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Small Arms as a Global Public Policy Challenge: A View from a Participant-Observer

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This article draws upon more than 15 years of 'participant-observation' with international efforts to regulate the global trade in small arms and light weapons to examine: the overall trajectory, major successes, and shortcomings of international efforts to deal with the negative consequences of the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons; and the role, scope, and impact of expert knowledge and policy-relevant research in shaping 'global public policy'. By focusing on the specific role and experience of the Small Arms Survey project, a research-based NGO that played a high-profile role in these efforts, it outlines the general conditions that shape the prospects for academic research and analysis to influence global public policy both through agenda setting and framing, and through highlighting policy solutions. It also underscores the constraints upon the uptake of policy-relevant research, including epistemic uncertainty and governmental receptiveness. It concludes with some observations on the overall role of expert knowledge in the shaping of global public policy, and on the trajectory of international efforts to tackle small arms proliferation and misuse.

This article draws upon more than 15 years of direct and personal engagement as a 'participant-observer' with international efforts to regulate the global trade in small arms and light weapons. From 1997 and the earliest phases of preparation for the 2001 United Nations conference to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, up until today, the diplomatic and political machinery of the United Nations, like-minded states and civil-society coalitions, have concentrated on developing and deploying policy initiatives and programmes to mitigate the harmful effects of the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. Throughout this process I was not just a passive spectator (as is usually understood by scholarly 'participant-observation') but an active participant who, together with a team of researchers, attempted to shape the agenda of small arms and light weapons. Such an active orientation is rare for scholars or professors (and viewed suspiciously by many), but it did provide important insights into how multilateral processes of negotiation and implementation work, beyond the issue of small arms and light weapons themselves.

So in this brief article I want to examine two things:

- the overall trajectory and major successes and shortcomings of international efforts to deal with the negative consequences of the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons; and
- the specific role, scope, and impact of expert knowledge and policy-relevant research

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in shaping 'global public policy', and in particular the role of the Small Arms Survey, a research-based non-governmental organization (NGO) that I founded and directed until January 2016.

I will weave these two points together in a narrative that addresses both the evolution of the issue of small arms on the international agenda, and the specific role of the Small Arms Survey. I should note, however, that it does not make sense to look at the origins, work and role of the Small Arms Survey in isolation, since its particular significance only makes sense once we understand the political and diplomatic ecosystem in which the issue of small arms and light weapons regulation was situated. In the conclusion I will draw out some of the broader lessons concerning the role of academic and policy-relevant research, and how the two may fit together.

I

In the mid-1990s, and somewhat before the successful campaign to ban anti-personnel land mines that culminated in the 1997 Ottawa Treaty, a handful of scholars, activists and officials in a few governments, started to look at the issue of small arms and light weapons proliferation. Their perspective was mainly that of the arms control and disarmament community, and they regarded the issue as the last frontier of arms control, after weapons of mass destruction and major conventional weapons had been dealt with in a series of treaties that culminated in the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty at the end of the Cold War.[2] Of course, there was nothing new about the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, which have been around for a few centuries and responsible for most of the deaths in contemporary warfare. But the end of the Cold War was perceived to have released a flood of surplus weapons onto the international market that fuelled and exacerbated regional conflicts, conflicts in which civilians had increasingly become the major victims.

The most concrete result was that in July 2001 the United Nations convened an international conference on 'The Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects' – one of those major conferences like the Rio conference on the environment, Cairo conference on population, or the Beijing conference on women. This conference was the fruit of more than five years of efforts from within the United Nations, and by a loose coalition of states and non-governmental actors, and it resulted in a *Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects*.[3] Already controversy loomed in the title, with the phrase 'in all its aspects' representing a victory for those who wanted to examine the problem beyond a strict 'arms control' focus on combatting the illicit trade between states, to include such issues as the diversion of arms from domestic sources, their misuse within states, and the legal trade itself.

