

Roundtable on a Canadian Initiative to deal with Small Arms

Canadian government departments, NGOs and international experts met on November 18, 1997 to discuss small arms questions and problems. In summary, participants felt that current proposals for dealing with the control of small arms are ineffective or very limited in scope. To overcome these limitations and offer a more comprehensive response, it was felt that a Canadian initiative could be comprised of the following key elements: "coordination" of the diverse initiatives already undertaken; coalition-building among states, civil societies, NGOs, IGOs; norm-building through the stigmatisation of small arms; and a development component.

Reaction to Policy Options in Circulation

Some participants in the roundtable expressed their concerns about various policy options being considered to one degree or another by Canadian and other initiatives. There was strong concern with a treaty as the end-goal of a new initiative since signatories are automatically limited to states - non-state actors, who play a prominent role in the small arms issue and any possible initiatives, are excluded.

It was also felt that codes of conduct would be problematic and likely ineffective given that again, they rely on the capacity of states to ensure compliance with the codes. Many of the states experiencing the negative consequences of small arms lack the capacity to implement the codes.

There was also some opposition to a small arms policy that focuses on supply and demand. First, the distinction is not that simple and the issue of small arms is much more cross-cutting than is otherwise suggested. Second, framing the issue as supply and demand can be misleading as these terms are prominent in the arms control and disarmament literature which also emphasise the state as the primary actor. As a result, the non-state actor's role in the small arms problem and solution is neglected once again. Furthermore, the small arms issue is automatically considered as an arms control matter which in itself is limiting. Third, the issue of small arms itself was argued to be inadequately understood through the supply and demand framework, missing entirely as it does the key element of transfers. Finally, proposals targeting only the supply-side of the issue were felt to be discriminatory, especially by those who argue the problem is equally, if not more, driven by demand. Likewise, there was also opposition to initiatives that distinguish between licit and illicit trafficking. Some participants felt that such a distinction restricts the scope of any potential initiative.

Participants at the roundtable were divided on the question of embargoes and sanctions as policy options for dealing with the issue of small arms. They felt that these options would ultimately be ineffective as they are imposed by and affect only states. As a result, non-state actors, both domestic and transnational, would not be directly affected by embargoes and sanctions.

Similarly, some participants felt that buy-backs and amnesties would be ineffective as only the least desired weapons are turned in. Such programs are especially ineffective in areas where police are themselves corrupt or lack the capacity to carry out these policies.