

Communities tackling small arms and light weapons in South Sudan

Lessons learnt and best practices

Introduction

The proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is one of the most pervasive problems facing South Sudan, and one which it has been struggling to reverse since before independence in July 2011.

Although remoteness and insecurity has meant that extensive research into the exact number of SALW in circulation in South Sudan is not possible, assessments of the prevalence of illicit arms are alarming.

Based on a survey conducted in government controlled areas only, the Small Arms Survey estimated that between 232,000–601,000 illicit arms were in circulation in South Sudan in 2016¹. It is estimated that numbers of SALW are likely to be higher in rebel-held areas.

Estimates also vary from state to state within South Sudan. For instance, community security assessments² - conducted by Saferworld in June 2017 - in Rumbek and Kuajok - concluded that 80 per cent of households owned at least one firearm.

The presence of illicit arms in the country has contributed to a deteriorating security situation in recent years. Widespread acts of armed violence and accidents have resulted in the killing and maiming of civilians, including women and children.

In addition, increased incidents of armed cattle raiding have been a cause of instability throughout South Sudan including Jonglei, Lakes, Warrap, Unity and Upper Nile states. This has been fuelled by the unchecked proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the hands of unauthorised individuals.

For example, our ongoing analysis of gun-related violence and accidents by civilians recorded 107 incidents between July 2017 and April 2018. The incidents involved acts of banditry, accidental explosions and shootings, communal violence, and cattle rustling. These incidents resulted in over 200 deaths and 159 injuries as well as the destruction of property.

Several attempts to disarm civilians have been unsuccessful and have increased insecurity. The lack of a consistent country-wide approach to disarmament has meant that communities who have been disarmed are vulnerable to attack from their neighbours who are not.

Clumsy attempts at forced disarmament have created fear and resentment in communities. In many cases, arms end up recirculating afterwards. This occurs for two reasons: firstly, those carrying out enforced disarmaments are – either deliberately or through negligence – allowing seized weapons to re-enter the illicit market. Secondly, there have been no simultaneous attempts to address the demand for SALW within the civilian population. While conflict and insecurity persists, demand for SALW is likely to remain.

In April 2017, Saferworld, with support from United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), launched a project to identify and improve community-based solutions to the threats posed by the proliferation and misuse of SALW. The one-year pilot project aimed to raise awareness among communities about the dangers of SALW by building the capacity of existing community action groups in Kuajok, Rumbek Central and Rumbek East to educate their communities. These groups met to identify, prioritise and find solutions to problems posed by the widespread availability and access to SALW. Participants developed the ideas generated through participatory action planning meetings into community action plans. The community action plans in the three locations aimed to:

- raise awareness of the dangers posed by SALW proliferation
- tackle the demand for SALW by addressing the root causes of localised conflicts
- build communities' capacity to respond to insecurity stemming from the proliferation and misuse of SALW
- engage local authorities through advocacy meetings to encourage the adoption of measures to improve the security of citizens

¹ National Small Arms Assessment: http://www.ss.undp.org/content/south_sudan/en/home/library/democratic_governance/national-small-arms-assessment-in-south-sudan.html

² A community security assessment seeks to understand local conflict dynamics, including drivers of, and actors in, conflict and insecurity in a particular community. Using key informant interviews and focus group discussions involving a full spectrum of community and government stakeholders, the assessments gather and analyse empirical data concerning inter alia perceptions of security and SALW availability within communities.

Methodology

Saferworld and its partners, Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation and The Organisation for Children's Harmony, organised and facilitated three learning and experience sharing events Rumbek East, Rumbek Central and Kuajok. Ninety people attended (56 men and 34 women).

In structuring the events, Saferworld sought to ensure that each member of the community action groups, as well as participants from civil society organisations, women's and youth groups, and local authorities had the opportunity to share ideas and experiences around the nature and impact of SALW proliferation and misuse in their community.

Through interactive discussions – which included group work and presentations - all participants were able to contribute to the learning and experience-sharing process. By working in smaller groups participants had an equal opportunity to voice their opinions and to contribute to the ideas and suggestions captured within this briefing.

Members of the community action groups had space to evaluate how their planned activities had been implemented. Groups thought through approaches that worked well in particular locations and those that worked less well. They also measured the impact achieved by the pilot project to underline what worked and what did not, and to suggest further ways to deal with threats posed by SALW within their communities.

