

Section Four: Civil Society and Arms

Chapter 8

The Role of NGOs in the Control of Light Weapons Proliferation and the Reversion of Violence: A Case Study of Gun Free South Africa

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Introduction

This chapter argues that the increase in the flow and availability of light weapons should be understood, not simply as a technical issue of weapons supply and control, but as part of a broader political, social, cultural and economic problem. Seen in this light, it is a problem of both supply and demand. Understanding the problem of the proliferation of light weapons within this framework will help in better understanding the role of civil society, in general, and NGOs, in particular, in effectively reducing weapons flows and addressing the social impact of this proliferation. The work of a specific NGO is looked at here as a case study, in order that the role of NGOs in the control of light weapons proliferation in South Africa might be better understood.

The Need for a Holistic Approach to an International Problem

The increase in intrastate crime and ethnic conflict is greatly enhanced and facilitated by the availability of small arms, which are cheap, yet deadly.¹ It is critical that the international community focus attention on this issue.

In their 1997 Conversion Survey, the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC) acknowledge that, “the issue of small arms and light

weapons in conflicts and post conflict situations has only very recently been elevated to one of those issues attracting international attention.” During 1997, several significant initiatives at international level reported on their findings, bringing increasing attention to this problem.² The UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms presented their report to the UN Secretary-General in August 1998. The consensus report, the first ever dealing with small arms, has been approved. The report recommends that the UN support post-conflict initiatives related to disarmament and demobilisation, which includes the disposal and destruction of weapons, as well as locally supported weapons turn-in programmes. It also recommends that states should have adequate laws and regulations for effectively controlling possession and transfer of small arms and light weapons.³ Ambassador Donowaki of Japan, who chaired the panel, reported that small arms were not only causing the deaths of tens of thousands of people daily, but also exacerbated the increase in violent crime in post-conflict regions.

Other significant international initiatives are the development of a Firearms Protocol presented at the Eighth session of the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) in Vienna, in May 1999, and the UN international study on firearm regulations. Both have made recommendations on firearm regulation for the purpose of crime prevention and public health.

The rapid move by the British House of Commons, voting overwhelmingly in support of a total ban on the possession of handguns in Britain, is another example of the attention this issue has received over the last few years. The British case demonstrates the importance of public campaigns in reducing small arms proliferation. That vote could not have happened with such speed had it not been for the Snowdrop campaign – a campaign, initiated by the parents of the victims of the Dunblane massacre, which was very successful in mobilising thousands of ordinary citizens in support of the call for a ban on handguns.

It is generally accepted in the literature that while there has been a decline in major conventional arms trade and production, the converse has been the case with the flow of light weapons. The primary reasons for this increase in the demand for, and supply of, light weapons are cited as:

- the disintegration of the USSR resulting in the sudden availability of large amounts of new and surplus light weapons – a number of case studies illustrate the difficulty of controlling the transfer and spread of light weapons and small arms once they have entered the market.
- the rise in intrastate conflicts which is indicative of the relative loss of control by major powers over these conflicts, as well as an increase in the demand for surplus weapons to fight these conflicts
- the increase in free trade and subsequent development of illicit networks.⁴

Given that the concern about small arms proliferation is relatively new, no complete consensus has been reached with respect to whether the terms ‘small arms’ and ‘light weapons’ should be used interchangeably or for different groups of weapons. However, there is agreement on the major elements that the definition should include.⁵ Generally it is accepted that small arms are light, portable (can be carried by an individual or a light vehicle), concealable, relatively inexpensive, easily manufactured, require little expertise to operate and do not require extensive logistical and maintenance capability. The durability factor and easy transportation of light weapons are crucial to their proliferation. For the purposes of this chapter the term ‘small arms’ will be used.

The Problem of Small Arms in Southern Africa

South Africa is a heavily armed society. There are approximately 4.1 million licenced firearms in the hands of 1.98 licenced owners (SAPS 1995 figures). This does not include firearms in the hands of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) – estimated at 5 million. On average, eighteen thousand new firearm licences are issued every month. In 1998, 238 000 new licences were granted.⁶ Given the nature of the flow of illegal small arms, it is difficult to determine exactly how many illegal firearms are in circulation in South Africa. It is estimated that there are approximately the same number of licenced as there are unlicenced firearms.

