

FACT SHEET

SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Most present-day conflicts are fought with small arms and light weapons. These are the weapons of choice in civil wars, organised crime, gang warfare and terrorist attacks. They are easy to use, to carry, and to conceal. Illicit flows of small arms and light weapons undermine security and the rule of law, and they are often a factor behind the forced displacement of civilians and massive human rights violations.

Programme of Action

In 2001, countries adopted the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA). In it, governments agreed to take measures to improve national small arms laws import and export controls, to strengthen stockpile management, to ensure that weapons are properly and reliably marked, to improve cooperation in weapons tracing, and to engage in regional and international cooperation and assistance.

“The growing number of global and regional norms to counter illicit guns reflects the international community’s determination to stop the too frequent – yet preventable – destruction they inflict. However, paper and meetings will not stop innocent men, women and children from suffering from gun-inflicted death or gunshot wounds. What is needed is vigorous implementation.”

Kim Won-soo,
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs



Marking, record-keeping, and tracing

To effectively prevent and counter the diversion of small arms and light weapons, law enforcement authorities must be able to trace recovered illicit weapons to their point of diversion. Marking these weapons at the time of their manufacture and import facilitates weapons tracing. To this end, in 2005, the General Assembly adopted the International Tracing Instrument (ITI), which provides a framework for governments to cooperate with one another in weapons tracing – fulfilling one of the commitments governments made in the Programme of Action.

Periodic review of implementation

A review conference is convened every six years to assess progress in the implementation of these two agreements. Between review conferences, the United Nations convenes Biennial Meetings of States (BMS) in which governments consider challenges and opportunities for the implementation of these instruments. Additionally, countries have held Meetings of Governmental Experts (MGE) to benefit from the knowledge of technical specialists on matters pertaining to small arms control.



Small arms and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has created a linkage between peace and security on one hand and development on the other. The full and effective implementation of the PoA and its International Tracing Instrument (ITI) is of importance for attaining Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions and its Target 16.4 which calls for a reduction of the flow of illicit arms. At BMS6 States agreed to make use of existing national reports under the PoA and the ITI to support data collection for relevant SDG indicators and to provide assistance for building sustainable capacity to report on small arms and light weapons that have been seized, found or surrendered, and that have been traced (SDG indicator 16.4.2).

Small arms and the Security Council

The United Nations Security Council has been increasingly concerned with the issue of small arms and light weapons. Every two years the Council holds a thematic meeting on small arms. In 2015, the Security Council adopted its second resolution dedicated to the issue (S/RES/2220).

The role of the Office for Disarmament Affairs

- Organise and support meetings on the two relevant United Nations agreements
- Facilitate exchange of information
- Provide technical advice and assistance to governments, including through the UN Regional Centres
- Develop tools, guidelines and standards to facilitate implementation of commitments
- Promote system-wide coordination among the UN partners working on small arms issues
- Cooperate with regional organizations and relevant international organizations.

Consistent, high-quality advice

The United Nations makes available a set of **international small arms control standards (ISACS)**, which provide practical guidance to practitioners and policymakers on a broad range of small arms control issues. Visit www.smallarmsstandards.org.

Regional cooperation

UNODA staff working at HQ and in the UN Regional Centres for Peace and Disarmament facilitate regional cooperation and assist countries on implementation of UN small arms instruments. In this context, UNODA cooperates with regional organizations to provide a wide range of assistance to States, including through outreach and capacity building, organization of national training courses, and support to national arms destruction events.

Supporting activities

The UN Trust Facility Supporting Cooperation on Arms Regulation (UNSCAR) is a multi-donor trust fund established in response to the need for focused and effective support for conventional arms regulation. Visit www.un.org/disarmament/unscar.

Related multilateral work on small arms

The Firearms Protocol: www.unodc.org
The Arms Trade Treaty: www.thearmstradetreaty.org
INTERPOL: www.interpol.int

For more information, contact conventionalarms-unoda@un.org or visit www.un.org/disarmament.