Best practices in community-based SALW control

Learning from the experiences of community action groups, civil society organisations and local authorities, the pilot project implemented a number of activities and initiatives. Activities included dialogues between communities in conflict, awareness-raising campaigns on the dangers of SALW, and radio talk shows. Participants then identified the more impactful activities worth replicating or expanding to new locations. We discuss these below.

Improving knowledge and influencing attitudes and behaviours

All participants stressed the importance of awareness-raising meetings and campaigns. The most successful campaigns used media such as radio, television, print media and social media platforms, as well as the distribution of information, education and communications materials such as posters, flyers, banners, t-shirts among others.

These campaigns were successful in creating widespread coverage and raised awareness of the dangers of small arms and light weapons, including how households and individuals can stay safe.

Members of the community action groups in all locations acknowledged the positive changes brought about by these awareness-raising campaigns across project locations as illustrated below.

Efforts to enhance knowledge and awareness relating to the dangers of SALW proliferation also involved gathering data on incidences of SALW-related violence and accidents. This data documented deaths, injuries, robberies and sexual and gender-based violence involving the use of SALW.

The data was then analysed on a monthly basis and shared with the project participants so they could use it to advocate with authorities for action. In Rumbek Central County this resulted in prompt action by the local authority in Nyotikangui, which was the epicentre of armed conflicts in which sexual and gender-based violence were prevalent.

On several occasions the county commissioner deployed police personnel in the area upon receiving incident reports which community action group members had shared in advocacy meetings.

The story below narrates how, after attending awareness campaigns and listening to Saferworld awareness-raising radio programmes, community members took action to tackle the problems caused by armed youth.

Rumbek and other parts of Western Lakes state are hugely affected by insecurity caused by violence and banditry facilitated by widespread SALW. This SALW-enabled violence is worsened by the rising cost of living and localised disputes, as well as inadequate law enforcement. The continued conflict between rival communities has led to the militarisation of the civilian population and an increase in demand for, and supply of, SALW.

The impact of SALW on communities in Western Lakes state has included the devastation of lives and livelihoods as frequent cattle-raiding, revenge killings, robberies and looting had become common practice for armed youths. At the start of implementing community action plans in October 2017, 57 incidents involving SALW resulting in the loss of over 100 lives with over 200 injured and several properties looted were recorded by community action groups.

Amer Cinar is a mother of four; she lives in Malith block of Rumbek town. She attended community action group meetings in the area and participated in awareness campaigns, as well as listening to radio programmes designed to promote the safety of communities.

Amer revealed that before the initiative, armed youths would come from cattle camps and keep their guns in her and her neighbours' houses before going to the market to buy alcohol, among other things. She went on to say that these youths would later come back in the evening drunk, take their guns and start harassing people on their way out of the town.

After participating in the community action group meetings, Amer and other women in the area began to reject the storage of arms in their houses saying: **"It is unsafe to keep firearms where our children are playing"**. On 28 December 2017, one woman took her brother-in-law's gun to the police after warning him on several occasions not to keep guns in the house with children.

Athei Pel, another woman living in Malith, believes that the current situation is now better in comparison with the

previous six months thanks to the project's awareness-raising about the dangers of SALW. This was also because of action taken by the local authorities after community action groups in Malith, Acholtheen and Malual-Akan engaged with them.

Athei added that a meeting organised by the community action group with the county commissioner led to the deployment of police in Nyotik-Angui, and frequent visits by the commissioner to the area, which has now improved the situation.

"Awareness-raising campaigns, during which students marched to Freedom Square with posters depicting their disapproval at the proliferation and misuse of SALW in the community, persuaded armed youths to stop loitering with guns in public places" said Athei.

Building local knowledge and capacity of communities and local authorities

As noted earlier, the implementation of this project was community-led. Community action groups took project decisions while Saferworld and partners provided technical guidance. Community action groups received initial training on participatory action planning to help their engagement in the project.

The training equipped participants with the skills and knowledge necessary to solve small-scale security issues and other problems emerging in communities. For example, in Mayen-Gumel, Kuajok the community action group identified that the local school was not fit for purpose and prepared a community action plan proposing its renovation, which they submitted to the UNMISS state office.

UNMISS accepted the proposal and have refurbished the school. Group members relayed this success during the SALW workshop, stressing that the skills they had developed as part of the SALW pilot project are enabling them to deal with many other issues in their communities.

Majak, a member of the same community action group in Miyen-Gumel talked about how his community action group had saved school children in the area from the danger of an unexploded rocket-propelled grenade shell. Children had retrieved the shell from a hole near their school and had begun to play with it.

However, because of the training he had received through the project he recognised the shell as a weapon, and removed it from the children. He then called UNMISS personnel to the area who searched for other unexploded ordnance to safely detonate it away from the area. Majak added that the training they received will help them deal with SALW threats in their communities in the future.

Addressing demand for SALW

The proliferation of SALW is fuelling a range of problems and local disputes in South Sudan. This is exacerbated by a lack of security, difficult economic circumstances and political instability. These complex dynamics mean that dealing with SALW issues will require addressing the underlying factors that compel civilians to acquire arms and weapons.

Accordingly, the project has addressed the demand for SALW in the following two ways:

1. Through emphasising **peace dialogues to address local intra- and inter-communal disputes** which have been the

main sources of armed violence. The peace dialogues bring together community leaders such as chiefs, youth and women leaders as well as civil society organisations and local government authorities. These dialogues have been held in partnership with Gogrial State Peace Commission and other peace partners including UNMISS and World Vision.

2. By organising **advocacy meetings with local authorities to influence decisions, policies and legislation to address SALW problems**. For instance, in Rumbek East, the commissioner acted upon request by the chiefs and community action groups to create gun free zones for public places. This included markets, schools, health clinics and public gatherings. The order, which is still in effect at time of writing, has helped reduce crimes involving firearms including random shootings and armed robbery.

In Kuajok, after a series of meetings conducted by community action groups, partners and local authorities in the state, legislators of Gogrial state initiated a state level legislation to regulate the possession and use of SALW by civilians. It is hoped that a SALW bill will be introduced by the state legislative assembly.

Mitigating dangers posed by SALW in communities

The project explored locally-available means to mitigate the negative impacts of the possession and misuse of SALW by gelweng (armed cattle guards). Saferworld organised training on the risks of untrained civilians possessing automatic firearms.

After the training, gelweng leaders in Mabor-Alueth initiated a practice of collecting all firearms in the cattle camp to keep them in one place - which is guarded by selected youth on a routine basis. This managed to reduce the number of shootouts which were previously quite common in the cattle camp - even over small misunderstandings - and which usually resulted in injuries and killings. Now arms are only distributed to owners when there is an imminent attack by external rivals.

National small arms control initiative

Having documented positive changes made by community action groups in all the three locations as result of community-based initiatives, it must be noted that there remains a gap in meeting the challenge of achieving relative security within communities.

A comprehensive approach to community security targeting all areas and communities in the Republic of South Sudan was one of the recommendations made during our engagement with communities.

Progress in achieving the control of arms at the national level - especially tackling illicit firearms in the hands of civilians - will make it much easier to sustain the significant gains made by the project within communities. Another point worth noting is that most community members we engaged with, including armed youths, do not actually want to have guns.

One armed youth, Laa Mapuor, remarked in our recent workshop **“We are actually tired and weary of carrying guns. Guns have killed my friends who are my age, but we have no choice - our neighbouring rival communities are armed so we have to be armed too”**. It is because of these fears from rival communities and the security vacuum in remote rural areas that the youths are forced to carry arms.

Identifying and addressing sources of illicit weapons

Community security assessments in the three pilot project locations revealed that “guns are available everywhere” with respondents, including government officials, expressing alarm at the proliferation of SALW in the project sites.

As stated earlier, the local authorities in Rumbek East estimate that between 80 and 90 per cent of people in the county possess SALW. The findings also showed that even some underage boys (under 18 years of age) possess SALW; while a handful of respondents said that it is not uncommon for an individual to own two or three guns.

According to local authorities in Rumbek East the primary source of access to SALW in the three project locations is the organised government forces, some of whom sell their guns and ammunition to civilians.

This situation is driven by economic hardship due to the government’s inability to pay soldiers’ salaries over a number of months. In addition, it is believed that some of the weapons currently circulating in the country enter through Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda.