As a footnote, Japan played a particular and interesting role in this process, mainly via the person of Ambassador Mitsuro Donowaki, who was a major figure in promoting the issue within the UN, and chaired the first panel of Governmental Experts.[4] This was interesting, since Japan is not directly affected by the issue of small arms and light weapons – levels of

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2 See Boutwell et al., *Lethal commerce*, and Singh, ed., *Light weapons*.

3 For the Programme of Action, see: https://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/salw/programme-of-action/ (Last accessed on 30 April 2017) For a discussion of the Programme of Action see Small Arms Survey, 'Reaching consensus'.

4 UN General Assembly 'Report of the panel of governmental experts'.

firearms violence in Japan are extremely low, gun ownership is rare, Japan does not export small arms and light weapons, and Japan's exposure to the negative consequences of arms proliferation and use in conflict or post-conflict zones is very limited. But Japan's interest was consistent with its broader support of United Nations arms control and disarmament initiatives.

Since then, countless national, regional and international initiatives have been launched and hundreds of millions dollars have been spent on dealing with an issue that in the early 1990s was considered as a 'given' – as something that just 'was' and about which nothing practical could be done. So the first puzzle is: 'how and why did this agenda-setting exercise succeed?' To begin, it did not come about as a result of a dramatic change in material circumstances in the world: small arms and light weapons had already accounted for the overwhelming majority of conflict deaths since 1945 yet remained off the international security agenda until the 1990s. There was also no solid and systematic evidence on which to base policy prescriptions concerning the nature and scope of the problem: in the mid-1990s, analysts simply did not know whether the magnitude of the problem (however defined) had increased, and whether any of the alleged consequences of small arms and light weapons proliferation were real. Most of the assumptions that informed policy (such as the increase in illicit weapons trafficking from the former Eastern bloc, or the rising percentage of civilian victims of conflict) where not in fact backed up by any evidence, and were actually misleading. In addition, no major powers – certainly not the US, Russia, China, India or other regional powers – were advocates of action on the issue of small arms and light weapons proliferation.

II

What then, catalysed the agenda-setting process? Two factors seem to have been important. First, it was in part the result of the explicit invocation of the issue by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his 1995 *Supplement to the Agenda for Peace.* In its section on arms control, he encouraged the international community: to concentrate on what might be called 'micro-disarmament' ... practical disarmament in the context of the conflicts the United Nations is actually dealing with and of the weapons, most of them light weapons, that are actually killing people in the hundreds of thousands. The contemporary significance of micro-disarmament is demonstrated by the enormous proliferation of automatic assault weapons, anti-personnel mines and the like.[5] Within a year of the Secretary-General's statement, the first UN panel of governmental experts had been convened, and one of its recommendations was that the UN should consider an international conference on the 'illicit arms trade in all its aspects'. A second panel was convened in 1997 and reported in 1999, and the conference itself was set for July 2001. This constituted a significant 'agenda-setting act' by a multilateral institution, and it somewhat confounds those accounts that see institutions such as the UN as mere instruments of great powers that do not have any independent scope of action to shape the multilateral agenda. Parenthetically, the impetus within the United Nations came in part from an increase in the scope and scale of UN peacekeeping and 'blue helmet' operations, which exposed the UN system to greater risks (and awareness) of the widespread

[5] UN General Assembly Security Council, 'Supplement to an agenda for peace', para 60. This was followed by the convening of a seminar by the UN Center for Disarmament Affairs (CDA) on 'Micro disarmament: A New Agenda for Disarmament and Arms Control' in New York in November 1995.

proliferation of small arms and light weapons in conflict zones.[6]

A second key catalyst of the policy process was the role of a small number of key individuals working in partnership with diplomats from a handful of governments, including Japan, Norway, Colombia, South Africa, Finland, and Canada.[7] The composition of the two expert groups also included individuals from these states (among others) who continued throughout the following decade to play a key role in the development of policy initiatives and processes, often by chairing the United Nations (or regional) conferences. These non-governmental policy/political entrepreneurs seized an opportunity to advance an issue that had not yet taken hold at any national or regional level, and they bridged the gap between expert community analyses and formal diplomatic policy initiatives. Related to this was the desire among some states, notably Canada, Switzerland, and Norway, to capitalize on the success of the campaign to ban anti-personnel land mines that had resulted in the Ottawa Treaty – and to tackle the next big issue that had a serious negative impact on human security worldwide.[8]

