

West Africa Regional Seminar on Best/Promising Practices on Armed Violence Reduction

Abuja, 28–30 June

Seminar Report

Abbreviations and acronyms

ADR	Alternative dispute resolution
AVRP	Armed violence reduction and prevention
CSO	Civil society organization
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
ECOSAP	ECOWAS Small Arms Control Programme
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EITI	Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative
ESFCP	ECOWAS Strategic Framework on Conflict Prevention

Introduction

The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development is a high-level diplomatic initiative designed to support states and civil society actors to achieve measurable reductions in the global burden of armed violence in conflict and non-conflict settings by 2015 (and beyond). The Geneva Declaration was first adopted by 42 states on 7 June 2006 during a ministerial summit in Geneva, to which the Swiss government and the UN Development Programme invited high-level representatives from ministries of foreign affairs and development agencies. Today, the Geneva Declaration is endorsed by over 100 states.

The Geneva Declaration commits signatory states to measure the human, social, and economic cost of armed violence; to assess risks and vulnerabilities; to strengthen the efforts to integrate armed violence reduction and conflict prevention programmes into national, regional, and multilateral development frameworks and strategies; and to document and assess the effectiveness of armed violence reduction programmes and disseminate knowledge of good practices. Although the Geneva Declaration is a state-led initiative, it refers to the need to establish partnerships and cooperation among the various actors concerned by developing effective armed violence reduction and prevention (AVRP) initiatives. The declaration recognizes the key role of local and municipal authorities, civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector, and international organizations in AVRP.

On 31 October and 1 November 2011 the Geneva Declaration will hold its second ministerial review to assess the progress of global achievements in AVRP and to

promote best practices on armed violence monitoring tools and reduction programming. In order to prepare for the ministerial meeting, a series of regional meetings are being held in order to foster discussion and experience sharing at regional level, assess the progress of the implementation of AVRP programmes, and identify promising and innovative practices generated from AVRP activities to date in each region, which are to be disseminated at the global level.

The West Africa seminar held in Abuja was the fourth regional meeting of the series and was attended by over 70 armed violence reduction practitioners from or working on Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. In addition, two states from East Africa – Burundi and Kenya – were also present to provide continuity between the earlier East Africa seminar held in Nairobi in February 2011. Norway and Switzerland, as two active core-group states of the Geneva Declaration, were also invited to Abuja, as well as a large representation of the diplomatic community in Nigeria.

While the seminar was targeting states, there were significant contributions from regional and international CSOs, UN agencies, and regional organizations. Prior to this seminar, a civil society meeting took place in Abuja on 27 June 2011 aimed at 'creating a community of practice on armed violence and development in West Africa'.¹ After the regional seminar, Nigerian civil society representatives met to discuss the establishment of a nationwide network of CSOs working on AVRP.²

Objectives of the seminar

The purpose of the West Africa regional seminar was to bring together senior technical-level officials to assess the progress of global achievements in AVRP and promote best practices in armed violence monitoring tools and reduction programming. The objectives of the seminar were to:

- review the development and progress of the implementation of AVRP policies and strategies in West Africa;
- share experiences, lessons learned, and promising practices on AVRP programming (particularly as related to measuring and monitoring armed violence, achieving measurable reductions, and supporting victims and survivors of armed violence). However, given the time allocated and the structure of the events, the seminar cannot be considered as an evaluation of programmes or projects;
- increase regional cooperation among governments, international organizations, civil society, and development cooperation agencies; and
- continue to bridge the gaps between the security, arms control, and development sectors for the development of policies and programmes aimed at preventing and reducing armed violence.

¹ For more information, please contact Paulin Regnard at the Quaker United Nations Office: pregnard@quono.ch.

² Please contact Action on Armed Violence for more information (Serena Olgiati, solgiati@aoav.org.uk).

Overview of the seminar

The three-day working-level seminar combined plenary sessions and extensive group-work sessions to provide participants with the opportunity to actively exchange with experiences, promising practices, and lessons learned. Three working groups with about 15–20 participants each were established.

The first day set the scene with an opening session and remarks by the Governments of Nigeria and Norway, followed by presentations by speakers from the international and regional AVRPP community. These included representatives from UN agencies, civil society, and international organizations. After a recap of the regional and international commitments to armed violence reductions, panelists gave an overview of AVRPP programming worldwide and specifically regional and national efforts. For the afternoon session, the working groups met for the first time to focus on the tools of armed violence.