There appears to be consensus that the flow and availability of weapons in South Africa is a direct consequence of the years of conflict and

militarisation in the region. Oosthuysen claims: “The availability of vast quantities of small arms – in the hands of civilians, former combatants and the security forces – continues to fuel a myriad of political and criminal ambitions.”⁷ This is demonstrated by ongoing political conflicts (such as in KwaZulu-Natal), increasingly organised crime and the subsequent perceived need among citizens to own guns for self-protection. Now, with the cessation of hostilities, these surplus weapons flood the civilian market. The long years of conflict have helped create high levels of poverty and social dislocation. The outcome of this is that many people in the region have turned to criminal violence as a means of livelihood.⁸

The proliferation of small arms, both legal and illegal, is not a new phenomenon in this region, in South Africa in particular. This proliferation had been well established within all communities in South Africa by the time of the momentous political changes of 1990.⁹ Oosthuysen suggests that there are really two major factors fuelling the ongoing availability of small arms in South Africa:

- the continued growth in legal, licenced firearms;
- illegal arms which are either smuggled across the country’s borders or are former licenced firearms that have been lost or stolen.

This view is backed up by police statistics, policy research and newspaper reports. The availability of guns in South Africa has significantly contributed to the increase in violent crime. What makes crime in South Africa different from that in other countries is the extraordinary levels of violence to which it is linked. Of the 24 765 murders reported in 1996, 11 130 were committed with firearms – this is an average of 31 people a day. Crimes, such as robbery, murder, rape, taxi violence and others, are increasingly characterised by the use of firearms. The majority of the firearms used in these murders are pistols and revolvers.¹⁰

Many of the weapons in the hands of criminals have been stolen from licenced gun owners. From 1 April 1993 to 1 June 1995, 135 000 weapons were stolen from private individuals.¹¹ In 1998, almost 30 000 guns were reported stolen. Of these only 1 775 were stolen from police officers; the rest were stolen from licenced gun owners.¹² The human and economic costs of the increased use of these weapons, whether for self-defence or criminal activity, is enormous.

Current research suggests that the flow of small arms cannot just be seen as a technical issue of controlling supply. Professor Jacklyn Cock states:

“The discussion on the flow of guns into South Africa tends to focus exclusively on one source – cross border smuggling of AK-47s. The issue is more complex: the supply of guns is deeply imbedded in the South African social and economic order. Today, the supply of guns through the illegal arms trade is connected to many other activities which include the trade in ivory, rhino horn, diamonds, teak and drugs.”¹³

In a country which is already awash with small arms, tighter border control will assist in increasing controls on the supply side of the problem, but in effect these only prevent further accumulations.

This means that, in order for improved border control to be most effective, there must be a complementary policy which addresses the problem of the weapons in the hands of citizens – criminal and law-abiding. There are some researchers in the field who emphasise that the locus of small arms control should be centred on developing strategies and tactics for lowering the need for weapons on the part of citizens.¹⁴ This could include educating citizens about the danger of possessing a firearm, promoting a norm among youth that gun-violence is counter productive, and encouraging voluntary weapons hand-in programme. To reduce the demand for small arms, the culture of gun possession and gun violence has to change – this has to go hand in hand with policies that will reduce the high levels of personal insecurity which helped create the problem in the first place. This is particularly true in the current situation in South Africa.

The control of small arms is crucial to the future of the region, since the failure to implement effective controls could conceivably exacerbate crime, new political antagonism and undermine the region’s development and growth.¹⁵ There is no single cause of weapons proliferation in South Africa. It is only by uncovering the overlapping social, economic, political, cultural and psychological causes of violence that a better understanding of the role of various stakeholders and role players in dealing effectively with this problem can be gained.