Community action groups recommended that efforts be undertaken to lobby the government at the highest level in order to demand increased security at South Sudan’s porous borders to avoid smuggling of SALW from neighbouring countries. Securing internal state borders would also help to tackle smuggling and black marketeering of SALW.

Participants also recommended that the movement of weapons from state to state or county to county should be restricted to members of government forces, with permission from their respective units, to minimise incidents of leakages and transfers of arms from government soldiers to their relatives or other civilians in villages and cattle camps.

Finally leakages of firearms from organised government forces could be avoided through the proper storage of arms, controlled dispatch and inventory management, including proper registration and tagging/marketing of weapons meant for various units of the organised forces. This would help prevent unscrupulous officers diverting arms and ammunitions for private use or for sale to civilians.

Unless the authorities in Juba can ensure the effective management of SALW and the provision of protection to its citizens across the country, the proliferation of SALW and the vicious cycle of disarmament and rearmament will continue.

Comprehensive nationwide collection and destruction of arms

One of the key messages emerging from this project is that communities across project locations are interested in giving up SALW if safety and security can be achieved. As observed elsewhere, the collection and destruction of illicit weapons

can reduce the number of arms in circulation, thereby reducing access to such arms and making them unaffordable to many.

During the lessons learnt event, community action group members and other participants recommended that a comprehensive, well-coordinated, and nationwide voluntary disarmament programme be embarked upon.

Such a programme would require robust planning, financing, and strategic execution with measures to make the approach more appealing to all communities. This might involve destroying illicit arms at multiple sites across the country in order to raise awareness of the need to tackle SALW proliferation nationwide.

Policy and legal framework

Following the enactment of the Firearms Act 2016 at national level and in conformity with the Penal Code 2008, Western Lakes state introduced equivalent state level legislation.

However, these laws and policies remain largely unknown in the locations covered by the project and this is likely to be the case nationwide. The government cites logistical challenges to dissemination and enforcement throughout the country.

Participants emphasised that despite the logistical and capacity challenges, enforcement and implementation of these laws and policies is vital to contribute to the control of SALW proliferation and to prevent their misuse. Most of the people we worked with as part of the project recommended tougher legislation on civilian ownership and use of SALW.

Conclusion

In summary, the positive impacts achieved by this intervention were a result of awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy meetings, training of community action groups and gelweng, and peace dialogues which helped to address conflict - the main driver of demand for SALW within communities. Government officials, civil society representatives, and community members who participated in the various project activities appreciated the role of project interventions in reducing conflict and contributing to relative peace and stability in communities.

Finally, communities still look to the government to take the lead in finding solutions to the proliferation and misuse of SALW. Communities strongly recommend that the government takes tougher policy, legislative and practical measures to ensure the proper control of arms flows across international borders, from state-to-state within the country, and to ensure proper management of SALW stocks among its organised forces.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace.

Saferworld has been working in South Sudan since 2002. We work on community safety and security, peacebuilding, small arms and light weapons control, and conflict-sensitive development.

Since 2012, we have implemented community security programme with eight civil society partners in 16 locations across eight of the original ten states: Central, Western, and Eastern Equatoria; Northern and Western Bahr el Ghazal; Warrap; Lakes and Jonglei.

Since the outbreak of the renewed conflict in December 2013 and July 2016, Saferworld has included peacebuilding and reconciliation programming in our community safety and security work. Recently, with funds from UNMAS, we implemented a pilot project on small arms and light weapons management and control in three locations, working in collaboration with the South Sudan Bureau of Community Security and Small Arms Control, as well as civil society partners. We are starting a new project to expand our overall work, geographically, in the two remaining former ten states (Unity and Upper Nile) and thematically, to address increasing intra- and inter-community conflict and gender-based violence.

Our community security work in South Sudan is generously funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UK Aid Direct.



Armed youth who attended Saferworld's small arms and light weapons training in Rumbek East

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives.

1st Floor, Wing B, UAP Equatoria Tower, Juba, South Sudan Registered Charity no 1043843 Company limited by guarantee no 3015948

Tel: +211922500734 Email: sscountryoffice@saferworld.org.uk Web: www.saferworld.org.uk

For more information, please contact: Mauro Tadiwe - mtadiwe@saferworld.org.uk or Peter Machar Maluk Deng - pmachar@saferworld.org.uk