The second and third days consisted of plenary and working-group sessions focusing on key common regional patterns of armed violence. These included discussions on resources-based armed violence, cross-border crime and armed violence, urban violence, and victims of armed violence. Each working-group discussion was preceded by an introductory plenary session with three experts' presentations on the topic concerned. Within the working groups, participants exchanged experiences on each topic area, shared concrete examples of programming activities, and discussed challenges and potential innovative ways forward. Following the working-group discussions, rapporteurs presented the groups' findings to the plenary for debate.

AVRPP in West Africa: national experiences and commitments

The 15 West African and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member states present at the regional seminar are affected by different forms and levels of armed violence. Their societies are exposed to inter-community conflict and ethno-political factionalization, competition for natural resources (e.g. land, water, cattle, oil, precious metals, and minerals), and, at times, full-scale warfare. Violent crime and wider forms of interpersonal violence are also significant in many West African states. In the absence of strong state security and justice institutions, vigilantism and the private provision of security have become common in the region.

Countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire experienced civil wars in the recent past. They have implemented conventional post-conflict security programmes, such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), to address the legacies of violence. The government of Sierra Leone has employed a multi-sectoral approach to reducing and preventing armed conflict in the post-war state through security sector reform, judicial and law reform, institutional reform, and transparency and accountability measures (the Anti-Corruption Commission, the National Procurement Authority, etc.). This approach has been undertaken in cooperation with civil society and with support from international partners. A National Commission on Small Arms has recently been established. A chairperson heads the commission, which consists of

representatives from the relevant ministries, including Defence, Internal Affairs, and the Office of National Security. The commission works closely with civil society—for example, with the Sierra Leone Action Network on Small Arms—to plan, design, implement, and evaluate programmes and projects aimed at reducing and preventing armed violence. Apart from these efforts, a youth empowerment scheme also exists to train youth and create employment opportunities.

Liberia has addressed the risks of armed violence in a post-conflict environment with a national DDR programme, the establishment of the Small Arms Commission, and the setting up of the National Peacebuilding Fund. Legal reforms include a total ban on the possession of firearms and a new law on armed robbery. The government has put several other supportive initiatives in place. These include the provision of basic health-care services, the establishment of the National Veterans Commission, and the founding of the Liberia Anti-corruption Commission. The country is also putting a registration system for arms into place.

Although several West African states did not experience civil war in the recent past, they struggle to contain regional armed conflicts. Nigeria finds itself confronted by armed violence in the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt region, as well as terrorist attacks in the north of the country. Nigeria has just completed an amnesty programme for militant groups in the Niger Delta that temporarily brought about relative peace and security in the region. The country has also had good experiences with joint military and police task forces to bring escalating cycles of communal violence under control, for example, in the city of Jos. Other countries in the region deal with pastoralist conflicts and organized cross-border crime such as drug trafficking and trafficking in people. Relatively peaceful countries, such as Ghana and Gambia, are challenged by armed violence related to a weak or insufficient security apparatus, and competition for political power, land, and chieftaincy titles.

Recognizing the linkages between drug abuse and armed violence, Gambia has invested in the fight against drug trafficking and drug abuse, particularly among the youth. The country has organized public awareness raising campaigns against drug abuse and has put legal reforms on the issue into place. It has also established youth education programmes on drug abuse.

There was consensus among the representatives of the West African states that the success of AVRP programming depends to a great extent on the goodwill of governments, cooperation among state agencies, vibrant civil society involvement, and donor funding. The majority of West African governments have committed themselves to significant AVRP efforts (see Table 1).