Solutions to the Problem of Small Arms Proliferation in South Africa

Cock argues that the demand for small arms is socially constructed and the supply socially organised, which means that ultimately the solution is a social one: “Analysing the proliferation of small arms and the subsequent consequence of gun violence as a social phenomenon goes beyond just exploring individual biographies and motives; it also involves examining the diverse social organizations, cultural frameworks, social practices and institutions built up around guns.”¹⁶

Christopher Louise adds to our understanding of the social impact of the availability of small arms proliferation by identifying two sets of observations:

“First the proliferation and use of light weapons and small arms can be seen as symptomatic of deeper problems in the fabric of these societies. Therefore, the effects of this proliferation must also be sought in broader political, social and economic contexts.

Second, it is apparent that the availability and use of these weapons affect the pace and direction of societal violence.”¹⁷

He goes on to add: “[I]n areas where structural violence is already severe, the proliferation of light weapons and small arms accelerates societal dysfunction, political anarchy and the undermining of state authority.”¹⁸ Collectively this is what constitutes the ‘gun culture’ in South Africa. The analysis of the gun problem in South Africa as essentially a social and political phenomenon has implications for those who wish to reverse the culture of violence. It means understanding and knowing how to influence those institutions and cultural norms that support and justify this gun culture.

Effective solutions must be grounded in the recognition that South Africa has inherited a culture of violence – this is embodied both in the violence of apartheid and the romanticisation of the armed struggle, and the subsequent mythologising of the AK-47. During the apartheid era resources were mobilised for war and South Africans began to accept violence as a legitimate solution to conflict.¹⁹ South Africa is a society brutalised by violence. This

legacy of violence continues to impact on the new economic, social and political relations being forged in our recently established democracy.

Given this history, Louise's observation of the effect of weapons proliferation on societies that have experienced high levels of structural violence provides important pointers to understanding the culture of violence and the increase in violent crime in the post-conflict era in South Africa. Increased levels of crime and violence are common features in societies in transition. This is true of South Africa. In late 1994, Gun Free South Africa (GFSA) warned that firearm killings were the fastest growing form of violence in South Africa. Now, in KwaZulu-Natal for the first time, guns are killing more people than all other weapons.²⁰ The fact that South Africa is one of the most heavily armed societies in the world has not reduced crime; rather it has had the reverse effect. The increase in the legal possession of firearms, such as pistols and revolvers, means that guns are generally more available. Just as in the United States, crime figures and gun sales match each other creating a vicious cycle. Ordinary citizens get drawn into the very culture they wish to defend themselves against. The reality is that easy access to guns and the availability of these weapons makes killing people easier – not just in criminal activity but in domestic violence as well.

South Africa's experience of violent conflict takes place within the context of the changing nature of violence and conflict globally. Louise sums it up pertinently, thus:

“Conflict is no longer the struggle between states and ideologies – it has become the struggle between peoples and cultural identities. With some weaknesses in most societies, the degree to which human security has been eroded has become linked to the propensity for violence. Where this has been most acute, in such places as Somalia and Rwanda, society has imploded. Where it is emerging as a growing menace, but has been contained by stronger state structures, society has been burdened by the increasing levels of violent crime.”²¹

The research conducted by Cock and Louise identifies important factors in the complex relationship between the demand for, and supply of, small arms, as well as highlighting the social, cultural and political dimensions of

this problem. Moreover, it provides important pointers to dealing effectively with the problem of weapons flow by paying greater attention to one question: Why do people want guns? Both argue that in order to develop effective strategies to stem the flow of weapons in this region, the social conditions which lead to the increase in the use and possession of weapons must be mapped.

The existing literature points to two essential ways to approach the question of stemming the flow of light weapons. “The first involves policy directives aimed at establishing legislation that will stop or deter the supply of weapons – in other words tackling the circulation of weapons. The second approach focuses on the causes of weapons proliferation and, consequently, on the demand side of the light weapons equation.”²² “Both approaches demand political will at the highest level for there to be any effective change.”²³

Cock’s work implies that discussions of the problem of small arms proliferation which are framed purely within a legal or technical framework are deficient and that the discussion has to include how policy formulation and the development of programmes and campaigns must address this issue in a more holistic way, and therefore a more effective one in the long term. This, in turn, implies that both civil society and the state are important role players in shaping the debate on the issue, as well as being key to implementing effective controls, whether through tighter border controls or popular campaigns aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of civilians.

