



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement on the Role of Parliamentarians for the Achievement of the 2030 Agenda, Goal 16.4 in a Changing World affected by COVID-19¹

Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting on the 17th of December, 2020;

The world of today is marked by insecurity in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic affecting societies across the globe. In addition to the impact on human lives and health, socioeconomic development has slowed down dramatically, jeopardising progress achieved until date of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda.² Moreover, the number of armed conflicts has reached a record high in the last decade³, further contributing to the challenge of advancing towards the SDGs.

The uncontrolled proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) poses a serious threat to peace and sustainable development, as well as states' ability to effectively tackle major health, social and economic crises. In 2018, 223 300 people were killed in the world from armed violence committed with SALW, and many more were injured⁴. Over one billion SALW are circulating worldwide of which approximately 85% are in civilian hands.⁵ In addition to lives lost, SALW-related violence facilitates violations of human rights, gender-based violence (GBV) and impedes economic investment, having a negative impact on public health systems and productivity levels by draining public resources away from education and socio-economic development.⁶ Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a surge of domestic violence cases has been reported worldwide.⁷ This is indeed

¹ The Policy Statement has been elaborated based on discussions and conclusions from the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons (the Forum) webinar on October 29, 2020 "Realising the 2030 Agenda in a changing world affected by COVID-19: Parliamentary action on armed violence prevention to build back better for more peaceful and sustainably developed societies". Furthermore, it is based on the Forum's Policy Statement on Parliamentary Strengthening for Democratic, Peaceful and Sustainably Developed Societies, adopted by the Board in 2019. It was adopted by the Forum's Board on December 17, 2020.

² United Nations, Department for Economic and Social Affairs. 2020. Sustainable Development Outlook 2020: Achieving the SDGs in the wake of COVID-19: Scenarios for policymakers. Last accessed 2020-11-26 https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/SDO2020_Book.pdf

³ Global Peace Index 2018, 2019, 2020. The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) & The Global State of Democracy. Exploring Democracy's Resilience, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

⁴ Small Arms Survey. 2020. Global violent deaths in 2018. Last accessed 2020-11-25 <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/W-Infographics/SAS-GVD-March-2020-update.pdf>

⁵ Small Arms Survey. Small Arms Survey reveals: More than one billion firearms in the world. Last accessed 2020-11-26 <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/about-us/highlights/2018/highlight-bp-firearms-holdings.html>

⁶ United Nations Secretary General's report. 2016. The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects. Last accessed 2020.11.30 <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/english.pdf>

⁷ United Nations. 2020. UN chief calls for domestic violence 'ceasefire' amid 'horrifying global surge'. Last accessed 2020.12.08 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

a serious tendency where the presence of firearms further exacerbates the situation especially exposing women's rights and safety. For example, in 37.4% of reported domestic violence incidents involving a firearm in South East Europe, the outcome was lethal.⁸

The urgency of the situation calls for concise and effective steps at the national, regional and international levels on behalf of parliamentarians through their legislative, oversight and awareness raising functions as to create peaceful and resilient communities. The Theory of Change of the Forum is to contribute to the achievement of more peaceful and sustainably developed societies by enhancing parliamentary action in the implementation and universalisation of international frameworks relevant to the prevention and reduction of SALW- related violence through capacity building, policy shaping and awareness raising. In line with the Theory of Change, as an international organisation of parliamentarians, the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons (hereinafter: the Forum) is convinced that preventing armed violence to safeguard peace and sustainable development is fundamental to regain momentum in efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda and to build back better following COVID-19.

