
Small arms and light weapons

International Action Network on Small Arms

Background

Victims and survivors, their families, friends, and communities all continue to suffer the consequences of the use, misuse, and abuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) around the world. More than twenty years after the adoption of the **United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects** (UNPoA), a core international instrument addressing SALW, these weapons still pose an enormous threat to human security.

Other key instruments that address the trade in and misuse of SALW include the **Arms Trade Treaty** (ATT, entry into force, 2014), the **International Tracing Instrument** (ITI, 2005), and the **UN Firearms Protocol** (entry into force, 2005), supplementing the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (entry into force, 2003).

Persistent challenges in dealing with the proliferation, use, misuse, and abuse of SALW include:

- Limited attention to use of SALW in non-conflict settings.
- Exclusion of civil society.
- Limited attention to some traditionally underrepresented groups.

- Diverse instruments that are not systematically linked.
- Lack of full implementation of states' political commitments.
- Insufficient progress in connecting programs at local, national, regional, and global levels.

In fora such as the biennial meetings of states for the UNPoA and the annual conferences of states parties for the ATT, discussions focus predominantly on the use of these weapons in armed conflict. However, many types of armed violence, such as gender-based violence, take place in both conflict and non-conflict situations. Non-conflict settings include violence involving armed gangs and organised crime and police violations of some of the **UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force by Law Enforcement Officials**.

Current context

The Eighth Biennial Meeting of States (BMS8) to Consider the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (UNPoA) was held at the United Nations in New York City from 27 June to 1 July 2022. On 1 July 2022, the **BMS8 outcome document** was adopted

by consensus. BMS8 was the primary focus of the UN's work on small arms over the previous year, as is generally the case in years including biennial meetings or review conferences.

The outcome document for BMS8 represented continued progress on many issues, including building on the gender outcomes of the UNPoA's Third Review Conference in 2018 (RevCon3) and BMS7 (2021), moving forward on national action plans and national targets for implementing the UNPoA, continuing to draw attention to the effects of armed violence on youth and/or vulnerable communities, and increasing attention to the need for sustainable international cooperation and assistance in implementing the UNPoA and the companion ITI.

The outcome document also included discussion of a proposed open-ended technical expert group focusing on new developments in SALW manufacturing, technology, and design. Rapid changes in SALW technology could facilitate their proliferation and misuse. At the same time, however, new technologies could also be used to more effectively monitor and control SALW throughout the transfer process and their entire lifecycle.

As was the case at BMS7, Costa Rica led the development of a joint statement that supported strong language on gender issues. The statement was endorsed by more than 50 states and the European Union. It was a forceful and effective counter to states that had attempted to delete or at a minimum weaken the gender provisions in the outcome document.

The progress in BMS8 came despite significant challenges. On the second day of the conference, participants learned that Ambassador Enrique Manalo, the Chair of BMS8, had been selected as the Secretary

of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines. His departure made it difficult to understand who was in charge of which elements of the negotiations. Under those circumstances, the adoption of a substantive outcome document was particularly impressive.

As has been the case throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society was excluded from large portions of BMS8, significantly limiting the extent to which the voices of underrepresented groups such as victims, survivors, youth, and women were heard. This meant, for example, that civil society was not in the room when states decided to delete the words "victims" and "survivors" from the outcome document text on the last day of the meeting.

In contrast to RevCon3 and BMS7, the BMS8 outcome document was agreed by consensus, which in the UNPoA process is often taken to mean unanimity. Unfortunately, the emphasis on reaching consensus allowed a small group of states to force substantive changes at the end of the negotiation by threatening to block consensus.

The inclusion of SALW ammunition in UNPoA discussions and meeting outcome documents continues to be a controversial issue, as has been the case since the inception of the UNPoA. At BMS8, the vast majority of states continued to express the view that SALW and their ammunition must be considered together. A small minority of states argued that ammunition was not included in the UNPoA and should not be added now, and that the **open-ended working group on conventional ammunition** eliminated the need to discuss ammunition in the UNPoA process. In the end, ammunition was only mentioned in a paragraph acknowledging the continuing work of the open-ended working group.

For documents and further information related to BMS8, visit the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) website [here](#) and IANSA's dedicated webpage for BMS8 [here](#).

Recommendations for governments

During First Committee, delegations should:

- Demonstrate their commitment to the full, equal, meaningful, and effective participation of women in the UNPoA process by, at a minimum, ensuring parity in their delegations' leadership and composition, as well as their presentations;
- Support resolutions containing gender-sensitive measures to prevent, curb, and eradicate SALW proliferation and violence;
- Support language recognising that SALW and their ammunition are inextricably linked, and that ammunition is what gives SALW their deadly power;
- Recognise that the vast majority of deaths and injuries due to SALW use occur in situations of violence and crime, not in armed conflict; and
- Ensure that civil society is able to participate fully in First Committee proceedings by keeping the meetings open.

Beyond First Committee, states should:

- Ensure that they continue to make progress in implementing their commitments from RevCon3, BMS7, and BMS8, and prepare reports in advance of RevCon4;
- Ensure that the future resolution authorising RevCon4 sets a broad mandate for the meeting;

- Develop and carry out plans to act unilaterally or in regional groups to set and meet more ambitious standards for the transfer, export, import, transit, and brokering of SALW than agreed at the biennial meetings or the review conferences;
- Continue to focus on the need to collect and destroy surplus, obsolete, and illegal weapons and their ammunition;
- Implement all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are related to arms control issues, rather than limiting efforts to SDG 16;
- Take advantage of and further develop synergies among the UNPoA, the Firearms Protocol, and the ATT. For example, states could apply the criteria, guidelines, and prohibitions in the ATT to help bring more of the international trade in conventional weapons, including SALW, into compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law.
- Move beyond the mere rhetoric of asserting that civil society is an important partner in these efforts, by:
 - fully integrating civil society representatives into the work to reduce the human costs of armed violence;
 - ensuring diverse representation from survivors, youth, and other traditionally underrepresented groups; and
 - providing increased and sustained funding for civil society's work to raise awareness of these issues.

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