The task then of influencing the existing culture of violence in South Africa, and more specifically changing the gun culture in society, cannot be seen just as the responsibility of the state. While state institutions, such as the education system, have a critical role to play, organs of civil society, those institutions which can influence and shape peoples’ behaviour and beliefs, such as religious and educational institutions and community organisations, also play an important role. Nor is the state the only role player equipped to develop policies to deal with the problem of the supply of weapons, such as improved border control and more effective enforcement of existing legislation, as the case study discussed in this chapter will show.

A key question facing policy researchers and human rights activists working on more effective gun control measures is the relation between policy research and legal reform, public advocacy and mobilising public opinion in support of the reduction in small arms. The need for effective and dynamic strategies to reduce the number of guns in society, as well as combat the growing gun culture, is critical. The relationship between legal reform and enforcement, and grassroots mobilisation in support of stricter gun control and challenging the pro-gun culture, is important. The scope for the growth and entrenchment of a gun culture needs to be reduced.

Solutions need to go beyond state actions, mobilising civil society. The question of the role of NGOs in the control of small arms proliferation, and specifically in reducing the number of guns in our society, is a relevant one, given the political and social history of the Southern Africa region.

The case study of the NGO that follows will demonstrate the dynamic relationship between the phenomenon of supply and demand and examine some of the social and political conditions under which small arms control can be enhanced.

Case Study: Gun Free South Africa (GFSA)

Introduction

Given the context described above, it is not surprising that the South African government, research institutes and NGOs see the control of small arms as a priority. In the national crime prevention strategy document, government has identified the reduction in the flow of small arms as a priority. There are several academics and research institutes which focus on this issue. The only NGO specifically concerned about the proliferation of small arms and developing strategies to rid our society of this menace is GFSA, which was established in 1994.

GFSA's specific aim is to work for the reduction of the number of firearms in circulation in the country. The case study will focus on the key programmes and objectives of GFSA in order to demonstrate two key issues:

- the indivisibility of the supply and demand of light weapons flow;

- the control of light weapons as not only a technical exercise but also a political, social and cultural one.

As shown above, the problem of small arms proliferation in the region includes both legal and illegal arms. GFSA focuses on both aspects of the problem. Some key projects have concentrated on legal firearms with the understanding that the increase in the availability of licenced firearms feeds the illegal market. But, just as, in finding strategies to reduce the proliferation of small arms, demand and supply are two inseparable factors, so also legal and illegal small arms cannot be divorced from each other.

GFSA has focused on the following areas of work:

- policy research;
- public advocacy; and
- campaigning.

The case study will show how all three aspects are interlinked and impact on the supply of small arms, as well as on the demand. Wherever reference is made to small arms it includes both legal and illegal firearms unless otherwise stated. To understand why GFSA has focused on its three programmes as the most effective way to help reduce the number of firearms in circulation in our society, it is useful to look at the history of the organisation and how some of its strategies have been adapted to changing conditions.

When GFSA was founded in late 1994, it called for a national hand-in of firearms, both legal and illegal. A twenty-four hour amnesty was proclaimed by the government. The hand-in campaign was not very successful in getting large numbers of guns off the street, nor did it effect much change in the behaviour of the gun carriers – what could be called the demand side of the problem. However, it did impact greatly on the political leaders of the day and it enabled the issue of gun control to be put on the national political agenda. That was the single most significant impact of the national firearm hand-in campaign.

Subsequent evaluation by GFSA concluded that the time was not ripe, there had not been enough grass-roots organising and that the idea had not been sufficiently tested. The proximity of the campaign to the 1994 general

election meant that people were still uncertain of the direction the new government would take, and there was still widespread distrust of the police at the time.

Another attempt at getting back surplus weapons was initiated by the state in September 1995. It took the form of a Presidential proclamation calling on those who were in possession of state-owned arms to surrender them or face prosecution. This was an attempt by government to retrieve the firearms handed out by homeland governments, the police and the then SADF to all and sundry before the elections. This proclamation was also a failure and very few guns were handed in.

The surprisingly strong responses – both hostile and supportive – to GFSA’s campaign, from government, the ordinary public and the pro-gun lobby organised through the South African Gun Owners Association (SAGA), indicated that the issue of gun control is both important and highly contested. In early 1995, after reviewing the strategy of the hand-in, it was agreed that GFSA had to adopt a dual approach: advocacy work in the area of legal reform accompanied by the building of a social movement in support of ridding the country of guns.