In the face of the current global crisis, the capacity of states to uphold and efficiently exercise the arms control regime is at risk when resources are reallocated to health, social and economic responses.⁹ However, investing in the prevention of uncontrolled flows of SALW and peacebuilding is key in order to ensure sustainable recovery and development in the wake of COVID-19.¹⁰ In fragile states already affected by poverty and social and political instability, the pandemic threatens to reinforce economic hardship and conflict, in turn increasing the risk of civil unrest and violence.¹¹ As highlighted by the United Nations' (UN) Secretary General (SG) in his Global Appeal for Ceasefire in March 2020 and reiterated on the 75th Anniversary of the UN in October the same year, the need is palpable to silence the guns in the midst of the pandemic to allow life-saving aid to reach those most vulnerable and counter the crisis together.¹²

With the 2030 Agenda, the importance of reducing illicit flows of arms for the achievement of sustainable peace and development has been recognised in a universal framework, adopted by UN member states committing to the fulfilment of the SDGs. Parliamentarians have an important role in relation to building back better after the pandemic as well as working towards the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda and specifically SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions and its target 4 (SDG 16.4) "By 2030, significantly reduce illicit arms flows (...)" through their legislative, oversight and awareness raising functions.

⁸ UNDP 2020. The hidden pandemic: Firearms and intimate partner violence killing women. Last accessed 2020-12-08 <https://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/blog/2020/hidden-pandemic-firearms-killing-women.html>

⁹ Saferworld et al. 2020. Conflict sensitivity in responses to COVID-19 Initial guidance and reflections. Last accessed 2020.12.08 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/conflict-sensitivity-in-covid-19-responses---may-2020.pdf>

¹⁰ United Nations press release. 2020. Integrated Approach to Peacebuilding, Development Urgently Needed as Climate Change, COVID-19 Pandemic Aggravate Cross-Border Conflict, Speakers Warn Security Council. Last accessed 2020.11.25 <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14345.doc.htm>

¹¹ United Nations. 2020. Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19. Last accessed 2020-11-26 <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2020/March/covid-19-global-humanitarian-response-plan.html>

¹² United Nations. 2020. The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war. Last accessed 2020-11-30 <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/fury-virus-illustrates-folly-war>

The whole set of SDGs of the 2030 Agenda are mutually reinforcing and indivisible, and their implementation is therefore mutually dependent. The problem of SALW- related violence is linked comprehensively to all SDGs, including SDG 3 with armed violence as a public health impediment, and SDG 4 and 6 with armed violence impeding access to education, clean water and sanitation as well as SDG 5 on Gender Equality. As armed violence has a negative impact on a wide range of development aspects, SDG 16 is not only a crucial goal in itself, but the reduction and prevention of armed violence is a necessity if the comprehensive 2030 Agenda is to be realised by year 2030.

By strengthening the role of parliamentarians, who through their key functions are central in preventing and reducing the uncontrolled proliferation of SALW, important steps towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda can be reinforced. With just 10 years left to realise the SDGs, the Decade of Action calls for accelerating efforts for sustainable peace and development. Although positive initiatives are taking place globally, more is needed in order to fulfil the SDGs, in particular as COVID-19 is expected to continue to impact on societies mid- and long-term.¹³ Parliamentarians are vital both in safeguarding the progress already realised, as well as taking appropriate steps looking forward for the achievement of more resilient, peaceful and sustainably developed societies.

As pointed out in reports from the UN SG on SALW, the issue of armed violence cannot be addressed with arms control measures alone, but must form part of a wider spectrum of policy solutions in which security, human rights, health and development intersect.¹⁴ Parliamentarians have the ability to take the necessary measures towards prevention and reduction of SALW- related violence, including contributing to controlling civilian acquisition and possession and addressing the demand for SALW at national, regional and international levels. Moreover, parliamentarians contribute to responsible arms transfers, either in cases where countries have legislative councils advising on arms transfers, or by public awareness raising and exerting pressure on governments to adhere to and implement international instruments.

The parliamentary role also relates to translating international policies to the national level, ensuring national ownership and promoting more efficient implementation. Parliamentarians are vital in identifying synergy effects between the 2030 Agenda and other relevant international instruments for SALW control, including in the universalisation and implementation of Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and the implementation of the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (UN PoA), the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and UNSCR on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS).

