

NGO perspectives: NGOs and the small arms issue

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This article examines the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in relation to the small arms issue. It describes how NGOs have engaged with the issue in recent years, and focuses specifically on the role that NGOs played during the July 2001 United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (hereafter, the Conference).

NGOs and the small arms issue

The small arms NGO community (hereafter, the NGO community) emerged as a distinct 'community' in the late 1990s, although individual NGOs had been working on the issue of small arms since the mid-1990s.¹ With respect to the small arms issue NGOs have tended to focus on one or more of the following activities:

- research;
- policy development;
- advocacy;
- public awareness and education; and
- implementation (practical measures).

In some cases the lines between these different activities have become blurred (e.g. policy development and advocacy), and some NGOs engage in most or all of these activities.

The small arms issue has been on the agenda of the international community and the United Nations since the late 1980s, but only became more prominent in the mid-1990s when the then United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in his 1995 *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace*, challenged the international community to 'find effective solutions' to the problem of small arms proliferation and misuse, particularly in the context of UN peacekeeping operations. Also in 1995, General Assembly resolution 50/70B requested the Secretary-General to prepare a report, with the assistance of a group of governmental experts, on small arms and light weapons. At the same time as the UN began to focus on the small arms issue, the NGO community, particularly humanitarian and human rights NGOs, began to produce empirical

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evidence of a link between increased small arms proliferation and such negative effects as increased violence and loss of life—especially amongst civilians.

NGOs emerging at this time included the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), which was founded in May 1999 but had its origins in a virtual, Internet-based organization, Prepcom, established in January 1998. Many organizations that joined IANSA had previous experience in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). The World Forum on the Future of Sport Shooting Activities (WFSA), which is the international arm of the United States-based, pro-gun ownership National Rifle Association (NRA), was also formed in the late 1990s, with the aim of mobilizing firearms groups in preparation for the UN Conference.

Although the NGO community is ideologically and organizationally heterogeneous, most individuals and/or groups are aligned to one of two, largely antagonistic, broad umbrella organizations:

- the 'arms control community' is grouped under IANSA, which represents more than 320 organizations in 71 countries, mainly with an interest in disarmament, arms control and human rights issues; and
- the 'firearms community' is grouped under WFSA, which represents nearly 30 organizations, including hunting, sport shooting, firearms and ammunition manufacturers associations in 13 countries.

NGOs and the 2001 UN Conference on Small Arms

General Assembly resolution 54/54V in late 1999 confirmed that the Conference would take place in June/July 2001. From that time onward the NGO community, particularly the arms control community, began to play a critical role in documenting and identifying the various dimensions of the small arms issue. Many NGOs also helped to 'shape' the development of the issue through lobbying activities, producing policy proposals, and by making inputs into various negotiations and policy processes at the national, sub-regional and regional levels.

Both IANSA and WFSA, and their respective member groups, engaged in a wide range of activities in preparation for the Conference, including hosting meetings in various parts of the world.

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However, in their activities, the two communities adopted quite different approaches. The arms control community focused on generating concrete proposals for controlling the legal and illicit trade in small arms (e.g. an international convention on brokering), as well as highlighting the humanitarian impacts of the proliferation, availability and misuse of small arms. In general, these activities aimed to encourage governments and inter-governmental organizations to do more to address the small arms issue. The firearms community focused on limiting any global gun control efforts that might restrict the legitimate trade in small arms or infringe on the rights of private individuals in various countries (particularly in the United States) to keep and bear arms. In general, these activities aimed to encourage governments and inter-governmental organizations to 'leave alone', or do very little to address the small arms issue.

Many NGOs attended the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meetings of the Conference. The modalities of NGO access for the forthcoming Conference were a source of extensive debate during the PrepCom meetings. While some delegations (e.g. the European Union, Norway, Canada) supported a prominent official role for NGOs, similar to the Ottawa Process to ban landmines, other delegations

(e.g. Algeria and China) were concerned that certain NGOs (such as those concerned with human rights) would have undue 'influence' over the Conference, and therefore wanted to limit the access of NGOs. During the third PrepCom, agreement was reached on the modalities of NGO access. While significantly less than the NGO community had hoped, ECOSOC-accredited² NGOs that expressed interest in attending, and 'relevant' NGOs (relevant was never defined) were allowed to be accredited to the Conference. NGOs were allowed to attend all meetings of the Conference, other than those designated as closed, and a special session was set aside for NGOs to address the Conference. The one issue on which both IANSA and WFSA could agree, and on which they worked together during the PrepCom process, was to maximize the official role of NGOs in the Conference itself.

Both IANSA and WFSA (and many of their members) addressed the second and third meetings of the PrepCom at special sessions. During the PrepCom meetings, NGOs engaged in intensive lobbying of delegations, particularly with respect to the two drafts of the Programme of Action that were produced by the PrepCom Chairman, Ambassador Carlos dos Santos of Mozambique. IANSA, for example, produced a detailed critique of the second draft Programme of Action (L4. Rev.1) just prior to the third PrepCom. Despite being excluded from many of the PrepCom negotiating sessions, IANSA produced daily reports during both the second and third PrepCom meetings. These reports proved to be very useful, and in fact were often employed by delegations in preference to their own internal reports.

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The NGO community had a high-profile presence at the Conference, which was held at UN Headquarters in New York from 9–20 July 2001. According to the Department for Disarmament Affairs, 177 NGOs applied for accreditation to the Conference. More than forty NGOs, including members of IANSA and WFSA, addressed the Conference at a special session on the morning of 13 July. This session was important in acknowledging the role of NGOs with respect to the small arms issue, and the Conference President, Ambassador Camilo Reyes of Colombia, and a large number of delegates were present during the session.

Despite being excluded from the formal negotiating sessions, NGOs played a variety of roles during the Conference such as:

- advisors to government delegations;
- critical observers (in open sessions);
- commentators (side briefings and daily Conference reports); and
- lobbyists.

Although they had been able to exert some influence over other negotiation processes at the sub-regional and regional levels, and at the PrepCom meetings, the NGO Community had a fairly limited impact on the Conference negotiations, as delegations focused on following instructions from their capitals. The exception to this was the NRA, who through its influence on the United States delegation (which included two current members of the NRA Board of Directors) was able to exert a fairly significant impact on the negotiations and the outcome of the Conference. The American delegation insisted that they could not support any measures related to civilian possession and transfers to non-state actors—the only points on which the Conference could not agree. In the end these two issues, which were key issues for the firearms community, were excluded from the final Programme of Action in order to achieve consensus.

In his statement at the conclusion of the Conference, Secretary-General Kofi Annan addressed the role of the NGO community directly by welcoming 'the constructive participation at this Conference

by individuals and groups from civil society across the globe'. This statement, while noting the participation of NGOs during the Conference, does not indicate the widely divergent views expressed by NGOs. Ironically, the American delegation's opposition to advocacy activity by NGOs, although not mentioned in the PrepCom meetings but which was explicitly stated in the address of the

American Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control, John Bolton, to the Conference on 9 July, seemed to exclude that practised by the NRA.

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The role of NGOs was also explicitly acknowledged in the final Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (A/CONF.192/L.5/Rev.1). For example, in para. 2 (c) of Section IV, states participating in the Conference should 'further encourage

non-governmental organizations and civil society to be engaged, as appropriate, in all aspects of ... efforts to implement this Programme of Action'. However, the language in L5.Rev.1 is weaker than in previous drafts, and no mention is made of the role of NGOs as 'partners', which was included in an earlier draft (A/CONF.192/L.4/Rev.1).

Conclusion

The Conference marked a high point of both governmental and NGO activity on small arms, and had a significant impact on the NGO community. It mobilized new organizations to join the NGO community and helped build relationships between NGOs from different parts of the world, and from different sectors (e.g. human rights, development, arms control). As a result of all this activity, the NGO community has become more competitive as NGOs seek their respective niches and influence given the reality of limited resources for small arms work. This is a positive development. It should encourage NGOs to become more focused and achieve a better division of labour, thereby allowing them to make a constructive contribution to practical efforts to deal with the many dimensions of the small arms issue. The Conference was also useful for building better relations between the NGO community and governments. These relationships are not only crucial for the successful implementation of the Programme of Action but for dealing with all other aspects of the small arms issue.

Notes

1. The British American Security Information Council (BASIC) initiated one of the first NGO-based international research projects on small arms in 1994.
2. See following article by M. Datan for an explanation of ECOSOC accreditation.