Table 1 West African countries' commitments to AVRP

	Geneva Declaration	Oslo Commitments	Africa Declaration³
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³ The Africa Declaration on Armed Violence and Development was signed by 28 African states on 30 and 31 October 2007 in Nairobi. The declaration affirms support for and commitment to the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development and resolves to work to prevent and reduce armed

Benin	✓		✓
Burkina Faso	✓		
Cape Verde			
Gambia	✓		
Ghana	✓	✓	✓
Guinea-Bissau			
Guinea-Conakry			
Côte d'Ivoire	✓	✓	✓
Liberia	✓	✓	✓
Mali	✓		✓
Niger	✓		✓
Nigeria	✓		✓
Senegal	✓	✓	✓
Sierra Leone	✓		✓
Togo			

Sources: <<http://www.genevadeclaration.org>>; <<http://www.osloconferencearmedviolence.no>>; <<http://www.gichd.org/.../Africa-Decl-Armed-Violence-Dev-October2007.pdf>>

Key patterns of AVRP and intervention strategies in West Africa

The West African states discussed common drivers of armed violence and intervention strategies for reduction and prevention. Many representatives agreed that a coherent regional framework is crucial to address the challenges of armed violence. Cooperation among states needs to include the sharing of information, joint border control, a joint fight against the illegal proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and learning from best practices applied in the region. Table 2 provides a brief overview of the common drivers of armed violence in West Africa and intervention strategies suggested by participants during the seminar.

Table 2 The common drivers of armed violence and intervention strategies

Drivers	Intervention strategies
Group competition over political power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judicial reform • Pre-election sensitization and awareness raising
Land disputes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) to ensure peaceful and satisfactory settlement of disputes
Competition over traditional rulers' and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADR to ensure peaceful and satisfactory settlement of

violence in terms of an integrated and comprehensive perspective on social and economic issues in the relevant countries. For more details, see <<http://www.gichd.org/.../Africa-Decl-Armed-Violence-Dev-October2007.pdf>>.

chieftaincy offices	<p>disputes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judicial reform
Limited provision of security by state institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deployment of security forces • Community policing • Joint military–police task forces • Capacity building for state security agencies in stockpile and inventory management, and border control and management
Harsh socio-economic conditions, poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty alleviation programmes • Local development projects
Small arms proliferation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a national commission on small arms and light weapons with a mandate to prevent, combat, and eradicate the spread and abuse of illicit small arms • Ban or other control measures on possession of firearms • Road block checkpoints and weapons collection and destruction to reduce illicit stock in the country • Public education and awareness-raising campaigns on dangers of small arms proliferation and misuse • Review of legislations, regulations, and procedures on small arms acquisition and penal systems • Marking of weapons in possession of security forces
Local manufacturing of weapons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement/dialogue with artisans/local gunsmiths to stop illegal local production and redirect their skills to engage in economically viable alternative livelihood ventures • Public education and awareness-raising campaigns on dangers of arms proliferation and misuse
Youth unemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National and local youth employment programmes • Local enterprise and skills development programmes
Organized crime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened joint border controls • Improved data collection and intelligence sharing among states
Drug/alcohol abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restriction/ban on the sale of alcohol

- | | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Awareness and sensitization campaigns |
|--|---|

The tools of armed violence

According to participants, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons is one of the most pressing issues for West African states. A wide range of policy frameworks are available to address the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, such as the prospective Arms Trade Treaty and the 2001 Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, regional agreements and protocols, national legislative developments, and more localised programming initiatives. For the West African region, the two significant frameworks for the control of small arms and light weapons are the ECOWAS Small Arms Control Programme (ECOSAP) Regional Small Arms and Light Weapons Control Implementation Action Plan and the West Africa Small Arms Moratorium.

Intervention strategies on small arms availability focus on reform of the security sector, including legal reform. The marking of state-owned firearms is an important step toward gaining control over small arms and light weapons proliferation. Most countries have experience with public awareness-raising and sensitization campaigns on the illicit use of firearms. Disarmament programmes may be linked to amnesty programmes of the type implemented in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Civilian disarmament strategies should build on support from the local community, and traditional and religious leaders. Furthermore, participants underlined the importance for states to invest in the secure stockpiling and destruction of weapons collected during civilian disarmament programmes to ensure that these weapons do not return to the black market.

Box 1 ECOWAS Small Arms Control Programme

ECOSAP was established in June 2006 to support member states in capacity building for the fight against small arms proliferation. ECOSAP trains members of national small arms control commissions, supplies equipment, and supports the establishment of national action plans and national surveys on small arms and light weapons. It also provides technical and financial support to the West African Action Network on Small Arms, which includes 15 national civil society coalitions working on small arms control. At the regional level, ECOSAP also supports the development of regional small arms control policies, including the harmonization of laws on small arms and light weapons.

