma?**
Delegacias da Polícia Federal, nas delegacias da Polícia Civil e nos postos da Guarda Civil Metropolitana na cidade de São Paulo.

▶ **Como eu faço para entregar minha arma?**
LEMBRE-SE: PORTAR ARMA É CRIME.
Por isso você precisa estar com uma autorização (Guia de Trânsito) em mãos quando levar sua arma ao posto.

VEJA NO VERSO COMO ENTREGAR!

Dúvidas? Disque 153.

PASSO A PASSO DE COMO ENTREGAR UMA ARMA DE FOGO:


1 RETIRE UMA GUIA DE TRÂNSITO em um dos postos de entrega de armas. Esse documento vale apenas por um período limitado e permite que você leve a arma da sua casa até o posto de entrega.

2 DESCARACTERIZE A ARMA E TIRE SUA MUNIÇÃO. Você pode embalá-la em um jornal ou colocá-la em uma caixa de sapato com as munições separadas. O importante é que a sua arma não possa ser utilizada e que esteja disfarçada.

3 PARA RECEBER A INDENIZAÇÃO você precisa preencher um formulário com dados bancários e apresentar o nome e CPF do titular de uma conta corrente. Como você não precisa se identificar, a conta pode ser de um amigo, familiar ou conhecido.

4 GUARDE O COMPROVANTE DE ENTREGA DA ARMA. Esse documento é a garantia de que você será indenizado.

PLANO DE CONTROLE DE ARMAS DA CIDADE DE SÃO PAULO

Articulação:  **Agradecimentos:** Grupo Técnico e Grupo de Sensibilização do Plano de Controle de Armas da Cidade de São Paulo, Instituto Paulo Montenegro, Grupo Articulador do Id. São Luis (UNICEF) e Instituto Esporte & Educação.

Saiba mais: www.soudapaz.org/desarmasp

Figures 3 and 4. It is an example of a Brazilian campaign information leaflet. It shows a straightforward step-by-step guide for voluntary surrendering firearms and receiving financial incentives (Source: Sou da Paz Institute²⁸).

Sustainability

To guarantee the campaign's political and financial sustainability and its continuity, it is recommended to:

- Create the campaign by law with a specific public budget;
- Establish clear indicators and monitoring as well as civil society participation in all the campaign phases to make it more difficult for the program to be interrupted;

²⁸ This and other examples can be downloaded at: <https://desarmasp.wordpress.com/materiais/downloads/> (Accessed 23 May 2022).

- Over time, to prevent the campaign from falling into oblivion, it is important to have at least one annual effort with public investment to create an inspirational environment for the surrender.
- For instance, create the 'civil disarmament week or month'²⁹ and concentrate government, press and civil society efforts to do a more public debate during this period.
- Crimes committed with Firearms³⁰ that gather national attention are a good opportunity to re-engage with the society once they may be more open to discussing the risk of firearms. Additionally, these are moments with more opportunities in the traditional media to talk about the campaign.

4. How Civil society can lead or support these efforts?

Following are recommendations for civil society participation in all CDI stages and the benefits this involvement brings to the initiatives' achievements and sustainability.

Civil society can play several roles in CDI:

- **Diagnostic and planning:** Help identifying, during the CDI diagnostic, places and neighborhoods with higher gun ownership, the motivation behind the decision of gun purchase and the key arguments to persuade each gun owner to surrender their guns. Civil society can also be instrumental in establishing the best addresses for collection points (territories of neutrality) and their best opening hours.
- **Structuring and funding:** Gathering and convincing the private sector to support the initiatives by donating funds or goods to the campaign.
 - The support could be to structure collection points with computers, hydraulic presses for destroying weapons, van cars for itinerary posts, leaflets and posters. Negotiate partnerships with media companies for free slots in the programming schedule.
- **Communication and persuasion:** Prioritizing the target audiences and selecting key arguments for different groups (young males, elderly, women and others) and defining the most effective communication materials (leaflets, posters, videos, merchandising, TV and radio spots).
 - Recruit civil association, religious groups, sports club that could act as supporters in the campaign dissemination, and as agents of persuasion in the community.
- **Auditing and oversight:** Civil society partners can be present during the weapons handover to government officials, which will improve transparency, credibility, and audit numbers of surrendered weapons.
 - A selected number of stakeholders can be present at the pre-destruction stage to ensure that the weapons are getting to the final stage of destruction.
 - During the destruction's final stage, public ceremonies with the presence of civil society representatives will also help create a sense of confidence in the campaign.

What are the benefits for the government of partnering with civil society?

- **Effectiveness:** The grassroots features of civil society participation can bring more qualified information for CDI (e.g.: point out the most problematic neighborhoods, the groups to target and

²⁹ As an example, UN small arms destructions day (July 9), African union Africa Amnesty month (September), or South American day for voluntary disarmament (March 15).

³⁰ Most of the campaigns studied were structured after a crime that shocked society. In Brazil, a mass shooting in a Rio de Janeiro school in 2011 (that ended with 12 students murdered) was positively channeled as an opportunity to relaunch campaign materials. [Available here](#). (Accessed 17 May 2022).

custom messages to develop for each one of the target groups), and, also, help select and recruit local partners, as such expanding the capillarity of the collection point's network.

- **Trust and legitimacy:** In many countries, public actors face low levels of public trust. A civil society's genuine involvement will help bring trust to the effort. On a similar note, some people will fear walking into a police station with a weapon to turn over. Creating collection points in community spaces can minimize this resistance. In both cases, the presence of community leaders at the collection points can help create a safe and inviting environment for the population to attend.
- **Sustainability:** It is common for CD efforts to face discontinuity, especially with government changes. Civil society in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico helped avoid interruption and ensure CDI' institutionalization and sustainability.

Conclusion

Civil Disarmament Initiatives are more effective and sustainable as part of a broader gun control plan and legislation led by both the State and civil society. The population will be more encouraged to hand weapons if they clearly see the State's effort to provide public security, help solve conflicts and simultaneously remove illicit weapons from the streets.

The partnered effort between State and civil society arises from the most valuable features of each partner on CDI. On the one hand, the State provides scale, longevity, technology and resources; on the other, civil society contributes with territory knowledge, mobilization capacity, transparency and confidence to the initiatives.

The impact of civilian disarmament lies not only in the weapons it removes but also in its symbolism³¹, proclaiming that the role of addressing society's conflict is contingent with acknowledging individual responsibility. On a similar note, some researchers³² warn that the value of CDI should not be evaluated just on the number of weapons collected or crime indicators, but also as the community mobilization to address and push for gun control measures in each context.

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³¹ Faltas, 2018.

³² Wintermute, Garen in Wogan, J.B. (2013)

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