

Talking about Disarmament:

THE ROLE OF SMALL ARMS IN PEACE PROCESSES



Liberian factional fighters wait to hand in their weapons at a disarmament centre.

Weapons are part of all armed conflict. As such, they are a major concern in any transition to peace. This chapter examines how concerns related to small arms can influence peace negotiations and other attempts to achieve political agreements. It focuses on how these concerns have been addressed after agreement has been reached. In particular, it examines the implementation of disarmament during the many multi-dimensional peace operations undertaken, mostly by the United Nations, since the end of the Cold War.

This issue warrants attention because since the late 1980s peace missions have included a greatly expanded number and range of tasks, most of them in the context of civil war settlements, with a key consideration being how to disarm combatants. In most conflicts during this same period, small arms have been the most commonly used weapons and thus the major focus for disarmament efforts.

Issues related to weapons and disarmament are generally among the most political and contentious between belligerent parties, and the way in which they are addressed is of key importance to the resolution of conflicts.

The key findings of this chapter are:

- Weapons are commonly used as bargaining chips during peace negotiations, and parties often have a vested interest in providing inaccurate information about the numbers and types of weapons they hold in order to strengthen their bargaining positions. It is therefore vital to develop systematic and reliable means of monitoring arms possession and verifying claims.
- Disarmament and weapons control are increasingly included in the mandates of peace operations, but mandate objectives are often too vague and resources too sparse to implement them effectively. The responsible organization's decision-making procedures and ability to generate support will affect the scope of this problem.

- Political will and commitment from the parties are necessary, though on their own not sufficient, conditions for disarmament to succeed.
- Prospects of success must be realistically assessed before and during any disarmament operation, especially concerning possible motivations for parties' non-compliance, as well as considerations of deception.
- Disarmament should not be limited to active combatants, but should include other armed groups that have participated in the conflict, and in some cases also civilians.
- The design of disarmament and related interventions aimed at establishing and building lasting peace must accommodate the characteristics of the local environment. In particular, they must address the interests of all parties to the conflict, the reasons why ex-combatants and/or other civilians hold and use weapons in that environment, and their willingness and interest in preferring a peaceful resolution to a violent one.

Although successful disarmament is commonly viewed today as a key element in transitions from war to peace, it cannot be dealt with in isolation from the broader peace-building process. Disarmament must be integrated into other common elements of this process, including demobilization and reintegration, transitional justice, security sector reform, and weapons management. Not only are these other efforts important for achieving peace, they are also directly relevant to the success of weapons reduction and control measures. Collecting and destroying weapons, for example, will not reduce arms availability in the long-term unless accompanied by measures aimed at reducing people's desire for weapons, as well as their ability to acquire them through controls on supply.



Police double-check that weapons collected in the Philippines have been completely destroyed.

© Associated Press/Bullit Marquez

Understanding why people hold and use weapons is vital for disarmament to succeed in the long-term.

Because disarmament and these other important elements are mutually interdependent rather than a sequence of discrete events, they should be viewed as necessary elements of any comprehensive, and integrated peace-building strategy.

Efforts to remove small arms are of limited value as long as the political conditions needed for a resolution of the conflict are not in place. In the context of armed conflict, political factors are the primary determinant of success for weapons control and collection. As long as incentives remain for some parties to continue a conflict, and the political will to end it is limited, disarmament is unlikely to succeed no matter how well planned or implemented it may be.