For more information, see <<http://www.ecosap.ecowas.int/>>.

It is important to note that significant differences remain in the level of small arms and light weapons availability among countries. Small arms are only one sector of a large variety of instrument used in the perpetration of armed violence. Several countries emphasized the significant threat stemming from weapons other than small arms and light weapons, including self-made weapons, machetes, and explosives. Particularly in non-conflict situations and armed violence related to crime, locally made guns are very popular. According to statistics by the Ghana Police Service, about 80 per cent of

weapons used in armed robberies and murders are locally fabricated guns. The local manufacturing of arms and the availability of machetes call for different intervention strategies beyond small arms and light weapons frameworks. There is a lack of legislation to take other weapons, such as machetes, into account.

The working groups on the tools of armed violence focused on the following key points:

- **The marking and registration of firearms:** States should undertake programmes to mark state-owned weapons as a first step toward small arms and light weapons control. The establishment of national databases on small arms and light weapons should precede the registration process.
- **Ensuring the correct stockpiling and destruction of collected illegal firearms:** Countries need to ensure that the weapons collected during disarmament programmes are correctly registered, stockpiled, and destroyed. The public destruction of arms sends a particularly strong signal to local communities.
- **Addressing the proliferation of weapons beyond small arms and light weapons:** Taking into account that many violent incidents are perpetrated with weapons other than small arms and light weapons, countries should ensure that there is adequate legislation to address the possession and circulation of such weapons.
- **Addressing the local manufacturing of firearms:** Countries should engage local artisans and gunsmiths, and mobilize them into identifiable groups for registration, sensitization, dialogue, and collaboration in the fight against illicit small arms and illegal local production.

Resource-based armed violence

Many West African countries are rich in oil, minerals, and other resources. Economies with significant dependence on single commodities or on primary products as a proportion of gross domestic product are often at heightened risk of contestation over resources, instability, and armed violence. The illegal exploitation of natural resources may finance and prolong armed conflict. The oil-rich Niger Delta region has experienced soaring conflict and violence in the last two decades as a result of the neglect of basic infrastructure. The conflict in the Niger Delta is characterized by inter-group struggles, attacks on oil companies and their staff, illegal oil bunkering, pipeline vandalization, kidnapping, and hostage taking. Instability in the Niger Delta costs the country huge amounts in revenues due to the downscaling of production.

Several international and regional initiatives have been established in recent years to improve the governance of natural resources. These include most notably the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI)⁴ and the Kimberly Process. On the regional level, the ECOWAS Strategic Framework on Conflict Prevention (ESFCP) adopted in January 2008 provides practical directives and operational procedures for violence

⁴ <<http://www.eiti.org>>.

prevention in relation to resource exploitation.⁵ ECOWAS has also developed the Directive on the Harmonization of Guiding Principles and Policy in the Mining Sector,⁶ as well as the Mineral Development Policy adopted by the respective ministers in Accra on 3 June 2011. The ESFCP has developed a number of practical recommendations concerning a more violence-sensitive extractive sector. These recommendations include, for example, the creation of a network composed of state institutions, the private sector, CSOs, and community-based structures to elaborate and implement regional standards in governing natural resources or to put in place consultation frameworks and peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms that include all stakeholders.

Some West African states have committed themselves to voluntarily implement these international standards. Nigeria has been one of the first countries to sign up to the EITI and has recently received compliant status. The Nigerian EITI⁷ addresses resource-based armed violence by providing data and information on revenues through regular audits. This information should empower civil society to question government spending in order to enhance transparency and accountability. In addition to implementing EITI standards, a short-term amnesty programme for militant groups has been established. The amnesty programme has resulted in the short-term stabilization of the region. A total of 20,192 militants were registered and 2,760 weapons of various calibres and types were collected, including 18 gun-boats and 287,445 rounds of ammunitions. More than 5,000 ex-militants are currently in reintegration programmes. For long-term stabilization, the need remains to develop the Niger Delta economically and provide adequate public infrastructure. Militants taking part in the amnesty programme also need to receive education and training for sustainable reintegration.