III

Once the international process had been catalysed, and the UN Programme of Action negotiated and approved at the 2001 conference, the question of 'what is to be done' loomed large. The Programme of Action itself promoted a large array of national, regional, and global measures, touching all aspects of small arms and light weapons proliferation, stockpiles, transfers, and use, including:

- enhancing national legislation and regulation on production and transfer of small arms and light weapons;
- ensuring that manufacturers mark all weapons (and keep appropriate records) to allow identification and tracing of seized weapons;
- promoting increased transparency in small arms production and trade;
- improving the system of end-user certificates to reduce diversion and illicit trafficking;
- encouraging the destruction of weapons seized in criminal investigations, collected in post-conflict disarmament programmes, or deemed surplus to national requirements; and
- increasing the physical security of stockpiles to prevent leakage from national holdings.

Some important issues were excluded in the negotiating process, in particular references to the regulation of civilian possession of weapons (a National Rifle Association (NRA) red-line), a prohibition on arms transfers to non-state actors, and a mandate to negotiate an instrument to constrain the activities of arms brokers.

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[6] Two other smaller catalysts included the efforts of Mali, spearheaded by then-President Alpha Oumar Konaré, at post-conflict weapons collection in 1994, and Colombian sponsorship of a series of resolutions designed to target the illicit trafficking of weapons in the early 1990s.

[7] Key individuals included Edward Laurence, a former official in the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and professor at the Monterey Institute, Herbert Wulf, director of the Bonn International Center for Conversion, Virginia Gamba (then at UNIDIR), Swadesh Rana (UN Department of Disarmament Affairs) and others such as Michael Klare, Lora Lumpe (FAS), Owen Greene (Saferworld) and Brian Wood (Amnesty International). They acted as formal or informal advisors to some of the governments noted above.

[8] For example, Ed Laurence was the consultant to the first UN panel of governmental experts and drafted the report; he also advised the Canadian government on the issue in 1998-99. Virginia Gamba and the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa spearheaded the development of a common African position on small arms at an OAU conference in Bamako in 2000.

More importantly, however, the Programme of Action did not identify precise points for policy development or set any particular priorities. It also did not rest upon a strong base of evidence or information and analysis about the scope and scale of the problem that was its focus. At this moment major opportunities for policy-relevant research and knowledge creation appeared, and institutions such as the Small Arms Survey (alongside other non-governmental organizations such as Saferworld, the Bonn International Center for Conversion, the Institute for Security Studies, Viva Rio, and others), found their role and niche, and were able to have a direct impact on policy development. Before I explain what specific role the Small Arms Survey played, let me explore the conditions that shape the circumstances under which academic research can have an impact on policy processes, a subject that has been explored in great detail by other authors.[9]

IV

If one looks at the state of knowledge about small arms and light weapons proliferation and misuse in the late 1990s, it is rapidly evident that scholars and analyst knew next to nothing about the phenomenon. Although there existed a small body of 'expert knowledge' (academic and NGO) on small arms, mainly sponsored by major national and international NGOs such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the British-American Security Information Council (BASIC), Human Rights Watch, Pugwash, and the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, most of its works were devoted to documenting the negative consequences of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in conflict zones such as Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan, Somalia, Colombia, Rwanda, or Southern Africa. There existed no general or widely accepted knowledge that could serve as a foundation for broader policy-making, and analysts and policy makers did not have clear knowledge of:

- the global distribution of small arms and light weapons: how many weapons were in circulation, in whose hands, in which countries and regions;
- the annual volume of the legal trade: who were the major producers, exporters, and importers, and the scope and nature of global small arms production;
- the particular pathways of illicit trafficking, including major main sources of supply, common trafficking routes, and destinations; and
- how weapons were used and misused – which guns in whose hands in which places were the most destructive, and what the direct and indirect human, social and economic costs of armed violence were.

