

INTRODUCTION: IMAGINARY BORDERS

“The borders are free. Customs are so weak, if you give them a lot of money, they will not mind. They will let you take anything through.”
-NGO worker, Koidu, Sierra Leone

“We have no power here, and we are far from our families. We spend the night here at our post trying to keep ourselves entertained somehow and hoping that our wives will still talk to us when we go home.”
-Sierra Leone Police officer working week-long shifts at a border post.

“How will we be protected? I see people passing with ammunition from Liberia. How properly was disarmament done?”
-Villager living on Liberia-Sierra Leone border.

The Policy of Demand

Illegal gun markets follow patterns of trade that are determined by diverse factors: globalisation, historical trade routes that cross colonially-imposed boundaries, and the basic economic laws of supply and demand. Since the arrival of small and arms and light weapons (SALW) on the international policy-making radar in July 2001 (the year of the first UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects), policies aimed at reducing proliferation have focused almost exclusively on regulating and controlling the supply side of the market. Largely, this is because the world's supply of guns comes from a finite network of manufacturers, distributors, and dealers, some of them located in countries with the legal and criminal justice system capacity to enforce regulations once they are made. It is much more difficult to control or regulate consumers.

The ability to make and implement effective policy, however, lies in understanding and acknowledging both sides of the market. Addressing demand requires different, broader, often more long-term and creative strategies. Local conditions influence gun markets the same way they influence consumption of other goods; however, there are some underlying consistencies that cross

geographical and cultural boundaries. Factors fuelling demand include availability of weapons, economies on the margins, and lack of education and development. In post-conflict states, regional political dynamics and the relative success or failure of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) play a significant role in the evolution of illicit weapons trafficking and ownership patterns.

The Mano River Union sub-region of West Africa provides an important case study of how demand-based measures should be incorporated into small arms policy. The borders between Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire have always been so porous that the movement of people and goods from one nation to another is virtually unchecked. This has created a situation where the flourishing of trade is not limited to illicit goods such as diamonds and small arms, but also extends to agricultural and other commodities necessary for sustaining the livelihoods of people living in border towns and villages. Many such areas are simply better connected to capital cities in neighbouring countries than they are to markets in their own. Poor infrastructure, lack of roads, and general alienation from central government and nation-building creates a cost burden not only in terms of security, but also economically as palm wine and other products on the borders are bought and sold in foreign currency. The legitimate business and kinship ties that bind people on either side of the un-patrolled borders then function, often secondarily, as conduits for illicit goods. Because these ties go beyond the criminal element, monitoring and policing them is a Sisyphean task.

Rather than focusing arms reduction policies solely on policing and border control, the international community and national governments should direct funding and support towards infrastructure development on the borders. In Sierra Leone, for example, focus should be on building and maintaining roads linking farming and mining communities with each other, Freetown, and other major urban centres like Bo, Kenema, and Kono. Markets should be designed specifically to create incentives for people farming and producing commodities like palm wine to transport and sell their goods within Sierra Leone, rather than in neighbouring countries.

Ministries of youth can play a crucial collaborative role in organising opportunities for unemployed youth many of whom, in Sierra Leone and Liberia, fought in the recently-ended civil wars and went through the DDR process but still have no way of making a living. Programmes should be established to set up youth co-operative farms and associated businesses that will benefit from renewed infrastructure and market incentives. Such measures will, in addition to giving hope and direction to the demographic that fuelled

militias, further increase food security, eliminating the need for many low-level participants in arms trafficking to bolster family income through illegal activity. Only through political empowerment, infrastructure development, and economic alternatives will the flow of illegal small arms and light weapons be stemmed in the Mano River Union countries.

Imagining the State

How important is a strong or even functioning state to achieving acceptable levels of human security in a region? The “state failure” theory asserts that:

The rise and fall of nation-states is not new, but in a modern era when national states constitute the building blocks of legitimate world order the violent disintegration and palpable weakness of selected African, Asian, Oceanic, and Latin American states threaten the very foundation of that system... Desirable international norms such as stability and predictability thus become difficult to achieve when so many of the globe’s newer nation-states waver precariously between weakness and failure, with some truly failing, or even collapsing.¹

The term “violent disintegration” implies that there was something to disintegrate in the first place. Much of the population of Africa, on maps neatly divided into nation-states with clear borders, lives outside the influence of a central government. Borders all over the continent are both porous and un-patrolled because of geographical remoteness, limited resources to hire, train, and equip border police, and because people who live on borders often disregard them to pursue social and economic opportunities unconstrained by government or international security concerns. In other words, the Sierra Leonean farmer who lives closer to Conakry than Freetown cares less about border regulations than about selling his goods to an available market.