In Sierra Leone, resource-based armed violence has been addressed through a general poverty reduction strategy, legal reform, and the establishment of the Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Ombudsman. The country's conflict recovery and transformation policies have been anchored in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers I and II, the National Programme for Food Security, and the creation of jobs. The government pursues investments in infrastructure, health care, human development, agricultural productivity, energy, and the development of the fisheries industry.

Conflict over land ownership and rights for usage represent another dimension of resource-based armed violence. Land conflicts are often related to cattle rustling and involve tensions between farmers and herders. For instance, in Ghana, it has been reported that youth receive arms to enforce the land claims of their employers against rival claimants. Cattle rustling is a also significant criminal activity. In Gambia, it is prevalent across the regional divisions of the country and the southern and northern borders with Senegal. Gambia established the Cattle Farmers' Association with branches across the country in order to address this issue. It works in consultation with its Senegalese counterpart. Both associations cooperate with state security officials to avoid violent clashes and prosecute perpetrators.

⁵ See the sixth component—'Natural resource governance'—of the ESFCP, pp. 29–32: <http://www.ecowas.int/publications/en/framework/ECPF_final.pdf>.

⁶ C/DIR/3/05/09 of 27 May 2009.

⁷ <<http://www.neiti.org.ng/>>.

The working groups on resource-based armed violence focused on the following key points:

- **Implementing international standards on transparent and accountable natural resource management:** Countries should follow up on their commitments to implement international standards on natural resource management and good governance to reduce local grievances and underdevelopment in resource-rich communities.
- **Linking disarmament programmes with long-term development strategies:** There is need for a coherent political and security framework linked to a comprehensive development strategy in response to the needs of the communities affected by resource-based armed violence.
- **Promoting the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms:** Many conflicts over land ownership and use may be addressed by alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and the involvement of chiefs and traditional leaders in peaceful conflict resolution and the settlement of disputes.

Box 2 Linkages among state institutions, international organizations, and civil society for AVRP

A multi-sectoral approach is important to address AVRP in a coherent way. There are many opportunities for linkages between small arms control and disarmament programmes undertaken with international agencies and professional communities. For instance, in Ghana, the National Commission on Small Arms is partnering with six UN agencies to implement its Human Security Programme for northern Ghana. In this region, armed conflict and violence have been predominant in recent years. The commission has also established linkages with professional communities like teachers, professional/commercial drivers' unions, women's advocacy groups, and others to create awareness on armed violence and small arms proliferation. Other potential linkages include cooperation among the ministries responsible for education (to incorporate armed violence issues in school curriculums), health, and local and rural development to incorporate AVRP into coherent planning and programming.

Cross-border crime and armed violence

The porosity of borders and limited capacity for border control are major factors for armed violence in the region of West Africa. Too many states remain ignorant of the challenges of cross-border crime. There is a need to systematize and communicate best practices for their coherent implementation across West African states. Vast areas in the region are left without proper border control due to the shortage of qualified personnel and logistics. Weak border control facilitates organized crime, banditry, trafficking in peoples and drugs, armed robbery, and the proliferation of arms. These problems are exacerbated by corruption among security officials and the lack of cross-border cooperation. Several speakers pointed out that higher salaries for border and customs officials do not necessarily solve the problem of corruption among border security officials due to the scale of revenues generated through organized crime. A multi-actor

and multi-sector approach is necessary to address both the security and development dimensions of cross-border crime and armed violence.

Organized crime may be facilitated by the general lack of socio-economic development in border areas. Border communities often find themselves at the state's periphery, and national authorities tend to neglect security provision, health care, and educational facilities in these areas. These communities are therefore particularly vulnerable to engaging in illegal activities for their own security and welfare. Border communities are also often affected by political instability and armed violence due to the influx of refugees that might destabilize socio-economic conditions.

Speakers also noted the importance of regional cooperation to fight cross-border crime and armed violence. ECOSAP has made steps into the right direction, investing in capacity building for integrated border management. The programme elaborated national action plans and piloted quick-impact projects to reduce tensions among border communities and enhance cooperation. These activities aim to contribute to reduced cattle rustling, improved community security, the training of border operatives, and enhanced logistics and equipment for effective border control.