Beyond this, there existed no analysis of the relevant causal linkages: if one imagined a 'chain of proliferation' stretching from initial production of small arms and light weapons to distribution through exports and transfers to final user (and retransfers or diversion): what points in this chain posed the biggest challenges, or represented the most promising points for intervention to stem the illicit trafficking and use of small arms?[10]

In light of this, it is more interesting that the issue of small arms and light weapons became subject to policy analysis at all, except as the result of a widespread and general sense that there was something 'bad' going on, in particular that a perceived flood of weapons from the states of East-Central Europe to the global South, and to non-state armed groups, was exacerbating conflicts. Initial attention also focused, in a headline-grabbing

9 See, for example, Stone, 'Non-governmental policy transfer', and Stone, *Knowledge actors*.

10 On the importance of diversion from legal to illegal circuits, see Small Arms Survey, *Deadly deception*, and Vranckx, *Containing diversion*.

way, on the negative role of arms brokers, operating at the margins of the law in multiple jurisdictions.[11] But this lack of reliable knowledge and evidence on which to base policy actually provided an opening for expertise, and for a relatively large role for the nascent epistemic community around small arms and light weapons.[12]

It was in this context that the Small Arms Survey project was born. The first step in its founding was triggered by the Foreign Minister of Switzerland, who pushed his officials to find a way for Switzerland to play a significant role in the emerging small arms process at the UN, especially after Switzerland successful cooperation with Canada, Norway, Austria, and others on the Ottawa Treaty process to ban anti-personnel land mines. This took place in 1998. Several months later, at an off-the-record two-day workshop with government officials from about ten countries, and civil society representatives from roughly a dozen organizations, the idea to fill the 'knowledge gap' on small arms proliferation and misuse was born.[13] This was in 1999. Funding was quickly committed by Switzerland, the Small Arms Survey was established as a research centre in Geneva at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies – where I am a Professor – and the plans for the first few research studies and reports were laid. This was in 2000. In the summer of 2001, the first edition of the Small Arms Survey *Yearbook* was launched at the UN conference that developed the Programme of Action on Small Arms.[14]

The Small Arms Survey began relatively small – with a core staff of about six persons, and ambitions to publish an annual yearbook and a few research reports. But demand for its work – and available funding from a wide range of governments – meant that it expanded rapidly, both in terms of staff and the scope of its work. Schematically, one could summarize the evolution of its work in three phases: first, gathering and analysing existing information and data on small arms and light weapons; second, generating new data through in-depth research at the country level (often involving household surveys, extensive key informant interviews, triangulation studies, and focus groups); third, developing the evidence base for specific policies and programmes, sometimes at the request of implementing agencies. Specific long-term projects were 'spun-off' from the core work on small arms proliferation, including the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, and the Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan, both of which ran for many years with multiple outputs.[15]

By 2016, the Small Arms Survey had conducted field research in more than 50 countries around the world, and the outputs from this research included book-length yearbooks, edited volumes and reports, smaller research studies and working papers, briefing notes, handbooks, and multimedia podcasts. More than 150 such publications have been released.[16] More importantly, the Survey actively undertook to make sure that the policy

[11] See Peleman and Wood, *The arms fixers*, and Lumpe, *Running guns*. The 2005 Hollywood film *Lord of War* also captured this sentiment.

[12] On epistemic communities and the conditions that allow them to exercise policy influence, see Haas, *Epistemic communities*.

[13] The policy opening was made clear in a small meeting with the Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs, Flavio Cotti, and a group of non-governmental experts, including the author, as well as David Atwood of the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva. The workshop was subsequently organized by the Quaker UN Office in Geneva. The initial proposals for a feasibility study and start-up funding were drafted by the author.

[14] Small Arms Survey, *Profiling the problem*.

