Advancing arms control and disarmament in the Pacific
Permanent Mission of Australia to the United Nations in New York
Hannah Lewis, Pacific Small Arms Action Group
“Arms and Ammunition in Oceania: Successes, Lessons Learnt, and Challenges of Regional Arms Control”
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Introduction

Good afternoon everyone.

I’d like to begin by thanking the Australian Permanent Mission to the United Nations for hosting this lunchtime event and Mr Ian McConville, Deputy Permanent Representative from the Australian Mission in Geneva for his opening remarks. I’d also like to thank everyone attending here today, in particular the distinguished guests from Missions.

For those of you whom I haven’t met before, my name is Hannah Lewis and I’m a member of the Pacific Small Arms Action Group – or PSAAG, as we call ourselves. I’m also the lead author for PSAAG’s latest publication, Arms and Ammunition in Oceania. I’ve been involved with PSAAG for a couple of years now and am an Australian lawyer having previously worked at Amnesty and Oxfam.

I’m here today with my colleague, Laura Spano, who is the Arms Control Manager for PSAAG. Laura manages PSAAG’s Secretariat and is responsible for running workshops with Pacific Island countries, among other activities, through a generous UNSCAR grant that PSAAG received for 2015-2016. Before joining PSAAG, Laura worked in the United Nations system. Some of you might recognise her from the most recent Arms Trade Treaty Conference of States Parties in Mexico.

I caught a couple of blank faces in the audience when I said PSAAG so just briefly – PSAAG is a civil society coalition started in 2009 and based across the Pacific that coordinates civil society action to reduce the deadly impact of small arms and light weapons in our region. We work with civil society, national governments, subregional and regional organisations as well as international organisations.

Although PSAAG’s latest publication is over 100 pages, today I’m going to have to be brief. But please do get in touch later today or at any point in the future via email if you’ve got further questions or comments.

In the time that I have with you today, I want to touch briefly on three themes that are covered in significantly more detail in PSAAG’s publication, Arms and Ammunition in Oceania. These themes are:

- The informal “Pacific consensus for disarmament” and the successes in our region,
- Challenges for arms control and disarmament in the Pacific, and
- Regional and international cooperation.
The (informal) Pacific consensus for disarmament and arms control

Before I can discuss the successes of the Pacific or our informal but powerful consensus for disarmament, I need to acknowledge that our region is in some respects a comparatively a fortunate region.

We have had relatively less conflict than other regions in the world. Geographically, we’re also fortunate to be off the major drug and arms smuggling routes. Other regions are not so fortunate and are starting from a more difficult position. Disarmament and arms control in the Caribbean region, for example, occurs against a different backdrop even though the Pacific and the Caribbean share similarities such as predominantly being made up of small island developing nations.

While other regions make world headlines with stories that in the same breath cover conflict, loss of life and attempts to use arms to bring about peace, the Pacific has taken a different approach. Rather than flying in guns or arming groups in the hope of bringing about peace, we have made disarmament a priority in our approach to peace building. While other regions have seen an increasing proliferation of arms, we have not.

There is not time today to discuss the nuances of every success of the Pacific approach to disarmament and arms control. But I would like to name a few important – and often unsung – successes of this Pacific approach.

Firstly, 12 out of the 16 Pacific Islands Forum nations are routinely patrolled by unarmed police, while 10 have no military.

However, it’s not just that we have unarmed police in the Pacific. In the Pacific, we have also worked together to actively disarm across the region.

In Bougainville in 2001, unarmed peacekeepers as part of a locally designed peace process worked to disarm the island after a nine year conflict and associated hardships saw approximately 15,000 people killed. Disarmament in Bougainville was seen as so important that it was linked to aspirations for independence.

The disarmament approach to restoring stability was taken again in 2003 in the Solomon Islands after the conflict there. The best explanation of this comes from the former Deputy Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, who, in 2013 said, “[the] Solomon Islands remains an arms free state. We note the use of conventional and unconventional arms in the wrong hands threaten international peace and stability.”

Across the ocean, three years later in Timor-Leste, a regional intervention also included a disarmament component. The disarmament mission, according to peacekeepers, was a success.

Closer to my own home, Australia, following a tragic mass shooting in 1996, the Australian government implemented a national ‘buyback’ and amnesty program which resulted in a third of the nation’s firearms being destroyed, and halved the number of households that contained guns.
In the Pacific Islands, in the face of insecure state armouries and leakages of government guns into illicit markets and the associated social disruption that this causes, Australia and New Zealand worked with their Pacific neighbours to secure armouries and destroy surplus weapons. In Papua New Guinea for example, a third of all military weapons were destroyed.

In the context of this informal consensus for disarmament, it’s no surprise that two important international advancements in arms control came from our region:

- Firstly, **UNSCAR** - a trust fund for disarmament and arms control initiatives - was one of Australia’s contributions to the Arms Trade Treaty negotiations. PSAAG, for one, is immensely grateful for this contribution as it is allowing us to work more closely through a series of workshops with Pacific Island countries on arms control and disarmament issues.
- Secondly, the Pacific Arms Trade Treaty **Model Legislation**. Although this was funded by the New Zealand government, Pacific Island governments were consulted and shaped the model legislation. The legislation while specifically tailored for our region is also being drawn on by other regions around the world.

These successes are demonstrative of what is best described as an informal Pacific consensus for disarmament. What I have described is just the tip of the iceberg – you can read more in PSAAG’s recent publication or in Philip Alpers’ article available on the Conversation.