Three key points emerged during the working group discussions on cross-border crime and armed violence:

- **Joint border control and information sharing:** Countries should strengthen cross-border cooperation and establish joint border controls and a regional criminal database for information and intelligence sharing. Cooperation is mandatory for monitoring and data collection purposes among ECOWAS states. In the long term, the introduction of e-passports and the technical equipment for their use would enhance data collection.
- **Joint security and development programmes:** Border control and cross-border crime are both security and development concerns. Countries should coordinate their efforts on socio-economic development in border regions to reduce communities' vulnerability to engaging in or tolerating organized crime. For example, Gambia, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and Guinea-Conakry have established joint security and development programmes for border zones with support from several CSOs.
- **Maritime protection:** Countries should also strengthen cooperation in the control of maritime borders in the fight against organized crime and armed violence.

Urban violence

Urban violence is a specific form of armed violence that affects post-conflict states as much as countries without significant civil strife in West Africa. Rural underdevelopment often results in rapid urbanization and the uncontrolled emergence of overpopulated slums. Poor urban environments, and the lack of infrastructure and economic opportunities are often associated with urban violence and crime. Key influential members of society, such as politicians, opinion leaders, ethnic and religious

leaders, and traditional leaders and chiefs may provide their followers with arms to secure their political interests.

Urban unemployed youth are often the perpetrators as much as the victims of armed violence. There was broad agreement that a primary intervention strategy to tackle urban violence needs to focus on education, skills training, and job creation for urban youth. Some speakers also cautioned against stigmatizing youth as the sole perpetrators of violence. Youth represent a social group that also holds much potential for economic development and improved governance. They are therefore the solution to as much as the source of the problem of armed violence.

One key best practice in reducing and preventing urban violence is the establishment of a functioning early warning and response system. For example, Ghana set up the Ghana Early Warning and Response Network—‘GhanaWarn’—which focuses on monitoring and reporting human security- and conflict-related issues for adequate and timely response to improve communal security and development. GhanaWarn monitors specific proximate causes of urban violence and provides incident and situational reports related to accidents, armed attacks, civil unrest, physical and sexual assaults, and arrests and detentions made.

The working groups on urban violence made the following points in their discussions:

- **Addressing rural underdevelopment:** In order to reduce migration to cities and the pressures of overpopulation, states should also focus on the development of rural areas to address the problem of urban violence from a development point of view.
- **Investing in conflict-sensitive urban development:** Countries need to assure that slum removal and urban development action plans are conflict/violence sensitive and take the specific situation of the urban poor into account. Slum development programmes should aim at providing basic amenities (especially electricity, water and sanitation, and health facilities) to concerned populations. Slum removals and relocation programmes are considered as difficult initiatives and need to assure adequate compensation for the targeted population groups.
- **Avoiding the stigmatization of youth as perpetrators:** Countries should assure that police forces do not view urban youth simply as potential perpetrators of violence. It needs to be recognized that youth are the future of a country.

Victims of armed violence

Victim assistance should be understood as a crucial factor in AVRP strategies. Victim groups and communities hold the potential for revenge. Ignoring their plight may therefore rekindle the cycle of armed violence. Victim assistance is also an important factor within the overall post-conflict recovery framework. The conflict-sensitive relocation and socio-economic reintegration of victims are necessary for sustainable armed violence prevention. Both the Geneva Declaration and the Oslo Commitments emphasize the duty to care for victims of armed violence.

Dealing with perpetrators of armed violence who may at the same time be victims of such violence remains a sensitive issue to address. For example, under-age perpetrators have rights to protection within human rights frameworks, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Providing youth perpetrators with skills training and employment opportunities is one important aspect of dealing with perpetrators of armed violence.

Furthermore, victim assistance programmes need to develop gender-sensitive approaches to recovery and reintegration strategies. Due attention needs to be paid to the issue of gender-based violence and its consequences.

The plenary discussion focused on three key points:

- **Following a multi-actor approach to victim assistance:** Countries should ensure that victim assistance is as much a security concern as it is a public health issue. Victims of armed violence need medical assistance as much as social-psychological support.
- **Developing gender-sensitive intervention strategies:** Countries should strengthen their focus on gender-based violence to ensure adequate assistance for victims.
- **Strengthening monitoring and data collection on victims of armed violence:** Governments need to collect data on victims and perpetrators thoroughly in order to document the scale of the problem and allow for adequate and coherent assistance.

