

Arms Trade Treaty – 11th Conference of States Parties

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Remarks for Panel 1 on Universalization by Mark Downes, Director, Small Arms Survey

Thank you, Mr President.

Today, I'd like to speak to four main points about the ATT and the road to universalization.

1. Universalization is about relevance, not just awareness

We often assume the challenge to universalization is a lack of awareness or misunderstanding among non-States Parties. But our engagement shows something more complex.

In some cases, countries have made informed decisions not to ratify the ATT. That doesn't mean we stop the conversation—but it does mean we need to reflect honestly on whether the value proposition of the Treaty meets their needs and addresses their concerns.

We must also ask whether the Treaty is fulfilling its own objectives, as set out in Article 1:

- to establish the highest possible international standards for regulating the arms trade; and
- to prevent and eradicate the illicit trade and diversion of arms.

All in the service of:

- contributing to international and regional peace and security;
- reducing human suffering; and
- promoting cooperation and responsible action.

These are shared goals. But the question we must ask—openly—is: **Is the Treaty delivering on these promises?** And for non-Parties: **Does joining improve regional peace and reduce suffering in practical terms?**

2. Regional cooperation highlights the Treaty's practical value

Framing universalization as a way to collectively address regional security concerns may make the ATT more appealing.

In CARICOM and the EU, we worked with States Parties to catalogue spent ammunition at crime scenes. In many cases, the ammunition was less than a year old—evidence of recent diversion. By analysing this data, we helped identify diversion patterns and trends useful for export licensing decisions. This work was only possible because of shared commitments—and a willingness to collaborate regionally and with research institutions.

In West Africa, universal ATT adoption alongside the ECOWAS Convention allows states to learn from each other and align good practices. This includes new-generation national action plans that go beyond stockpile management to adopt more inclusive and gender-responsive approaches to small arms control.

However, our research shows that while the ATT is often mentioned in the Women, Peace and Security national action plans of exporting states, it's rarely referenced in those of importing states—even ATT parties. This suggests a gap in how the ATT is perceived: **How do we make it more relevant to the daily realities of those most affected by violence?**

3. In some regions, the ATT is seen as exporter-centric

In the Indo-Pacific, we've heard three recurring concerns:

- **Perception of bias:** Some states view the ATT as favouring exporters—focusing on post-shipment verification and industry—while neglecting issues more relevant to them, like brokering or maritime security.
- **Industrial concerns:** Governments worry that ATT obligations may limit the growth of national defence industries.
- **Credibility gaps:** Some question the Treaty's legitimacy when ATT States Parties continue exporting to high-profile conflict zones.

Different ministries also view the ATT differently. While Foreign Affairs ministries may support it, Defence ministries are often more cautious.

This is where civil society and research institutions play a crucial role in building bridges—by providing data, analysis, and facilitating dialogue among stakeholders. But their impact is limited by inconsistent funding and capacity, meaning they may miss brief windows of opportunity for influence.

4. Strengthening the Treaty's value and accessibility

Improving the ATT's value to non-Parties—and to current States Parties—means ensuring its implementation aligns with its core objectives. I'll leave you with four proposals to that end:

First, fund more research into issues that matter to non-Parties—like maritime security, trans-shipment, gender-based violence, and violations of international law. If the ATT is to be global, it must speak to global realities.

Second, ensure sustainable support for national civil society and research organisations. These actors are well placed to build public support, engage parliamentarians, and maintain momentum between diplomatic meetings.

Third, make outreach smarter. Closed-door, regular conversations are often more effective than high-level events or one-off trainings. These informal settings can uncover real concerns—and identify shared solutions.

For example:

- parliamentarians may be motivated by community violence prevention;
- gender equality advocates may want to align ATT work with WPS goals;
- military leaders may prioritise better weapons and ammunition management.

Fourth, reduce administrative barriers. Streamlining reporting and financial procedures would benefit current and future States Parties. We should also invite reflections from exporters, importers, transit and trans-shipment states on whether the ATT is meeting its purpose—and how it might do so better.

In Closing—A Call to Action

Let's be clear: **Universalization is not just about numbers.**

It's about ensuring the Treaty is **seen as credible, practical, and relevant**—by exporters and importers alike, by security actors and civil society, and by regions with different realities.

If we can show that the ATT helps reduce community violence, supports gender-responsive security, and builds regional confidence, then we can make a stronger case for universal membership—not just through persuasion, but through shared purpose and practical results.

Thank you.