In his extensive study of Somalia, Peter D. Little approaches the state failure model this way:

If a state were a required component, then the Somali economy could not exist, and nor could those of several other African countries, where the formal government has virtually collapsed... While it is common today to hear of the collapsed African state, invoking images of political girders and structures falling into an abyss, the applicability of the phrase to Somalia since 1979 can be questioned. This is even more so in the context of the country’s borderlands where official controls

have always been weak. For instance, can we really speak of a failed state, if it is questionable whether a meaningful state ever existed?²

Little illuminates the distinction between a collapsed central government and a collapsed state. Economies of trade and the power brokers that they produce can be far more influential in determining the politics and relative peace or security of an area than whether there is a functioning central entity recognised by the United Nations.

Carolyn Nordstrom focuses on the anthropological rather than economic aspects of war and peace relative to state primacy. She concludes that much of the hand-wringing over the necessity of a strong state is a myth based on the assumption that only a handful of elites can bring order to chaos:

Diplomacy and military science would have it that peace is brokered at the formal level, among those responsible for running countries and wars. This view perpetuates notions about the primacy of the state. In this popular lore-cum-wisdom, the masses are not sufficiently sophisticated to either run wars or realise peace. The “masses” – undifferentiated and unpredictable – are prone to unrestrained eruptions of violence (riots and vigilante lynchings) and to stunned inertia in the face of threat (troops protecting cowering civilians)...It is the job of the visionaries and the gifted to fashion society in such a way as to keep the beast as tamed as possible...If people can be convinced of this scenario, they can be convinced that the state, and those who rule in its stead, are essential to the survival of the human race.³

There is of course validity to the ordering of the world in terms of states. While the example of Somalia and other “borderlands” such as Northern Kenya show that economies (licit and illicit) can thrive in the absence of state government, no one is in a rush to dismantle existing borders and see what happens. Rather, the way we prioritise and conceptualise state power and authority informs whether we tailor policies to the way things are, or the way we would like them to be. Small arms and light weapons are easy to transport and distribute, and the reality in the Mano River Basin is that state borders will not be a hindrance to the economy of guns for the next ten to twenty years, at least. Nordstrom’s field notes include this philosophy from an unnamed interviewee:

If you are exposed to violence, you become violent. It is a learned response. And this is a fact of life, not a fact solely of war. The war

may come to a formal end, but all those people who have learned violence – learned to solve their problems, and conflicts, and confusions with violence – will continue to use it. They will be more violent with their families, with their friends, in their work. They will see violence as the appropriate response to any political contest. So is the war really over? Is the violence of war gone suddenly with declarations of peace? No, violence lives in the belly of the person and ruins society, unless peace is taught to the violent. And peace must be taught just like violence is, by subjecting people to it, by showing them peaceful ways to respond to life and living, to daily needs and necessities, to political and personal challenges.⁴

In this more locally-based conception of peace, demand is the ultimate factor behind war. Peace deals are made at the state level, between leaders of political movements, but this may have a more limited effect on the flow of illicit weapons in a region than is often celebrated. In the case of West Africa, peace deals and the disarmament processes that eventually follow have become market indicators rather than cut-off points in the sale and transport of small arms and light weapons. Particularly in this context, focusing on how those market indicators work and where they point is crucial to building effective small arms policy.

Regional and National Policy Context

West Africa is notorious for political instability and an almost unmitigated flow of small arms and light weapons from Eastern Europe and across nearly non-existent borders. In 1998 the ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) *Moratorium on Importation, Exportation, and Manufacture of Light Weapons in West Africa* represented an important step towards addressing small arms proliferation in the region. It was adopted and signed in Abuja on 31 October 1998 by the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government and renewed for a further three years on 9 July 2001. The Moratorium allows for states to apply for exemptions to meet national security needs or international peacekeeping requirements, but otherwise was intended as a true moratorium.

PCASED, the Programme for Coordination and Assistance for Security and Development (known by its French acronym) predates the Moratorium, as it was originally intended to support the implementation of the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Mission on the Proliferation of Light Weapons in the Sahel-Sahara sub-region. However, following the adoption of the

Moratorium, the ECOWAS Heads of States and Governments requested that PCASED become the central pillar in its implementation. Over the five-year period PCASED was expected to support the implementation of the moratorium in nine priority areas:

- Establishing a culture of peace;
- Training programmes for military, security, and police forces;
- Enhancing weapons controls at border posts;
- Establishing a database and regional arms register;
- Collecting and destroying surplus weapons;
- Facilitating dialogue with producer suppliers;
- Reviewing and harmonising national legislation and administrative procedures;
- Mobilising resources for PCASED objectives and activities; and
- Enlarging membership of the Moratorium.⁵

PCASED is currently being phased out and replaced with the ECOWAS Small Arms Programme (ECOSAP), with the creation of a Small Arms Unit at ECOWAS headquarters. Plans are also underway to transform the moratorium into a legally binding instrument.