Given that there have been several successful weapons hand-in programmes in inner cities in the United States, as well as in countries such as Haiti, Mali and El Salvador, the idea of an amnesty and a weapons hand-in is not entirely off the agenda in South Africa. There is interest in the concept among senior leaders in the SAPS and the Secretariat for Safety and Security.

International experience of weapons hand-ins indicates that the purpose of such a campaign must be multi-dimensional and cannot just be seen as an exercise in collecting weapons; rather it involves several components, such as community mobilisation, public education and advocacy work. This shows that when it comes to implementing effective controls, both government and civil society have important roles to play in impacting on the demand and the supply of weapons. If the hand-in is seen primarily as trying to change gun carrying behaviour, it is clear from those programmes that have been successful, that the state needs to be involved, particularly where its law enforcement agencies are concerned. Dr Edward Laurance of

the Monterey Institute of International Studies, an expert on small arms proliferation and voluntary weapons turn-in programmes, argues that hand-ins work best when implemented in a local area with the full co-operation of the police and community groups as an integral part of development plans for that particular community.²⁴

Now this discussion turns to the three new strategies adopted by GFSA, after the relative failure of its hand-in programme.

Policy Research

The objective of the policy research programme is to investigate policy options for reducing the number of guns in circulation.

Reviewing existing legislation with regard to the licencing and control over legal firearms was seen as one avenue through which to reduce the number of guns in circulation in our society. This involved comparative research and looking in particular at firearm control mechanisms of other African countries. The research revealed a broad spectrum of policies across the world.

The results of the research were used to develop a framework for critiquing the *Arms and Ammunition Act* of 1969. It argued that the loopholes in South Africa's firearm legislation have contributed to the increase in the availability of small arms. GFSA submitted a report to the Minister of Safety and Security outlining key aspects of the Act which, if amended, would improve firearm control. This report contributed to the terms of reference of the National Firearm Policy Committee appointed by the Minister in January 1997 to investigate a new policy for the control of legal firearms in South Africa. The Minister requested the committee to develop policy which will "contribute to a drastic reduction in the number of legal weapons in circulation in South Africa."²⁵

Members of the committee were primarily civilians and ranged across the spectrum of opinion regarding firearms. The national co-ordinator of GFSA was appointed to serve on this committee as was a representative from SAGA. The report recommended a series of measures to improve the control over small arms proliferation. These included competency tests for licence applicants, restriction of the carrying of a firearm in public places

and limiting the number of guns licenced for self-defence. This report, together with other reports such as the Duncan Enquiry into the Central Firearm Registry (CFR), further contributed to government's developing a comprehensive firearms control strategy which is now managed by the National Crime Prevention Strategy secretariat. Subsequently, another NGO, the Institute for Security Studies, was commissioned to manage the drafting of a new firearms control policy which is expected to be ready by August 1999.

GFSA has made an important contribution to the policy process, both via its initial policy research and through participation in the policy committee. One of the factors which has contributed to the ability of NGOs to influence and work constructively with government on the issue of small arms control is the latter's expressed commitment to arms reduction.

Legislative changes by themselves cannot change anything – it is the implementation of the new laws that is critical for ensuring that the desired goal of the reduction of arms flow is achieved. There are two aspects to the problem of implementation:

- new practices within government institutions;
- support from the general public for new policies and their implementation.

In order for any new policy or legislation to be implemented effectively, the personnel and institutions responsible for its implementation need to be given the necessary capacity.

The case of the CFR provides an example of the importance of institutional reform of the state. A steering committee member of GFSA, Sheena Duncan, was appointed by the Minister of Safety and Security as the civilian chair of a committee of inquiry into the CFR. Its mandate was to investigate irregularities within the CFR, but was extended to make recommendations on the systems used within the CFR which allow for the occurrence of irregularities. The inquiry commenced in early 1997 and the then Minister of Safety and Security, Minister Mufamadi, made this report public in May 1997. It is evident in the report that negligence, gross abuse of powers and corruption resulted in firearm licences being issued too easily, and to the wrong people. It is estimated that up to 20 000 people with

criminal records have licenced firearms. A directive from the Ministry of Safety and Security to tighten up on the issuing of licences has resulted in a decrease in the number of firearm licences being issued. After such a short time, to determine whether the number of firearm applications has decreased is difficult, but there has been an increase in the number of firearm licences that is being refused.