[15] The Geneva Declaration process was launched by Switzerland and UNDP in 2006; research on 'measuring and monitoring armed violence' resulted in the publication of three editions of the *Global burden of armed violence* (Geneva Secretariat, *Global burden*, Geneva Secretariat, *Lethal encounters*, and Geneva Secretariat, *Every body counts*), the latter two published by Cambridge University Press and accessible at http://www.genevadeclaration.org/ (Last accessed on 30 April 2017)

[16] All of the publications are available on the Small Arms Survey website at: www.smallarmssurvey.org (Last

relevant information in these studies was available for policy makers around the world – translating publications into local languages, holding events around the world, providing off-the-record briefings, and in general engaging in active outreach. All of this depended on large-scale support from governments, UN and multilateral organizations, and occasionally other sources such as foundations.[17] And of course, a team of about 20 full- and part-time staff in Geneva and around the world.

What were the underlying conditions and circumstances that made the Small Arms Survey project so relatively successful in such a short time period? At least two conditions seem important, one external and one internal. Externally, the state of knowledge in the late 1990s regarding the challenges of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons that was described above created a situation in which *knowledge brokers* could play a crucial role. A knowledge broker 'sits in between knowledge producers, [such as] scientists … and those who use knowledge, such as policymakers, the general public, or people working in the health domain. Knowledge brokers try to bridge the gap that can exist between those two worlds and build connections'.[18] Knowledge brokers also serve to provide a 'frame' or set an agenda for a specific policy domain by providing evidence to support policy, and in providing answers to some of the questions sketched above, and in drawing out the practical and policy implications of these findings. The Small Arms Survey emerged exactly in this context, and its work gathered support – financial and political – from a range of governments that recognized the 'knowledge gap' that existing in the policy area of small arms and light weapons.

The second condition, internal to the Small Arms Survey project, was its positioning as an objective, neutral, and non-partisan source of information that was publicly available for all stakeholders, including governments, International Organizations, and civil society actors. Its formal mandate was *not* as an advocacy organization, and thus it was *not* a member in the international NGO activist coalition (International Action Network on Small Arms - IANSA). More importantly, as a research programme of the Graduate Institute, the Small Arms Survey project possessed the authority of an academic institution – and the accompanying responsibility to conduct research to high scientific standards. In this regard it occupied a niche similar to that of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) or the Bonn International Centre for Conversion (BICC), all of which have close links with the academic and scholarly world. This can be contrasted with more activist-type organizations such as Saferworld or International Alert, both of which perform valuable and solid analysis, but seldom original or basic research.

An ancillary element of this claim to expertise was directed towards civil society and the research community, and it involved the development and dissemination of toolkits and capacity building initiatives to promote best practices in research to ensure high standards and scientific reliability.[19] This was especially important since most civil society actors relied on anecdotal or partial evidence and did not have adequate training in such things as household survey techniques, statistical analysis, or even how to properly conduct key informant interviews and field research in conflict zones.

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accessed on 30 April 2017)

17 Core support – approximately half of the budget – was provided by Switzerland. Other contributing governments (for various times) included: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the European Union, Finland, France, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

18 Meyer, M., quoted in Holgate, 'Emerging professions', para 2.

19 A list of toolkits, handbooks and training tools can be found at: http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/tools.html (Last accessed on 30 April 2017)

Research by itself does not automatically guide or shape policy or programming. The Small Arms Survey (and other similar organizations working on the issue) thus adopted a conscious strategy to 'embed' its work – and occasionally its researchers – directly in the policy process, in order to influence how policy-makers responded to the small arms issue and how particular states carved out distinctive niches for their own activities. This took several forms, the most prominent of which was the provision of an expert staff member as a consultant to assist the Chair of every UN conference after 2001, as part of the Chair's diplomatic drafting and negotiating team.[20] This also applied to other processes such as the development of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Handbook on best practices (in which the Small Arms Survey drafted one contribution on behalf of a participating state), the work on the UN International Small Arms Control Standards (ISACS), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) report on armed violence prevention and reduction, and as expert members of national delegations at UN conferences.[21] Several former Small Arms Survey staff members have also served on UN special panels investigating arms embargoes and arms flows to conflict zones.