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) met in Bamako, Mali two years later in 2000 to develop an African Common Position on SALW, in anticipation of the 2001 UN Conference.⁶ Using the 1998 ECOWAS Moratorium and the 2000 Nairobi Declaration, among other African regional initiatives, as a starting point, the Bamako Declaration put demand reduction strategies on the policy map. While carefully reaffirming the values of sovereignty, non-interference, and the right to individual and collective self-defence, the signatories emphasised that “the problem of the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons... sustains conflicts...promotes a culture of violence...has adverse effects on security and development...and is both one of supply and demand.” It goes a step further in suggesting that the problem should be dealt with not only by controlling suppliers, but also through:

the promotion of measures aimed at restoring peace, security and confidence among and between Member States, the promotion of structures and processes to strengthen democracy, the observance of human rights, and economic recovery and growth, the promotion of conflict prevention measures, and the promotion of solutions that include both...supply and demand aspects.⁷

Despite the political importance of these policy measures and the attention they have drawn to the problem of small arms in West Africa, the moratorium has been flouted openly, as have sanctions against Liberia. The civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia have resulted in increased arms flows and an environment where disarmament has to be achieved before non-proliferation can be addressed. Lisa Misol, a Human Rights Watch researcher, testified before the United States Congressional Human Rights Caucus in May 2004, identifying several specific ways in which small arms policy has been failing in West Africa. She testified:

Contributing factors include lax arms export controls in supplier countries, regional allies who provide cover and sometimes financing, and transnational arms traffickers motivated by profit. Another key factor is the ability to pay of embargoed buyers, who use misappropriated funds or trade valuable commodities such as diamonds or timber concessions for arms.

Let me cite an example drawing from Human Rights Watch's research. In mid-2003, while conflict raged in Liberia, the government of Guinea imported mortar rounds and other ammunition from Iran. These were declared on cargo documents as "detergent" and "technical equipment." From Guinea, the weapons cargo was forwarded to allied rebels inside Liberia who had just made two offensives on the capital, Monrovia. The rebels, of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), used those weapons to fire indiscriminately on civilian areas of Monrovia in what was known locally as "World War III." Scores of civilians were killed and hundreds wounded when the mortar rounds landed in makeshift camps for displaced people and other populated areas. One of the tragedies of this case was that it was child soldiers – children as young as 11 years old – who fired many of the mortars.⁸

Written policy is no substitute for political will; and political will is often ineffective in "failing states."⁹ In an environment of few laws, fewer borders, and no enforceable regional policy, demand factors and local approaches are both practical and necessary.

Factors behind Demand

The monograph “Guns in the Borderlands” published by the Institute for Security Studies in 2004, was the result of fieldwork conducted in Kenya to test hypotheses about factors behind the demand for small arms and light weapons. While West Africa represents a different political, economic, and geographical challenge, many of the factors identified in that research are relevant and applicable across these divides.

Identity-based conflict

A majority of Africa’s population can be classified as children or youth. The percentage of African countries’ population under 14 years old ranges from 35 to 49 per cent.¹⁰ The success or failure of child and youth development can destabilise nations and entire regions. States have a responsibility to provide their underage citizens with education, health care, and safe shelter, rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. They often fail to prioritise youth involvement in positive activities that promote peace building and conflict resolution, leaving a lack of safe space for the most vulnerable – and in many cases the largest – section of the population. Youth are then open to recruitment in activities that facilitate the worst kinds of marginal economies: those that buy and sell guns and conflict.

In peacetime, citizenship is defined according to a narrow set of criteria; historically, this has included only men, or men of a certain age who were property owners, or men of a certain race or economic background. Citizenship in most modern states, while often more inclusive, still defines youth and women as special ‘sub-categories’. Youth and women’s leagues of political parties keep these groups out of the mainstream with a focus on fringe rights. In times of conflict, however, both gender and age prerequisites are often re-formulated to fit conscription needs.