Since then Duncan has been appointed to the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) which is a joint SANDF/SAPS team set up to recover all state owned firearms illegally in the possession of private individuals and to audit all firearms in the possession of the state and local governments.

Gun Free South Africa has thus played an important role in helping shape policy with regard to stricter gun control, as well as in assisting the state in developing its capacity to implement those policies.

In order to achieve the goal of reducing the flow of small arms, GFSA went beyond doing comparative research, using this latter as the basis on which it engaged with other key role-players, such as members of Parliament and the NGO sector. These meetings, regular information briefings and discussions with politicians across party political lines are aimed at furnishing with good data and sound reason those who influence the passage of new Bills through Parliament, in order that they might adopt progressive policies which will ensure the reduction in the flow of small arms in this country.

Those institutions and/or organisations who are sympathetic to the goals of GFSA were identified and a similar process of information sharing occurred. A critical difference between influencing the views of politicians and that of relevant NGO players is that those in the NGO sector who support GFSA's policy recommendations do so because there is a convergence between their aims and objectives and what the new law can achieve. For some NGOs, such as the Quaker Peace Centre, there is an in-principle support for the goal of violence reduction and the creation of a peaceful society. Supporting policies which will ensure stricter gun control fall within the broader vision of a more peaceful society. For other NGOs, such as Disabled People South Africa (DPSA), People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) and the health sector, there is a convergence between some

of their objectives (such as decreasing the number of gun shot victims) and what the new law can achieve. That support also coalesces around specific recommendations rather than being a *carte blanche* support for all policy changes. For example, the health sector (both within government and the NGO community) may support policy recommendations for an increase in the age restriction for a licence applicant and the implementation of an injury surveillance system. Identifying a range of NGOs that might be influenced has created the potential for building an alliance which strengthens the support for arms control, while at the same time broadening and influencing GFSA's own perspective. The convergence of interest around a specific set of policies has also strengthened the arm of the state in implementing new policy on gun control. By working within this framework, it has been possible to build a broad alliance of organisations and individuals supporting the call for gun control. The Gun Control Alliance was launched in February 1999. Over 150 organisations and hundreds of individuals have endorsed the Charter for Gun Control. These include a diverse range of people and organisations from the human rights, religious, youth, women, business, farmer, police and health sectors.

This process of advocacy is ongoing and involves maintaining contact with those whom GFSA wishes to influence, as well as learning from other advocacy groups, such as DPSA, who to influence and how to do it most effectively. This process is also supported and complemented by an ongoing public education programme (see below) which further strengthens the call for a reduction in the number of firearms. The general public is influenced primarily through the public education and campaign work of GFSA. With the success of the public education programme in shifting peoples' attitudes away from gun ownership and helping organise the voice of the unarmed majority, it becomes easier for government to implement stricter controls through legislation, as this will match more closely with what the general public desires.

Given that the licencing procedure is more rigorous, and is coupled with a public opinion that supports the reduction in the availability of small arms, it is anticipated that fewer people will apply for gun licences. There is a dynamic interplay between the control of small arms supply and the reduction in demand.

Public Education

The goal of the public education programme is to influence the attitudes of the general public towards supporting stricter gun control and to challenge the prevailing gun culture by promoting two central messages:

- that the number of guns in circulation needs to be reduced;
- that it is a myth that guns are a means of security.

The 1994 hand-in campaign was characterised by a very visible media campaign with almost daily coverage in the electronic and print media. It was effective in getting the issue into the public arena, but was limited to radio talk shows, TELEVISION interviews, letters to the editor and press releases. It was largely reactive and often in response to opponents of ‘gun control’.

