

INTRODUCTION

The international trade in weapons has always been a source of controversy and concern. Although arms are bought and sold more or less openly by many states, there is always an admission, even by those who approve of such exchanges, that arms cannot be traded as freely as other commodities such as bananas or televisions. Weapons can kill, and their potential destructiveness sharpens the political, economic, and social concerns about their trade.

In 1985, an estimated \$28,850 million dollars (US) worth of weapons changed hands, with more than 35 states acting as sellers and 115 states as buyers.¹ This represented a three-fold increase in volume (in real terms) since 1963. In addition to this expansion in volume, the focus of the arms trade has also shifted in the last 25 years. In the 1963-67 period, roughly 58 percent of the weapons transferred went to the developing world; by 1978-82, the proportion had risen to more than 80 percent.

This growth, and the negative implications for the developing countries of high levels of spending on armaments, has sharpened the debate in recent years. On the one hand, there is the argument that high levels of spending on arms, and on military establishments in general, consumes scarce resources that could be more productively used in other sectors. Such spending, it is also argued, contributes to excessive militarization of society in the less-developed parts of the world. This side in the debate is often cast in terms of the link between disarmament and development, the first being a pre-condition for the second.

On the other side, there is the argument that many, if not most, states that purchase modern weapons have legitimate "security" needs that must be met. There are external threats to deter or defend against, in some cases threats even to national survival. The international trade in arms is seen simply as part of the warp and woof of international politics in an imperfect world, an endemic feature unlikely to change or diminish unless the nature of international politics itself changes.

In either case, without a better understanding of what drives both the suppliers and the recipients in the international arms transfer system,

¹Data on arms transfers is notoriously unreliable. All statistics here are taken from the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1986*. The term "transfers" is used more generally than "trade" or "sales", because it encompasses those transactions that may be made as grants, or as part of other arrangements.