Sustainable Disarmament for Sustainable Development

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"Sustainable Disarmament for Sustainable Development"

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Attached to the Prime Minister of Belgium,
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1. Introduction: The background of War and Poverty

Conflicts have impoverished countries in every major region, in many cases wiping out the achievements of decades of economic and social development. The destruction of physical assets, disruption of trade links, and loss of human capital is devastating, but only part of the problem. Violent conflict also leaves a legacy of militarised divided societies, widespread displacement, and decimated institutional capacity.

A 1996 World Bank report explains the connection between War and Poverty. The impact of conflicts is particularly severe on women and children, who constitute approximately eighty percent of the displaced in Africa. Since 1990 these conflicts have, on average, claimed the lives of at least 170,000 people each year. We could speak of a new "democratic distribution" of the consequences of war. A recent study in Rwanda reported that the genocide left 114,000 children separated from their parents; and in Liberia, a quarter of the combatants of the various factions were children.

In her interesting study about "Girls and warzones", Carolyn Nordstrom spotlights the situation of girl-victims and girl-soldiers in wartime is often hidden for the international community. In her introduction she states the following:

"This study asks not only what girls in war and peace face, but why it is so difficult to gather information about girls at all. Limited studies and statistics are available, blunted by walls of silence over the state of the world's girls today. This silence hides a world of human rights abuses."

The absence of social provisions worsens the conditions of poor people, and contributes to frustration and sudden explosion of violence. It is clear that many conflicts in the post-cold-war period find their origin in social exclusion.

2. Belgian efforts for conflict management and peace-building

Belgian Development Co-operation has introduced new mechanisms for strengthening the capacity for conflict prevention, conflict mediation and peace building. New efforts to reduce poverty and inequalities in development are closely linked to the quest for peace and stability.

Priority is given to initiatives that promote reconciliation and confidence-building, micro-disarmament initiatives, mine clearing, capacity-building and support for human rights.
There's a need for a silent and flexible field diplomacy with the philosophy not to legitimise automatically irregular armed forces but to avoid putting them in an isolation that would only reinforce their position. The Development Co-operation wants to support these delicate actions for dialogue, bringing together people from conflict areas and people having fled in the Diaspora for discussing an agenda they have approved together. Therefore, early warning systems should be set up in order to detect growing tension at an early stage.

Reflecting on conflict prevention and peace consolidation we must not lose sight of the impact of arms trade, especially of the traffic of light weapons. Special attention must be devoted to the issue of securing surplus weapons - particularly small arms - after the end of conflict.

3. Sustainable disarmament for sustainable development

As the UN-panel of experts, the OECD and the World bank are stating, disarmament is essential for an adequate conflict management strategy. Although light weapons may not necessarily start conflicts in themselves, they can exacerbate pre-existing tensions, and will increase the intensity and the duration of conflict. In several cases arms are recycled; for example guns used in the war in Angola are now flowing into South Africa. Ironically, many of these weapons originated from South Africa, where there are now record levels of violence. They can also undermine post-conflict reconstruction and hinder development efforts. Communities are losing faith in the capacity of the police to provide security, which further inflates the demand for weapons, and is fuelling the growth of paramilitary privatised security forces. Moreover, high levels of military expenditure divert spending from essential social services, increasing the risks described above.

The industrialised countries must realise that they have a certain responsibility because of their virtually unlimited transfer of light weapons. In addition to considerations on the supply side we must also assist the countries in their efforts towards sustainable peace and development. The proliferation of arms often occurs in those societies who are poorest and least able to cope with the consequences. With the vast quantities of weapons already in circulation in conflict-prone regions, any solution will not lie with supply side controls alone. Although it is undoubtedly important to prevent a further influx of weapons, it is also necessary to look at policies and strategies to reduce the numbers of demand.

Hence tackling the illicit traffic in arms, especially in small arms, must be a priority for the International development co-operation.

I would like to give a short overview of the existing initiatives in Europe and Belgium.

4. Belgian and European initiatives

On the level of the supply side, the British presidency is preparing a proposition for an EU-Code of Conduct to restrict the EU-arms exports to conflict-prone regions and to foster more transparency.

Together with the Dutch Presidency at the European Council for development cooperation, Secretary of State Réginald Moreels made in the beginning of 1997 a plea for a EU-initiative against illicit arms transfers. In June 1997 the Council of General Affairs approved the "EU Programme for preventing and combating illicit trafficking in conventional arms".

In this programme the EU member countries vowed to strengthen their collective efforts to prevent and combat illicit trade of arms, especially small arms, within the EU. Further they could help to reduce demand and could assist "recipient" countries
and regions in conflict in their efforts to reduce the availability and flow of light weapons. In particular they recommended focusing on capacity-building by strengthening laws, training police and customs officials and setting up regional points of contact to report trafficking.

Belgium is making a plea for a coherent implementation of the EU-Programme. Important European fora, such as the debate on the Future of EU-ACP Relations, should examine increased efforts for conflict prevention and concrete actions against proliferation of small and light weapons.

Moreover more attention should be paid to programmes related to diminishing the proliferation of all kinds of weapons in developing countries, mine-clearing programmes, destruction of arms, food and money for weapons, gun buy-back schemes, reconversion of arms industry. To improve the military and security environment, training towards respect for democracy and good government for the military forces should be provided.

