

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP ON SMALL ARMS

Blog post



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Revised Indicator 16.4.2: A useful, but limited, step towards 2030

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Today, 10 March, the [UN Statistical Commission](#) wraps up its 48th session in New York after agreeing on revisions to several indicators that assess progress made in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 as part of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

Among the SDG indicators revised in this round is Indicator 16.4.2, designed to measure implementation of the arms component of [SDG Target 16.4](#): 'By 2030, significantly reduce illicit [. . .] arms flows'.

How to measure such a reduction? An initial answer came in March 2016 when the Statistical Commission approved the first version of Indicator 16.4.2:

'Proportion of seized small arms and light weapons that are recorded and traced, in accordance with international standards and legal instruments' - [UN doc. E/CN.3/2016/2/Rev.1](#), p. 58

Work conducted in 2016 by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators led to a new formulation of Indicator 16.4.2, now agreed by the UN Statistical Commission:

'Proportion of seized, found or surrendered arms whose illicit origin or context has been traced or established by a competent authority in line with international instruments' - [UN doc. E/CN.3/2017/2](#), pp. 35, 41

There are four major changes between the first and new versions:

- 1) The reference, in the new version, to arms 'found or surrendered', as well as 'seized', underlines the relevance of the [International Tracing Instrument \(ITI\)](#) (small arms 'found' in a country), as well as the [UN Firearms Protocol](#) (firearm 'seizure'), to the determination of the illicit nature of an arm.
- 2) The new reference to 'arms', rather than 'small arms and light weapons', ensures consistency with SDG Target 16.4 ('arms') and ensures that weapons other than small arms/light weapons are also under scrutiny.

3) The earlier reference to the recording of seized small arms has been lost—a weakness of the new language since record-keeping, along with marking, is essential to tracing. But the purpose of Indicator 16.4.2 has been spelled out: that states ('competent authority'), through tracing or other means, determine the illicit nature ('origin or context') of arms that they seize, find, or that are surrendered to them.

4) Finally, the new version expands and narrows the reference to applicable norms: 'expands' since the new mention of 'international instruments', rather than 'legal instruments', brings the politically-binding ITI clearly into the picture; 'narrows' since the failure to mention 'standards' arguably takes the [International Small Arms Control Standards](#) and other, similar guidelines off the table. This is as far as the global indicator is concerned. National-level indicators, essential to assessing the implementation of Target 16.4, can take inspiration from a broader range of sources than those referenced, generically, in Indicator 16.4.2 (see [Research Note 50](#)).

The new global indicator for illicit arms flows clarifies the measurement challenge. In order to generate better information on illicit arms flows, states need to determine—for example through tracing—the illicit nature of the arms that they seize, find, or that are surrendered to them. More specifically, states need to increase the proportion of arms subjected to such a determination. Only then can broader patterns and trends be revealed.

If the objective is now clearer, numerous obstacles remain that preclude an accurate determination of changes in illicit arms flows over time. These include: patchy reporting for the instruments that support Target 16.4 arms reduction aims, and the need to distinguish seized arms (their parts, accessories, and ammunition) according to their specific features (including type, model, and circumstances of seizure) (see [Research Note 50](#) and [Research Note 57](#)).

Measurement also depends on country-specific circumstances and capacities. Although they may share similarities, every country is unique—as the Small Arms Survey describes in case studies examining [Honduras](#), [Somalia](#), Niger, and Ukraine (publications for both forthcoming).

Measurement on its own, however, does little to fulfil the aim of reducing illicit arms flows in line with Target 16.4. As explained [elsewhere](#), reducing such flows largely depends on the extent to which existing arms control instruments are given practical effect, in particular those at the global level ([Arms Trade Treaty](#), [ITI](#), [UN Firearms Protocol](#), [UN Small Arms Programme of Action](#)). This is an ongoing challenge; yet, more than any other factor, it will determine whether the goal of reducing illicit arms flows over the coming years is achieved or not.

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The Global Partnership on Small Arms was a platform where stakeholders engaged in reducing or preventing illicit arms trafficking were able to interact; exchange information, experience, and knowledge; and give feedback to further their shared goals.

The Global Partnership was intended to build on the mutually reinforcing implementation of existing international instruments dealing with countering illicit arms trafficking (for example, the UN Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons), promoting the regulation of the legal trade through the Arms Trade Treaty, and advancing gender equality through the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.