The way forward

The regional West Africa seminar fostered exchange of experiences on AVRPP initiatives and programming among the countries concerned and among practitioners from different sectors. It demonstrated that an impressive range of experience and promising practices exist in the region that are worth further elaboration and wider dissemination. The discussions also underlined the very good regional framework provided by the various ECOWAS instruments. On the negative side, participants agreed that at the national level, the implementation of the existing instruments and measures was often made difficult by a lack of political will.

The plenary presentations and working-group discussions also demonstrated significant shortcomings in governments' implementation of coherent, long-term, and sustainable AVRPP strategies and programmes. Most notably, the lack of adequate monitoring and data collection on armed violence and the effectiveness of intervention strategies in the entire region needs to be addressed in the future.

The discussions focused on the following key recommendations to combat armed violence in West Africa:

- Promote regional cooperation in sharing data and resources in the subregion.
- Promote cooperation among security forces within the region in combating armed violence.

- Educate people and disseminate information relating to the dangers of armed violence in the subregion.
- Promote economic cooperation in order to reduce unemployment and create job opportunities especially among the youth.
- Develop effective and efficient security forces within the subregion.
- Develop strong national and international laws on restricting the use of arms and ammunition.
- Engage equally with the causes of violence and avoid an exclusive focus on its consequences.

Overview of identified good/promising practices

National arms control measures

- *Small arms and light weapons commissions* are effective ways of coordinating government responses to the multiple challenges posed by arms proliferation. *Their mandate should be expanded to include armed violence* (this has happened in parts of East Africa, such as Kenya).
- *Marking and tracing initiatives are improving control.* These efforts need to be stepped up, while *national arms databases* need to be improved (Senegal's is a model).
- *Moratoriums on firearms are positive*, but their implementation needs to be stepped up and CSOs need to hold governments to account.
- *Amnesties for illegal weapons* can be effective, but need to be time limited and properly targeted.
- *Early-warning systems* are useful but expensive tools and require coordination with many actors in terms of early response. Ghana's National Security Agency is a good example.
- *Parliamentary support programmes* exist, but are often stand-alone. Initiatives such as the Parliamentary Forum's Inter-parliamentary Forum for West Africa is a step in the right direction.
- Not all ECOWAS states *enforce the confiscation of non-registered weapons*. This stimulates cross-border trafficking.
- *Cross-border conventions on security* are important (as that between Gambia and Senegal) and help reduce secondary/cross-border supply.
- *National databases* are having an impact, and the data needs to be systematized, stored and analysed (Burundi and Liberia are models). *Crime/violence observatories are important tools for effective policing.* Resources need to be made available for these institutions.
- The *public destruction of collected/confiscated weapons* sends a powerful and positive security- and confidence-building message.

- Efforts at *eradicating the informal production of firearms* need to be improved. A few successes have been noted.
- West Africa's borders will likely never be sufficiently guarded to counter cross-border trafficking. As such, the focus needs to be on *collective, regional security measures*. ECOWAS frameworks on cross-border protocols provide the premise for integrated, cross-border policing and the establishment of a region-wide criminal database, but this needs political will.
- *Cooperation between security agencies and local people to secure porous borders* is delicate and needs to be done in a structured manner. Development funds need to be directed to border communities to provide meaningful alternatives to crime. *Visible joint (cross-) border patrols* could be very successful.

Peace-building and conflict management measures

- *Inter-religious councils* manage many local conflicts throughout West Africa, particularly farmer–pastoralist conflicts. There is a *Regional Religious Network for West Africa*, which should be supported. International organizations should not be afraid to support religious organizations. *Traditional leaders need to be systematically involved* here too.
- Politicians, students, and religious leaders need to be brought into structured dialogues and *national peace councils* to avert electoral violence well in advance of elections. *In every society, the majority of people want to live peacefully. Peace councils need to tap into that 'silent majority'*.
- *Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms* (as in Ghana) are working, but need more widespread support.
- Not enough is known about gender-based violence. *More research on the different ways that violence impacts men and women in society needs to inform policy*. Initiatives such as Environment Day in Nigeria are a positive step.
- *Support for transparent elections is vital*. The recent election in Nigeria is a good example of how this investment can pay off.
- *Truth and reconciliation commissions and transitional justice courts* can help restore confidence in society and make it less violence prone (the Special Court for Sierra Leone is a good example).