For those governments that contributed to and made use of Small Arms Survey research, the partnership between government and NGO was regarded as a 'force multiplier', able to generate expertise beyond that within their foreign ministries (which were often quite small). More broadly, however, their political culture and system needed to be one in which civil society organizations were not universally regarded as antagonistic to government policies or suspicious of politics (although some elements of civil society could be). This sort of openness was the hallmark of more 'Anglo-Saxon' (including Scandinavian) political systems, and certainly was not universal. The result was that the Small Arms Survey became a sort of 'hybrid' organization, in two ways. First, there was no separation between basic and applied research: the generation of research knowledge went hand in hand with attempts to shape the development of policy, in the sense that there was no 'independent' process where basic science was performed outside of or prior to the policy process. The generation of knowledge was explicitly commissioned by major stakeholders, who had a direct interest in using the results to shape their policies and programmes. Second, the Small Arms Survey was intellectually and scientifically independent – no one has ever attempted to determine in advance what the findings of any given research project should be – but at the same time, dependent for funding support on governments who have particular interests and policy focuses. This required at times a delicate balancing act, in which researchers needed to be conscious of the limitations of their own work, and in particular of the areas in which independent research could not be conducted.

V

I can offer two (from many) clear illustrations of how this processes unfolded in order to show how research could shape the debate and the policy responses to the problem of small arms and light weapons proliferation and misuse. First, in terms of weapons flows to

[20] The consultant's role was to ensure that the documents adopted were consistent with – or stronger than – previously agreed commitments, and coherent with other multilateral agreements.

[21] Individual staff members at different times served as members of the Australian, Swiss and German delegations. Other countries such as Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom also had NGO experts on their delegations at various times. For the OECD and OSCE reports see, for example: OECD, *Armed violence reduction,* and OSCE, *Handbook of best practices*.

conflict zones, the belief in the late 1990s was that weapons were flooding from the North to the South, or more correctly from post-Cold War Eastern Europe to parts of Asia and Africa, and that the primary 'choke points' for stemming this flow would be found in such policy initiatives as regulating international arms brokers or improving international sanctions mechanisms.[22] As more and more field research was conducted in conflict and post-conflict zones such as Sierra Leone, Burundi, Northern Uganda, South Africa, Papua New Guinea, Brazil, and elsewhere, it became increasingly clear, however, that the weapons used by non-state armed groups and large-scale criminal syndicates were mostly being sourced locally. The arms were stolen, bought, and smuggled from local owners or local sources, and only rarely acquired through large-scale international trafficking network (there were exceptions of course, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia People's Army (FARC) or the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA)). Of course, ultimately the weapons came from major producers, but they most often had been legally sold to legitimate users (usually governments or state organs) many years prior to their diversion into illegal circuits.

The differing policy implications of this were clear: if the challenge is weapons being transferred directly from major arms producers, then a policy focus on the illicit trade is important – and the North is 'responsible' and the South is the victim – broadly defined. But if the problem is more local, then the issue is more focused on the diversion of weapons from legal to illegal circuits. The solutions to the problem of diversion involve a focus on such things as physical stockpile security, marking and tracing of weapons, destruction of surplus stocks, and broader issues of security sector governance.[23] This latter message presented an entirely different policy agenda, one that represented a much greater 'intervention' into the internal affairs of affected states. This knowledge was thus not neutral, but it required a fairly deliberate strategy ('where are the guns coming from') in order to generate an evidence base that could shape an emerging policy debate, and it was certainly *not* led by a preconceived set of interests that dictated which knowledge would be useful and to whom.