As the issue of small arms control becomes more critical and the profile of GFSA grows, more and more people are becoming interested in supporting the goals of GFSA by including its message in their materials. An example is the Soul City television series, which included GFSA’s basic call for firearm reduction in its third series that ran for seventeen weeks from early August 1997. This series also included books for school curricula, comics and radio stories. The GFSA message is included in these books at all levels, through the use of the GFSA logo, gun free zone signs on the school buses and discussion topics on alternatives to guns.

Another example of the growing support for gun control and GFSA’s objectives is that GFSA has a charity account with a major international advertising agency, Sonnenberg Murphy Leo Burnett (SMLB). Since the beginning of this relationship, GFSA’s public education and communication strategies have expanded, become more sophisticated and more proactive. This means that GFSA is able to increase the rate at which it engages with the general public through the mass media, as well as to vary the message it puts across depending on the target market. A variety of media have been used, including radio adverts, cinema ads, print ads, postcards and outdoor advertising. The print media advertisements have been aimed mainly at a sophisticated market and placed in financial dailies and weeklies.

The influence that GFSA has been able to exert through the use of the media has not been limited just to the general public. The media itself has become

an independent voice articulating the same goals as GFSA: in the short term, a reduction in firearms and, in the long term, a gun free society. An editorial of a prominent daily commended Minister Mufamadi for “the start he has made in overhauling South Africa’s chaotic firearms licencing system. The long term aim must be a gun-free SOUTH AFRICA. But it will be a giant step forward if the tough provisions of the *Arms and Ammunition Act* are actually enforced.”²⁶

With the announcement of new draft gun legislation in July 1999, most of the major national dailies supported the move towards stricter gun control.²⁷

Gun Free South Africa’s public education programme has gone beyond conveying its two key messages, resulting in a deeper level of education. In response to the print ads, some people have requested more information, others are interested in getting involved in a practical way and yet others want notice of seminars, newsletters, information packs and similar material. A strategy which, on one level, aims to educate the general public about the myths relating to firearms and to create new social norms about gun ownership, on the other, translates into something that is beginning to impact on the behaviour of people in regard to private gun ownership.

Much of the public education is aimed at the unarmed majority – those who do not own or use a firearm, but may still consider getting one, whether for self-defence purposes or for other reasons. The public education programme is used to communicate the goals of GFSA and the vision that inspires it, as well as trying to influence the attitude of ordinary South Africans in support of stricter control.

The communications strategy uses the mass media to assist in creating the conditions under which legal reform and improved gun control are supported by the general public. This, in turn, will strengthen the hand of government in implementing stricter controls and enforcing legislation more effectively.

If the public education programme is successful in winning this support for stricter controls, it can be said that, as an NGO, GFSA is affecting the supply of weapons. If there is an increase in the number of people who begin to accept and understand the message that guns are not a means of

security, this organisation will have been successful in decreasing the demand for guns. Although GFSA embarked on public education as one strategy to reduce the demand for guns, it is clear that another, the use of mass media communication, can influence the public's perceptions in the direction of supporting increased controls over guns, and therefore create the conditions under which legal reform can be implemented.

There is no doubt that GFSA has succeeded in tapping a deep well of public concern about the proliferation of small arms, as well as about the prevalence of a gun culture. Moreover, it has succeeded in giving voice to this concern, providing avenues for direct involvement and advocating viable policies for gun reduction. Its public education has simultaneously provided support for stricter gun control, and begun to challenge and reverse the gun culture in South Africa.

If civil society is to be effective in contributing to increased controls over the flow of small arms, what it should do is avoid separating the causal factors of the problem into the neat categories of supply and demand. This is seriously to underestimate the dynamic relationship and interplay existing between the two. Policy development and the implementation of programmes must occur simultaneously and in mutual support of each other. For example, if the programmes to address the problem of the demand for weapons are successful, then policies on the supply side, such as stricter law enforcement and gun recovery programmes, will be more effective and become more acceptable.

Campaigning

Gun Free South Africa's two major campaigns are the Gun Control Alliance and the Gun Free Zone (GFZ) Initiative. The Alliance has been briefly described in the previous section. The GFZ campaign calls for the creation of gun free zones in public places. It encourages institutions, organisations and ordinary people to declare their premises a 'Gun Free Zone'. The goal is to make the carrying of a firearm socially unacceptable by the display of the 'No Gun' signs, by which it is made more difficult for gun carriers to bring their firearms into public places.