Education and vocational support measures

- *Vocational training schemes for youth* (as in Ghana) are demonstrating results in terms of violence prevention. They need to be properly targeted (surveys).
- Simple measures such as *free school meals* can have a big impact in terms of *school retention rates* and prevent kids from 'hitting the streets'.
- *National curriculums need to become much more conflict sensitive* and should encourage a culture of peace. International lessons are helpful here and CSOs need to play a role.

- In states still recovering from recent conflicts, like Liberia, *former mercenaries need to be supported with vocational programmes*, even after they have also received formal DDR packages.
- *Sensitization campaigns on violence and arms* can be helpful, but campaigns must be creative (Gambia) and tied to a new law or a new police initiative.

Managing resources in a conflict-/violence-sensitive way

- *Audits and the publication of resource companies' revenues, expenditures, and profits* help build a culture of corporate accountability.
- *The introduction of a 'local tax' on revenue* can give an important peace dividend to host communities.
- *Corporate codes of conduct* need to be insisted on at the international level for the extractive industry (World Trade Organization, World Economic Forum). *Corporate social responsibility* needs to be more than a public relations exercise (ECOWAS's Mining Code is a good model).
- *Land management disputes* need to be managed by a respected *independent arbitrator*.
- The state needs to ensure that companies address *egregious environmental mismanagement* and are heavily penalized if they damage the environment.

Development assistance/international standards

- *International standards (ATT, ISACS) are often set too high*; if they are, implementation will not happen. A more practical and realistic approach is necessary. ECOWAS needs to have a voice in treaty formulation.
- More *coordination from UN agencies* (Coordinated Action on Small Arms, Armed Violence Prevention Programme) in supporting the national implementation of standards is necessary.
- *Long-term capacity building of agencies and ministries* is key to anchoring prevention. Without gradual steps to full national ownership, it is a pointless exercise.
- *International assistance needs to be longer term and more predictable*. The status quo encourages small-scale, low-impact projects.
- Small-scale community development projects are not insulating communities from violence. *Armed violence and development need to be informed by an understanding of the drivers of violence*. Senegal's Security and Development Programme is a good example of a large-scale, evidence-informed programme.

The regional West Africa seminar also focused on the Geneva Declaration and its implementation. On the road to the Geneva Declaration second ministerial review, it is important to generate political support and consensus at the international and national levels on the importance of investing in AVRPP. In order to provide a strong message from a region at the forefront of the efforts to combat armed violence, it is important

that the five remaining countries that have not yet endorsed the Geneva Declaration should take steps to sign it in the coming months. In general, one of the key challenges will be in implementing the commitments signed at the international level and translating them into national policies and programmes. In terms of programming, it remains key to identify, systematize, evaluate, and invest in promising AVRPP programmes. Seminars like the one organized in Abuja are a first step in this direction, but a more systematic and robust approach is needed in order to generate such knowledge. This effort can only be undertaken in a partnership among national authorities, international organizations, and civil society in the countries of West Africa.

On 31 October and 1 November 2011 the Second Ministerial Review Conference will bring together the signatory states to the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development and of the Oslo Commitments. The goals of the conference will be to:

- reaffirm the engagement of all signatories;
- assess progress in AVRPP;
- disseminate monitoring and evaluation tools and best practices;
- link global policy and practitioners on the ground; and
- provide clear priorities for the implementation of the Geneva Declaration until 2015.

The conference will be the opportunity for governments, municipalities, the private sector, civil society, NGOs, and UN agencies to share experiences in tackling armed violence. Unlike previous meetings, the emphasis of the meeting is on ‘practice’ so that there is a major effort to identify participants with concrete experience on the ground. The Second Ministerial Review Conference will be important to sustain and strengthen wider global commitment to AVRPP and an agenda that needs both a long-term commitment and the investment of resources from states, international organizations, and NGOs alike.

The contribution of West African countries to these two tracks is key for understanding progress and the various challenges related to AVRPP. While the emerging West African promising practices need to be disseminated at the global level, experts also expressed their desire to strengthen AVRPP experience sharing and capacity building at the regional, subregional, and national levels. It is important to create local communities of practice that are able to relay the work done at the international level and link it to national agendas.