A second illustration concerns the role of ammunition. Until systematic research was conducted on the small arms and light weapons market, it was not clear that at least half of the volume (by dollar value) of the annual global market in small arms and light weapons, parts and components, and ammunition was accounted for by ammunition: approximately 4.26 billion United States dollars (USD) of an annual transfer total of 8.5 billion USD.[24] More importantly, although intuitively obvious, it was not clear whether or not ammunition supplies represented a 'choke point' for the market that had policy implications. Yet research showed that in some cases the value and price of weapons in the black market depended on availability of ammunition, not the intrinsic value of the weapon itself, and that in some cases availability of ammunition (or its absence) could shape the tactics of non-state armed groups, making them less likely to 'waste' ammunition and in particular to attack civilians indiscriminately.[25] This obviously has direct policy implications for regulation of ammunition, and one result of the creation of new knowledge was the catalysing of a policy process (spearheaded by the German government) to address the issue of ammunition controls multilaterally. More broadly, a specialized research group (Conflict Armament Research - CAR) was spun off from the Small Arms Survey, and

22 See Peleman and Wood, *The arms fixers*, and Lumpe, *Running guns*.
23 See Bevan, 'Arsenals adrift', and Small Arms Survey, 'Diversion of arms'.
24 Small Arms Survey, 'Piece by piece'.
25 Florquin, 'Price watch'.

focuses almost exclusively on tracking and tracing weapons and ammunition flows within conflict zones.[26]

There are many other examples that could be offered of how research not only responded to specific policy concerns, but also served an agenda-setting role in identifying new or under examined areas for policy development. These cases demonstrate that public policy research does not always follow a 'standard model', in which a set of specific questions is framed and formulated by policy-makers, and the role of public policy research is to determine instrumentally the best (usually measured in efficiency terms) possible choice to achieve pre-ordained goals. In some cases, identification of the goal itself is part of the research process. More importantly, the 'knowledge brokers' – including those who worked with the Small Arms Survey and similar organizations – were well aware of the structural and political constraints they faced, had limited and realistic expectations or ambitions for the influence they could exercise, and strove to 'push the envelope' with policy-relevant research. In other words, they saw themselves both as knowledge generators and as policy entrepreneurs, occupying dual and not separate roles. Their authority and legitimacy, however, depended on a specific claim to expert knowledge and analysis, much like climate scientists or environmental researchers bring research findings to bear on policy issues such as global warming, protection of fish stocks or endangered species, and so forth.[27]

VI

Over the past fifteen years, the research and policy focus of the Small Arms Survey, and the small arms policy community as a whole, has evolved in several ways. To begin, the initial narrow focus on the 'arms control and disarmament' dimensions of small arms – the production, trade and stockpiling of small arms – was broadened to include three specific axes of research:

- the negative consequences and impact of the proliferation and misuse of small arms, including in particular the relationship between violence and insecurity and arms availability, and the relationship between violence and development;
- the specific role of 'armed actors' – in particular non-state armed groups as weapons carriers, and as vectors for the proliferation and misuse of small arms; and
- the evaluation of the effectiveness and 'success' of particular programmes that dealt with small arms and light weapons, including post-conflict disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; marking, tracing, and record-keeping, secure storage of national and individual weapons, and different types of civilian regulation of arms ownership.

All of these issues have been tackled in different ways by the Small Arms Survey (and many other researchers), with the specific goal of going beyond a narrow focus on weapons and embedding the issue of the proliferation and misuse of small arms in a larger social, economic, and political context.

But this expansion of the research agenda has not always been followed by an increasing interest on the part of policy-makers. Like any other issue area, small arms had its moment in the limelight, when it was an attractive issue for policy makers to pursue as 'entrepreneurs' and its 'normalization' when it became a regular part of the multilateral agenda, through bi-annual conferences and five-year Review Conferences. The small arms

[26] See Conflict Armament Research at http://www.conflictarm.com/ (Last accessed on 30 April 2017)
[27] See, for example, Streck, 'Global public policy networks'.

issue has no doubt slipped down the policy agenda, although the problems that it tackles are still widespread. This has had negative consequences in at least two areas. The first was the diminished presence of large-scale activist NGO mobilization at the international level, with the shrinking of funding for the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA).[28] The second, parallel, development was the general reduction of financing for research and knowledge creation, and the narrowing of its focus to specific programmatic and policy areas. In short: funding is less easily available and less flexible for researchers, and the opening for research to contribute to framing and setting the agenda for policy and programming has been reduced.