Defining this consensus is too big a task for this presentation. But what I will say is that we know that this consensus is shared across the region because time and time again when there is conflict in our region, the region responds – as I have outlined – by disarming rather than, as many regions would, arming. So although the informal consensus might be described slightly differently in Suva, Sydney or the Solomon Islands, we know it is there, and, we know it works.

Even though other regions may be starting from a less fortunate position – one of conflict, chaos or a geography placing them within major arms or drug smuggling routes – there are lessons from the Pacific consensus for disarmament and arms control that could be, and should be, shared with other regions.

**Challenges**

I’m going to move now to talking about challenges. Before we discuss challenges, however, I’d like to note that we can overcome these challenges when there is a will to do so. The challenges are great but, they are not insurmountable.

We have a good foundation for arms control and disarmament in the Pacific, however, without continued implementation and investment, the Pacific could become a hotspot for the problems caused by illicit arms. This is a real risk that must not be underestimated because the consequences of inaction are deadly.
In order to not only preserve what we have but also build on it, it is essential that countries effectively implement existing arms control instruments like the United Nations Small Arms Program of Action and ratify and implement new arms control instruments like the Arms Trade Treaty.

Currently, as a region, the Pacific has one of the lowest global rates of ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty and one of the lowest global rates of reporting under the United Nations Small Arms Program of Action.

This is deeply concerning and a significant challenge. If the Pacific is to preserve what we have and avoid becoming the weakest link or, even worse, a region plagued by the effects of deadly and uncontrolled arms, we must, as a region implement arms control instruments.

Of course, there are significant challenges to implementation which need to be overcome. There are capacity issues which are both technical and financial. This is particularly so for small island developing countries which are faced with unique challenges. I hope that later when the floor opens some of our distinguished guests will be able to discuss these particular challenges further.

Competing priorities which is compounded by capacity issues is also a consistent problem which hampers effective and sustained action on arms control and disarmament across the Pacific. We know for instance that often one person in a Pacific government is responsible for many different areas of work which makes it difficult for them to dedicate the time required to arms control and disarmament.

To overcome the challenges of capacity and resource constraints, arms control and disarmament need to be prioritised by national governments, regional bodies and international organisations.

A final challenge that I would like to leave you with is the urgent need to bring the successes of arms control and disarmament to those pockets of the Pacific where the insecurity caused by arms is still a daily concern with tragic consequences.

**Regional and international cooperation**

Although I have outlined some significant challenges for arms control and disarmament in the Pacific, there is potential, if there is the will, to overcome them.

I want to move now to regional, subregional and international cooperation. Just a short point on terminology – for ease, when I refer to regional cooperation, I am including subregional cooperation within that.

There are three brief points that I’d like to make. I hope – as do my colleagues in PSAAG – that these points will help to spark a conversation that can continue long after we’ve all left this room today.
The first point is simple: it is that regional and international cooperation in relation to arms control and disarmament works. The Pacific has already shown this and it is a matter of logic. If arms are not only a national but also a regional and international threat to peace, security and sustainable development then the problem must also be addressed at all three levels.

The second point is that because in our region we know that regional and international cooperation works, we’ve already built up the regional architecture to effectively cooperate. The Pacific Islands Forum, the Melanesian Spearhead group and organisations like the Oceania Customs Organisation or the Pacific Transnational Crime Network are bodies through which we can cooperate. As a collection of islands with porous borders stretching across oceans – it also makes economic sense to cooperate. It is far more cost effective to work together and share our available resources than to work in silos.

Of course it’s easy to talk about cooperation in the abstract. I’d like to hand over briefly to my colleague, Laura, to talk about a recent excellent example of regional cooperation.

[Laura Spano presents ‘Regional Cooperation on Arms Control in the Pacific’]

Finally – and this is something that you can read a lot more about in PSAAG’s latest publication – instruments like the Arms Trade Treaty and UNPoA envisage and encourage cooperation on the regional and international level. These instruments contain provisions on regional and international cooperation because countries like those in the Pacific pushed for this because of our commitment to regional and international cooperation.

I’ll conclude my remarks on cooperation by reminding you of a key line from the Pacific Islands Forum Common Principles on an Arms Trade Treaty that was presented at the 2012 Arms Trade Treaty Conference. Forum members held that, “Members of the Forum recognise the crucial importance of international cooperation in achieving the goals and objectives of the Treaty. The inclusion of provisions promoting international cooperation between States, particularly the exchange of information regarding implementation of the Treaty, will be critical in facilitating measures to prevent and detect irresponsible arms transfers.”

**Conclusion**

To briefly conclude, there are significant challenges going forward that we need to address at a national, regional and international level.

The risks of not addressing these challenges are significant. Not only do we risk the Pacific becoming a hotspot for illicit arms and the problems they bring but we also risk losing the advantages that the region currently reaps from arms control and disarmament.

When the benefits of arms control and disarmament include more peaceful societies, sustainable development and lives saved while the risks are so significant, it is essential that we work together to overcome the challenges that our region faces.
Thank you once again to the Australian Permanent Mission to the United Nations for hosting this event and to the Australian Government for their ongoing support and work on arms control and disarmament. It has been a pleasure to be at the Australian Permanent Mission today.

PSAAG looks forward to continuing this conversation today and into the future. You are welcome to pick up a copy of PSAAG’s recent publication, *Arms and Ammunition in Oceania*, or to get in touch with Laura Spano or myself.

References:

