

SPECIAL COMMENT

In 2006, the West Africa Action Network on Small Arms estimated that 8 million small arms and light weapons were transiting through the sub-region. The same year, the Heads of States of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) adopted a convention to regulate the production, circulation and civilian possession of small arms and light weapons as a collective measure against the phenomenon that drives much of the insecurity in West Africa.

Undoubtedly, the findings of the ongoing ECOWAS assessments will provide up-to-date information on the current situation in the sub-region and will allow us to grasp the real impact of small arms proliferation on security in West Africa. In particular, we already know that the availability of small arms accounts for a considerable number of deaths and injuries in the civilian population, allowing interpersonal and inter-communal tensions to escalate into skirmishes and eventually full-fledged conflict. Their circulation takes advantage of the porosity of borders, making disarmament efforts particularly challenging. These borders also facilitate and reinforce the presence and activities of illegal transborder networks such as drug smuggling and human trafficking. The existence of armed groups operating outside of state control undermines state governance, challenges the rule of law and jeopardizes security as a global concept. By this I refer to human security, an approach that encompasses food, economic, social, sanitary and environmental security needs at the individual and the community levels.

Furthermore, widespread insecurity hampers the provision of social services such as in the fields of health and education, and access to food and water. Insecurity impedes long-term socio-economic development by forcing people to move, leaving their harvests and businesses unattended. It also diverts public spending away from key sectors of development such as health, agriculture, engineering and education.

It should not be forgotten that, as in other regions, insecurity in West Africa invariably affects the most vulnerable portions of the population such as women, youth and ethnic minorities. In situations where the rule of law is disrupted, a high degree of sexual and gender-based violence is generated. Clearly, there is need to adopt a gender lens in discussions on peace and security in the region and for greater support for women's efforts towards conflict prevention, resolution and relief.

The growing awareness of the interconnectedness of the threats to security and of the need for a holistic approach to building security has led to the adoption of key instruments at the sub-regional level in the fields of prevention of conflict, human trafficking and drug trafficking. In particular, thanks to the tireless work of the ECOWAS Commission, the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light

Weapons could enter into force in 2009. The Convention will be a crucial step towards effective small arms control within the sub-region and solid progress towards the achievement of long-term security and human development.

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