VII

Beyond the case of small arms and light weapons, what broader conclusions can be drawn about how research can inform policy and 'make change'? What role does information and analysis play in the process of shaping global public policy, and programming, and what have we learned from the experience of the 15 years of practical work on the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons? These are large questions, and despite having worked in this issue area for more than a decade I still have only tentative answers to them.

To begin, I can say what does *not* make change. Academic researchers often have the idea that the books and articles that they publish and disseminate through the usual scholarly journals or outlets are somehow going to trickle down or be diffused into the policy world. This is not true, for at least two reasons. First, policy-makers, NGO activists, and civil society at large, do not read academic journals. And academic articles are not intended to be read by policy makers, since they are almost always written in an obscure style, or do not present timely findings. Second, and more importantly, most scholars do not make a deliberate attempt to translate their findings into what policy-makers and NGOs call 'actionable' knowledge by engaging directly with the messy and complex world of public policy.

What then, are the prospects and potential for research and analysis to influence public policy? The case of international action to deal with different dimensions of the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons may not be representative of all international peace and security issues, but neither is it unique. It represents a 'global public policy' issue, and in this sense it is like a wide variety of other contemporary international security issues, ranging from efforts to stem transnational criminal activity and financial crime, to the fight against terrorism, to attempts to restrict the transfer of dual-use goods, to post-conflict peace-building initiatives and security sector reforms. So let me conclude with four observations. First, the spread of the idea of 'evidence-based policy-making' from the public health and medical field sciences to other areas of public policy has created a greater demand for high quality research and analysis to inform decision making.[29] This has been an important development of the past two decades that has created a situation where academic research in the social sciences can potentially have

[28] IANSA remains active, however, but mostly at the national level and with limited global organization or outreach. See IANSA at http://www.iansa.org/home (Last accessed on 30 April 2017). For an overview of how NGOS helped shape the development of norms regarding small arms and light weapons proliferation and misuse see Garcia, *Small arms and security*. For an analysis of the role played by pro-gun NGOs (mainly spearheaded by the National Rifle Association), see chapter five of Bob, *The global right wing*.

[29] For an overview see Sanderson, 'Evaluation, policy learning'. For examples from international development, see Banerjee and Duflo, *Poor economics*.

greater impact. Second, most multilateral policy issue clusters are not just about regulating state interactions, but are all about *internal or domestic* politics, and they reach deeply into the internal governance arrangements of states, often attempting to reshape the security relationship between states and their citizens. The goal, in short is to shape national policies – what governments do – through the diffusion and transmission of best practices and institutional arrangements from different contexts. In the case of small arms proliferation and misuse, most of the concrete initiatives – to constrain civilian possession of weapons, to reduce their availability for non-state actors, to improve the security of national stockpiles of weapons, or restrict exports to states with a good record on conflict and human rights issues – go well beyond a narrow arms control agenda, and are deeply interventionist. In such a situation, researchers and analysts have to be extremely careful that their findings are robust and reliable, applicable to specific and very different contexts, and do not cause harm through their unanticipated consequences.[30]

Third, policy impact from research is most likely in a situation of uncertainty, when there is no clear understanding of the nature of the problem to be solved, the causal processes that are involved, or of the solutions that will work. Finally, and perhaps more pessimistically, if the world is in fact moving towards an era of 'post-truth politics' in which policy decisions are shaped by emotional appeals and sometimes outright demagoguery, rather than facts and analysis, then the role of knowledge, science, research, and evidence is going to be in jeopardy, and the trend towards evidence-based policy making will be reversed. At this moment in history, as scholars and researchers, I think therefore that we have a responsibility to engage with the important policy issues of our time, regardless of our discipline, and regardless of how difficult this may be, in order to ensure that the voice of reason and knowledge is heard above the din.

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30 Some of the early post-conflict weapons collection programmes run by UNDP ran this risk, when efforts to disarm civilian populations left them vulnerable to predation by non-state armed groups or the armed forces. See Bevan, 'Crisis in Karamoja'.

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