



**World Health
Organization**

**SECOND BIENNIAL MEETING OF STATES ON THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UN PROGRAMME OF ACTION
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS**

STATEMENT OF THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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PREVENTING ARMED VIOLENCE: ACHIEVING THE CENTRAL OBJECTIVE OF THE PROGRAMME OF ACTION

Mr Chairman, Excellencies and Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Two years ago States gathered here to review the implementation of the Programme of Action. On that occasion, the World Health Organization welcomed the Programme of Action as putting forward a comprehensive framework to address a complex problem. In particular, WHO drew attention to the fact that the Programme of Action clearly framed State's primary concern as a determination to reduce human suffering.

Indeed, the explicit recognition of the health dimension as a part of the Programme of Action is a point we wish to re-emphasize on this occasion, because in our view it is absolutely fundamental. The ultimate objective of our combined efforts should be that fewer lives are lost, fewer hopes are shattered, fewer families are bereft of a loved one, and fewer people live in communities pervaded by fear.

Achieving this cannot come through arms management and disarmament strategies alone. While international agreements on arms transfers, arms embargoes, marking and tracing and general disarmament issues can all contribute, there is a fundamental disconnect between these largely normative developments, the international environments in which they are negotiated, and the streets where armed violence is occurring.

It is difficult to be precise about the magnitude of armed violence. We are limited to working with broad estimates, based on incomplete data that is typically pieced together from a variety of sources. Whatever the precision of such estimates, there is a basic truth about the several hundred thousand people who are thought to lose their lives through firearm-related violence each year: for each and every life lost, a violent perpetrator - overwhelmingly likely to have been a young man - pointed a loaded firearm at another person and pulled the trigger.

One thing we need to recognize is that the full scope of our efforts needs to impact on this final moment. This final meeting point of circumstance where a violent act may be perpetrated by an individual armed with a gun. Part of reducing the likelihood of those set of circumstances are supply side approaches - the focus of the vast majority of efforts undertaken in the context of the Programme of Action to date. Without question, these are part of a long term, comprehensive solution to a complex problem. But they are only *a part* of the solution, and only part of what is called for in the Programme of Action. Two years ago WHO asked those attending this meeting to consider the fact that a decade of weapons buyback programs had removed less than 2 percent of illicitly circulating stocks of small arms from global circulation.

The conclusion is obvious. We have effectively two choices before us. We may continue as we have to date, focusing predominantly on the largely normative and legal frameworks that deal with supply of small arms. Doing so will render irrelevant the technical expertise, interest, and potential contributions of a variety of stakeholders

deeply concerned by the human suffering the Programme of Action is meant to address. Our second choice is that our way forward broadens beyond what has been the case to date to develop a coherent and comprehensive response to the call in the Programme of Action to simultaneously address demand for small arms. Doing so not only leverages the broader set of capacities that are relevant to this issue, it directly answers another call of the Programme of Action; that of complementary approaches and partnerships.

WHO very much hopes that we within the UN system and the Member States will make this second choice, although the advantages I've just described are not even the most compelling. The *key* advantage is that the most direct way to drive down demand for small arms is to reduce armed violence - and this, ladies and gentlemen, responds directly to the overarching goal of the Programme of Action.

Studies have clearly shown that *the* primary driver of demand for firearms is the perception of insecurity within one's community. Studies also show that a variety of approaches can achieve measurable reductions of violence within communities. We know that educational incentives for high risk youth and social development and life skills training are effective. Pre-school enrichment programmes also appear promising. We also know that programmes focusing on strengthening family relationships are effective - these include interventions such as home visitation, parenting programmes and family therapy. Improving school settings and reducing availability of alcohol both appear promising. I could go on, but there are two important points I want you to take away from the brief set of examples I've just given:

1. Firstly, what I have just described should lay to rest any notion that violence is somehow a necessary part of human condition - the evidence shows that social investments and inter-disciplinary programming can and do lead to measurable reductions in violence within communities.
2. Secondly, none of what I have just described is unrealistic. Preventing violence is not akin to addressing the fundamental challenges of humankind.