This initiative enables people, organisations and institutions which support the reduction in the flow of small arms in our society to give visible

expression to that support. The message of the GFZ campaign reinforces the central message of the public education programme – that carrying a gun is not a means of security – whatever its intended purpose. By the public display of the ‘No Gun’ sign at the entrance of public buildings, those who carry weapons are becoming increasingly isolated. This support adds to that built among the general public through the public education programme, as well as to that developed through the advocacy work on the legal reform process. It is evident that developing support among a broad range of constituencies, using different programmes, is possible and creates a solid base from which to mobilise at grass roots level.

The GFZ Initiative has been a successful campaign. There are 120 organisations, each of which has declared itself a ‘Gun Free Zone’. This includes the religious, business and NGO sectors. The Initiative has received support at both grass roots level and within government. The Gauteng Legislature declared itself a ‘Gun Free Zone’ in late 1996 and the provincial government, through the office of the MEC for Safety and Security, is now moving to make all provincial buildings gun free. The implementation of the GFZ in government will constitute a partnership between GFSA and Safety and Security. This will involve GFSA’s designing the policy and implementation plan together with the Ministry of Safety and Security, as well as its being the main driving force behind the production of resource materials, such as posters, pamphlets and gun free signs. Schools, health care centres and clinic and welfare offices have been identified as priority areas. This partnership between government and GFSA on the GFZ campaign is an example of how both government and civil society are involved in shaping attitudes and behaviour on gun control.

The concept of gun free zones has been adopted by many ordinary citizens’ groups and community groups. An example of how a campaign such as GFZ can be used to mobilise an entire community is that of Mapela. Mapela is a small rural community of approximately 3 000 people in the Northern Province, 35 kilometres north of Potgietersrus. A GFSA member from that community began to organise the people around the idea of gun free zones in July 1996. By November of that year, five secondary schools and four primary schools had declared themselves ‘Gun Free Zones’. This involved discussion with both staff and pupils. Other gun free zones include the health clinic, the two trading stores, a bottle store and a shebeen. In January

1997, discussions were held with the chief in the area and, after her full support had been given to the idea, the tribal authority hall was declared a 'Gun Free Zone'. The initiative has mobilised the community to seek alternatives to possessing firearms, which has involved further discussions, not only with police on policing priorities within that area but also with community leaders for identifying violence flashpoints.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above description of the three major GFSA programmes – legal reform, public education and campaigning – that they are interlinked and interdependent, creating a dynamic relationship, particularly with regard to the impact that all three have on the supply and demand of small arms.

If, at the macro level, it is more difficult to get a firearm, as a result of increased controls, while at the same time the success of the public education programme through the mass media has reinforced the perception that increased controls can and should happen; and, concomitantly, at the level of the GFZ campaign, those who have supported the increased controls go a further step toward isolating those who do carry guns, then on all three levels both the demand and the supply of weapons will be affected. This implies that the control of small arms is not just a technical issue but a political and social issue of building public support for control, and challenging and attempting to reverse the influence of the gun culture in our society. This is a complex process which government cannot manage alone. It is better suited to implementing some aspects, such as policing the new law; while NGOs may be better suited to implementing others, such as the mobilisation against guns.

The case study shows how a partnership between GFSA and government has laid the conditions for improved control and for contesting the prevalence of a gun culture in South Africa, as two aspects of a technical, political and social problem. It constitutes, in other words, an effort to reduce the proliferation of small arms both from a supply and a demand perspective. This ability of GFSA to contribute to the formation of government policy on gun control and to the reform of state institutions

(CFR) has to be seen, in particular, in the context of a state in transition, and facing severe capacity and policy constraints. Within this context, NGOs can play an especially critical role, in enhancing government capacity, contributing to the reform of state institutions and building public support for progressive policies.

Gun Free South Africa illustrates the importance of linking three different activities – policy research and advocacy, public education and public campaigning. It also illustrates the need to work at different levels to mobilise civil society and to reform state policy. It is in this multifaceted approach that GFSA's success, albeit limited, lies.

Endnotes

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