Changing Attitudes:
Weapons Collection and Destruction

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Public destruction of weapons, Rio de Janeiro.

Weapons collection and destruction programmes have been implemented in a variety of settings worldwide. While their features may vary, their core elements are essentially the same. Past attempts at weapons collection have enjoyed mixed success. The number and conditions of weapons collected have often been unsatisfactory, collected weapons have in some cases not been destroyed and later re-entered circulation, and some programmes, particularly those that offer cash as compensation, have increased demand and led to an influx of weapons to an area. Despite disagreement about their effectiveness, these programmes continue to receive widespread support from policy-makers, operational agencies, donors, and the public. The number of programmes is expanding, a trend that is likely to continue since weapons collection and destruction was one of the few concrete measures that received widespread support during the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference.

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When formal disarmament ends, the tools of war often remain in society.

A review of recent weapons collection programmes shows that they are usually intended to support either crime prevention or peace-building efforts. There is a particularly strong tradition in the Americas of using weapons collection as part of a broader crime prevention strategy. The presence of small arms in post-conflict settings can undermine fragile peace agreements, obstruct peace-building and reconstruction, and increase the likelihood of a return to violence. Thus the disarmament of rebel groups, paramilitaries, other irregular armed forces, and even civilians is a decisive factor in sustaining peace settlements. However, when peace operations and formal disarmament processes end, excessive quantities of weapons often remain in the hands of ex-combatants or other civilians. Hence, voluntary weapons collection programmes have been used to reduce the number of weapons in circulation in post-conflict situations in countries like Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Mozambique.

Weapons collection is unlikely to have a durable impact unless it is part of a broader strategy to address the underlying causes of conflict. A growing awareness of the mutually reinforcing relationship between security and development has led to the realization that both are necessary for conflict prevention and post-conflict peace-building. The first comprehensive attempt to link disarmament and development strategies through weapons collection, an approach that became known as 'weapons

for development', was undertaken in the province of Gramsh in Albania in 1999. Presently, the UNDP and other organizations are developing and carrying out projects within this framework in various regions and countries such as Albania, El Salvador, the Solomon Islands and parts of Africa.

Previous weapons collection efforts are currently being analyzed to identify best practices and avoid problems encountered in the past. The emerging concept of weapons for development illustrates how weapons collection programmes are broadening their objectives, integrating new methods and approaches, and lengthening their time-lines. Increasingly, they form part of comprehensive, longer-term strategies, which, by promoting development and human security, address the root causes of violence and thus the demand for weapons. This is reflected in the changing role of compensation, where there is a trend away from individual rewards towards collective incentive schemes. Another component that is increasingly incorporated into such programmes is public education, which by raising awareness and changing public attitudes towards the role of weapons in society may help to make weapons collection programmes more effective. In fact, the number of weapons collected may often be less important than other objectives, such as building confidence, influencing attitudes, and forging co-operation and trust among groups in a given society.

Increasingly, weapons collection programmes form part of a longer-term strategy for addressing the root causes of violence.

Excerpt from TABLE 7.9 Examples of major small arms collection and destruction programmes, 1989–2001

Location	Time period	Framework	Organizer	Weapons collected	Sources
Gramsh, Albania	1999	Crime prevention/ Conflict prevention	UNDP/ UNDDA/ UNOPS	5,981 weapons 137 metric tons of ammunition	UNDP (2000)
Sierra Leone	1999–2000	Peace-building	UNAMSIL	12,695 weapons 253,535 rounds of ammunition	UN, quoted in Berman (2000)
The Republic of Congo	2000–August 2001	Peace-building	IOM/UNDP	2,800 weapons 8,000 grenades and other explosives	IOM/UNDP (2001)
Bosnia-Herzegovina	1999–November 2001	Peace-building	SFOR	15,169 small arms 57,492 grenades 5,385,130 rounds of ammunition	SFOR (2001)
Macedonia	August–September 2001	Peace-building	NATO	3,875 weapons 397,625 mines, explosives, and ammunition	NATO (2001)
Mendoza, Argentina	2000–01	Crime prevention	Government/ NGOs	2,566 weapons	Appiolaza (2001)
Brazil	2001	Crime prevention	Government/ NGOs	100,000 weapons	Viva Rio (2001)

Without proper evaluation, the effectiveness of weapons collection and destruction cannot be determined.

How effective are weapons collection programmes? It is still necessary to develop and apply more reliable criteria to assess these programmes. There are insufficient evaluations of past programmes, uncertainty about which criteria such assessments should be based on, and a continued need to develop measurable indicators of success. In terms of evaluating the significance of the quantity of weapons collected, a key problem is the general lack of baseline data on small arms possession in the target community, without which it is hard to draw any meaningful conclusions. Apart from the number and the quality of weapons collected, the social impact of programmes must be assessed. Without social impact studies being conducted in a systematic way, it is not possible to determine the actual effect a programme has had on the community, for example in terms of crime, public health, and public perceptions of insecurity. The relative absence of well-documented results has resulted in a major gap in the debate about success and failure. As long as this problem persists, the effectiveness of these measures cannot be ascertained.