However, there is an important qualification that I would like to add to what we know about preventing violence. The vast majority of what we have studied and carefully evaluated comes from programmes in high income countries. Knowing what works in lower income settings is a vital, largely unaddressed, political policy question that responds directly to the Programme of Action's call for demand side approaches and action-oriented research. This need is precisely what the World Health Organization and the United Nations Development Programme are striving to respond to in the context of the Armed Violence Prevention Programme. The overall objective of this programme is to promote effective responses to armed violence through support for the development of an international policy framework founded on a clear understanding of the causes, nature and impacts of armed violence, and best practices generated from violence reduction and prevention initiatives to date.

The Armed Violence Prevention Programme has activities at both the global and country levels. Country level activities now underway within Brazil and El Salvador build directly on work already undertaken by WHO and UNDP to comprehensively map

firearm-related violence in Brazil and El Salvador respectively. This previous work will now be supplemented by a series of initiatives designed to survey national and local violence prevention initiatives, evaluate specific promising violence prevention practices, and strengthen national policy and institutional capacities. Taken together, these activities will lead towards multi-sectoral mechanisms within government through which further technical and policy support from the international level may be channelled and provide an important contribution to the evidence base of effective violence prevention practice in low and middle income settings.

At the global level, a process of technical dialogue between key stakeholders and practitioners in the field of armed violence prevention will be undertaken, complemented by research, to discuss and analyse the lessons and practice generated in this area, mainstream the issue within broader development assistance frameworks, and to identify optimal strategies and approaches which could eventually form the basis of a broader international policy framework. An overarching goal of the Armed Violence Prevention Programme is to contribute to more coherent, integrated, and evidence-guided strategies to address the issue of armed violence at international, regional and local levels.

This action-oriented research collaboration between WHO and UNDP within the Armed Violence Prevention Programme is a model example of the partnerships called for within the Programme of Action. The UNDP brings strong programming capacity and obvious capability in community development to this effort, whereas WHO contributes an informed understanding of the factors driving armed violence, a series of violence specific technical tools, and analytical expertise.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 2002 the Director General of the World Health Organization launched the *World report on violence and health* which compiled and reviewed available evidence on the magnitude, impacts, and preventability of violence. Two fundamental conclusions emerged from this groundbreaking report:

1. Firstly, no single factor drives violence – violence arises from an interplay of factors at the level of the individual, their relationships, communities and the society.
2. Secondly, violence can be prevented – a number of approaches have been well documented in terms of preventing violence, and I have described a number of these to you already.

While this latter conclusion is of fundamental importance and grounds for a pragmatic sense of optimism, it must be tempered with one important qualification: the vast majority of successful violence prevention programmes have emerged from evaluations carried out in high income settings. There is a compelling need to extend these evaluations and provide lower income settings with the knowledge base to engage with violence prevention in a more evidence-guided manner.

And make no mistake about it, these lower income settings are very much engaged with trying to prevent violence, and with good reason. High levels of armed violence are

killing their youth, dissuading foreign direct investment, and draining fragile gross domestic products. Earlier I referred to work carried out by the WHO in Brazil which developed a comprehensive profile of firearm-related violence for that country. It may surprise many of you to know that firearm-related deaths were the leading cause of death for the entire country for those aged 15 to 29. Nothing else even came close.

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

Earlier I said we had a choice. We can continue much as we have done and focus on attempting to control and curtail supplies of small arms. Our alternative way forward is to recognize and develop those aspects of the Programme of Action that are currently underdeveloped, notably the call to simultaneously address demand for small arms. If we work together to achieve that through supporting and evaluating efforts to prevent armed violence we can extend the impact of the Programme of Action well beyond the disarmament sphere and directly affect the lives and prospects of millions around the world.

The World Health Organization stands ready to contribute towards achieving this.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.