In the midst of a global crisis, parliamentarians must ensure that peacebuilding, and the prevention of SALW-related violence as an integrated part, is placed at the centre of strategies for societal recovery. As emphasised in the UN Resolution on the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, “sustainable development cannot be realised without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development”.¹⁵ The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) specifically highlights the importance of parliamentarians protecting democratic processes and imposing checks and balances on government emergency powers when exercising their legislative and oversight functions, so that

¹³ United Nations. 2020. Decade of Action: Ten Years to Transform Our World: Last accessed 2020-11-25 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/>

¹⁴ United Nations Security Council. 2015. Small arms and Light Weapons: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2015/289. Last accessed 2020-11-27 http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/289

¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/70/1, p. 9

measures taken comply with international human rights standards, and are legal, necessary, proportionate and respect the principle of equality.¹⁶

As highlighted in SDG 16, strong institutions are crucial for sustainable development. This has been reconfirmed during the current global pandemic, where political will and strong and resilient institutions are key in order to adequately address societal, economic and health crises. However, parliamentarians are often neglected in development initiatives, which means the potential of parliamentary action in contributing to armed violence prevention and reduction is lost. Low parliamentary capacity and weak institutions in developing countries may in turn lead to distrust in democratic systems and pave the way for authoritarian rule. This is particularly worrying as policymakers and scholars have stated tendencies of a decline in democracy globally¹⁷. Hence, strengthening the role of parliamentarians is vital in order to safeguard democracy, peace and sustainable development.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed additional pressure on already vulnerable institutions across the world. Responses to the crisis that are viewed as inadequate, biased or disproportionate by the public have contributed to increasing distrust in institutions and heightening tensions. Hence, recovery from the pandemic must prioritise rebuilding resilient, inclusive and accountable institutions that foster the rule of law and good governance and re-establishes trust in democracy.¹⁸ In these circumstances, investing in parliamentary institutions and organisations is imperative. The Forum's work to build the capacity of its member parliamentarians is not only relevant to prevent SALW-related violence for more peaceful and sustainably developed societies, it also contributes to increased ownership, political accountability and consolidation of the parliamentary role as a whole, ultimately strengthening democratic and resilient institutions and the overall capacity to tackle societal crises.

Objectives

The Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting on the 17 December, 2020;

Acknowledges the severe effects on societies globally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including on human lives and health as well as social and economic development, disproportionately affecting vulnerable people;

Expresses solidarity with all people affected by the global crisis, and *extends its condolences* to families and friends of the victims of COVID-19;

Endorses the UN's Secretary General's Global Appeal for Ceasefire made in March and October 2020 on the need to silence the guns in the midst of the pandemic;

Recognises the uncontrolled flow of SALW as an obstacle to the achievement of more peaceful, resilient and sustainably developed societies;

¹⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). 2020. Human Rights and COVID-19: A guidance note for parliaments. Last accessed 2020.11.27 <https://www.ipu.org/human-rights-and-covid-19-guidance-note-parliaments>

¹⁷ Global Peace Index 2018, The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), page 34

¹⁸ ACCORD. 2020. Peacebuilding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Last accessed 2020.11.25 <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/peacebuilding-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Welcomes and supports the SDG 16 of the 2030 Agenda, to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, and *calls for* immediate implementation of initiatives to fulfil the Goal and reach its targets, specifically target 4 to “By 2030, significantly reduce illicit arms flows (...)”;

Calls on parliamentarians to reinforce concise and effective measures at national, regional and international levels through their legislative, oversight and awareness raising roles for the achievement of SDG 16.4 to build back better following the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring that the interrelations between armed violence and sustainable development are adequately addressed within the legislative, oversight and awareness raising work of parliaments;

Recognises that women and men are affected differently by the pandemic, and *underlines* the importance of including gender considerations in strategies for recovery as to reduce existing inequalities;

Reiterates the importance of promoting universalisation and implementation of the ATT as well as advancing the implementation of the commitments under the UN PoA and identifying implementation synergies with UNSCR 1325 and UNSCR 2250;

Encourages the donor community to invest in parliamentary organisations as an effective way to strengthen democratic institutions at the national, regional and international levels, ultimately safeguarding democracy for more resilient, peaceful and sustainably developed societies;

Mandates the Forum, its Members, and the Secretariat to undertake all necessary efforts towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, SDG 16, and in particular target 16.4.