Early warning systems should be set up in order to detect the proliferation of small and light weapons at an early stage. UN-monitoring must be reinforced to strengthen the check-points where arms transfers take place. Important check-points are for example the harbours and the supply roads in conflict areas. In this context the existing informal networks of ngo-fieldworkers should be encouraged to raise the alarm if they witness arms accumulations and illicit arms transfers. A 'monitoring culture' should thus be established, be it by way of the UN, by our field-workers or by our Embassies in the countries concerned, so that we can be alerted in advance of calamities in the making. Supporting regional bodies, research institutions and local ngo's, development co-operation can assist low-income countries in their monitoring capacity.

Incentives to stop excessive military expenditure, which diverts scarce resources from vital social services, should be supported. Moreover a regional approach of transparency on military spending encourages confidence between conflicting states or regions.

The recent BICC Conference in Bonn concluded that reconversion and demobilisation programmes within a broader long-term peacebuilding project deserve special attention. Existing demobilisation programmes should thus be accompanied by education, employment programmes and psycho-social support to the victims.

Concerted aid for former female combatants and child soldiers must be put as a priority. Armies try to cover up the presence of child combatants in their ranks. As a result, peace agreements have no provisions for this category of former soldiers. Development assistance can help reunite them with their families and support completion of their primary education.

The different youth organisations in Europe are raising the alarm. At the recent conference in Belfast, youth leaders representing 28 countries vowed their concern about the situation of Youth and children in conflict zones. The European Youth Forum is planning to have a campaign in 1998 to claim the abuse of children and especially child-soldiers.

The Belgian development co-operation is prepared to collaborate to implement an effective European Programme for preventing and combating illicit trafficking in conventional arms. Multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental development agencies provide support and built up experience on the field of demobilisation, micro-disarmament and peace-building.

Clearly, in assisting low income countries with demobilisation and reintegration, it is
imperative that we learn from best practises. I would like to give you some examples.

Since 1995 Belgium has supported a democratisation programme for the South African Police forces. This project supports the collaboration between the Belgian and the South African Police forces in the field of training and information exchange. With this initiative we want to support South Africa in their transition towards demilitarisation, security development and combating crime.

In September 1997 different international organisations such as UNICEF, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have denounced the inhumane practises of the heavy-armed rebellion group “Lord Resistance Army” in Uganda. The LRA has over the past two years kidnapped more than 10,000 Ugandese children in order to make them fight against the Ugandese army. Already 5,000 children have been able to escape the LRA base. The Belgian Development Department immediately decided to support UNICEF, developing their efforts for reintegration and psychological assistance of the traumatised children.

The development co-operation promotes awareness raising in Belgium, by supporting the Flemish Peace week, information campaigns, different seminars, etc. Close contacts exist between the Belgian ngos and partner organisations in South Africa, such as "Gun free South Africa", who work at the level of the population on awareness raising to explain the effects of the possession of small and light weapons.

5. The need for a global campaign on light weapons

Belgium is gathering research experience from different non-governmental organisations and academic circles especially relating to mercenaries in Africa and the consequences of the proliferation of small arms.

Various peace movements and humanitarian organisations held in September a Flemish campaign week on the proliferation of small arms and development. This very successful manifestation was supported by the Secretary of State, various groups of the parliament, different academic circles and more than 70 non-governmental organisations.

In light of this, the Belgian Secretary of State truly believes that there's a need for a global campaign on the issue of the proliferation of small arms.

In academic circles several voices are making a plea for a new "Ottawa-process" for small arms and light weapons. The different actors involved should co-operate in order to draft a charter including supply-side and demand-side measures. The international code of conduct of Dr. Arias could be part of this Charter. Dr. Owen Greene of the University of Bradford is warning for a lack of image of a possible campaign on small and light weapons. Compared to the anti-personnel landmines, the small and light weapons issue is more complex. Hence, I would like to invite this conference to propose an image, a "humanitarian flag" for a possible global campaign in order to draw the attention to the consequences of small and light weapons.

As a consequence of the Flemish campaign on small and light weapons, the Secretary of State is planning to organise in September next year an International Conference on "Sustainable disarmament for sustainable development" that aims to examine the role of international development assistance in tackling problems caused by light weapons issues. Réginald Moreels is very ambitious on this conference. Three research groups are currently preparing the content and the OECD and different working groups of the European Parliament are involved. Moreover he's inviting important prominent speakers such as Dr. Arias and his committee for Nobel Price Winners as well as representatives of low-income countries.
In the light of this Conference next year, the Secretary of State is very keen to pick up the recommendations of this interesting Washington conference and is prepared - by consequence- to support a possible global campaign on light weapons.

6. Conclusion

When a country spirals into violence, any gains in development can be severely damaged or destroyed. Therefore, the capacity to manage conflict before it erupts into violence, during the violent phase, and in post-conflict situations becomes a vital part of the development calculus.

Reflecting on conflict prevention and peace consolidation we must not lose sight of the impact of arms trade and light weapons in particular. Special attention must be devoted to the issue of securing surplus weapons - particularly small arms-after the end of conflict.

Development assistance has a role to play both in the prevention of conflicts, in promoting security by developing capacity on the ground, and by promoting efforts to disarm and reintegrate former combatants. International donor organisations have long maintained a clear separation between development and security assistance. The case of the proliferation of small and light weapons convinces us that the donor community should pursue a “security first” approach to aid.

In September ’97, Belgian government, ngo's, humanitarian organisations and parliament shared the concern about the consequences of the proliferation of small arms to conflict-prone regions. In light of this, the different governmental and non-governmental actors should be encouraged to start a global campaign on the issue of the proliferation of small arms including measures on the demand and the supply side. Too little people are aware of the consequences of surplus weapons towards peace and the most affected of the society such as child-victims, child-soldiers and women.

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