Easy-to-use weapons allow power brokers to assemble and train these troops from a seemingly never-ending pool of poor, disenfranchised, and uneducated young people, including refugees, orphans, and internally displaced people. As a group like any other element of society, children and youth develop strategies for survival and find resources wherever they can. When conflict decimates schools, health care systems, and other support networks for children, the only options left involve violence. One participant at a “Shrinking Small Arms” seminar said, “Our children look at guns as

power. It is difficult to focus on guns, because in the minds of youth, the gun is the way to instant money, an opportunity for them where there is no other opportunity.”¹¹

Social status and ethnicity are also used to promote involvement in conflict. ‘Ethnic clashing’ is a term associated with large-scale violence, but it is not innate divisions between groups that push them to take up arms. Ethnicity is just another dividing line used by those in power to perpetuate conflicts for political or economic gain. The rise of civil tension usually stems from economic, social, and political grievances with no other outlet. Extreme poverty, competition for resources, political power brokering, and other factors make disenfranchised groups (whether ethnicity-based, age-based, or other) easy prey for those seeking to build their own militias, crime syndicates, or gun-running empires.

Availability

Availability drives demand for weapons. Because they are sturdy, durable, and reusable, small arms are extremely difficult to get rid of. Once they are present in a country they tend to stay there, either fuelling crime or flowing over national boundaries to serve the needs of neighbouring conflicts. One of the purposes of demobilisation, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programmes is to confiscate and take small arms out of circulation following a conflict period, but arms caches are rarely effectively destroyed in the wake of fragile peace agreements. In unstable regions with bleak economic forecasts, former combatants have little hope of finding a job in civilian life. The option of keeping a gun and seeking mercenary work is more enticing than turning over their only chance at earning a livelihood. The mere presence of weapons in situations where the balance of power is already delicate frequently plunges post-conflict states back into complex emergencies before significant development and reconstruction gains can be realised.

Poverty, unequal access to resources, large youth populations with limited access to education or jobs, and other socio-political factors contribute to instability, but it is the presence of guns that enables conflict to escalate into the type of violence that is beyond state control or mediation. Guns create another self-perpetuating cycle: an internal arms race. The more people accept that weapons are necessary for survival and economic advancement, the more insecurity spreads and drives further demand. Small arms proliferation hinders development and conflict resolution efforts, creates

space for war economies to grow and become entrenched, and contributes to a growing number of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Economies on the margins

Although Sierra Leone and Liberia are both incredibly resource-rich countries, the abuse and misappropriation of those resources for the personal gain of warlords and private military commanders has fuelled conflict that otherwise might have exhausted itself for lack of funding much sooner. The mining and marketing of diamonds from conflict areas not only enriched combatants, it also provided an easy conduit for small arms trafficking and facilitated deals with terrorist groups like Al Qaeda who are always looking for non-traceable liquid assets. Diamonds, which are small, easily smuggled, and extremely valuable, have financed the most marginal leaders and groups not only in West Africa but also globally as part of a network of financial and military deals that occur on the borders of legal transport systems and economies from Iran to Libya to Afghanistan to the United States.

In a contrastingly local view of this network, people living below the poverty line on the borders between Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia are often forced to sell what few goods they trade illegally across those borders because of the lack of infrastructure connecting them to commercial hubs that function in their own national currency. As such, it is a small step from palm wine, tobacco or produce to guns or diamonds, deals in which even the smallest cut of the reward might be enough to feed a family for several months.

Lack of education and development

The role of donors and governments in managing peace building efforts in low-level, sustained conflicts is closely related to economic factors, but presents a different challenge. Both education and development in the broadest sense of both terms form the foundations of frameworks laid out by local peace organisations for addressing conflict and building lasting peace. Education for both adults and children can change cultural perceptions, create opportunities for growth and changing economies, and produce more active, informed citizens.

Development can change the entire face of a community and its relationship to guns and conflict. Done poorly and without knowledge of local

pressure points, it can wreak havoc and create fighting among competing groups. Development on a large scale creates infrastructure with which communication and education can thrive. Guns thrive in the borderlands because they are cut off from the rest of the nation. People living in remote areas have little sense of their membership in the state. Without the benefits of government, the laws become meaningless. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Arms for Development Programme (AFD) has taken the connection between guns and development to its logical conclusion, extending community arms collection programmes to villages throughout Sierra Leone. Communities that are certified arms free receive block grants for a development project. Although the weapons collected through AFD have been primarily hunting rifles and other sometimes unserviceable pieces that would never make it into a formal disarmament programme, the effort is considered a success if only for the training and community planning emphasis that provides experience and purpose to the communities involved.