

Civilian crisis prevention through arms control in Central and East Africa: Germany's strategic partnership with the Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons (RECSA) – Shared security through multilateral engagement

Uncontrolled access to illegal small arms exacerbates conflicts and hinders sustainable peace – worldwide

In the Great Lakes region, the Horn of Africa and neighbouring states, the illegal proliferation, uncontrolled circulation and misuse of [small arms and light weapons \(SALW\)](#) remain among the most protracted and far-reaching, yet also most preventable, causes of armed violence. Although accurate data is often difficult to obtain, studies estimate that there are approximately 10 million small arms and light weapons in the hands of civilians in this region (Karp, 2018). SALW exacerbate violence with devastating consequences: conflicts between local communities became increasingly deadly over the years; they also play a role in cases of cattle rustling, poaching, banditry, organised crime and proxy wars, and, not least, in connection with the growing violence perpetrated by terrorist groups on the continent. The easy availability of SALW hinders the consolidation of state authority, particularly in remote border regions; it destabilises societies and undermines the conditions for sustainable development, reconciliation and peacebuilding in many contexts plagued by armed conflict.

The Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons (RECSA) implements practical and sustainable measures that are proving successful

[The Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and neighbouring States \(RECSA\)](#) was established in 2005 by fifteen member states in recognition of the cross-border nature of the SALW threat. The fundamental principle of this important organisation is that no state can effectively prevent the unauthorised transfer, illicit trade and misuse of these weapons on its own.

The fundamental principle of the regional organisation RECSA is that no state can effectively prevent the unauthorised transfer, illicit trade and misuse of small arms and light weapons on its own.

RECSA's mandate is to coordinate and support the implementation of [the legally binding Nairobi Protocol on the Prevention, Control and Reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and neighbouring states](#). This mandate places RECSA at the centre of regional cooperation in the areas of arms control, the prevention of the illicit transfer of weapons and the reduction of armed violence. RECSA implements concrete, practical measures such as marking, registration, traceability, Physical Security and Stockpile Management (PSSM), secure storage, the identification of surplus weapons, and the destruction of illegal, obsolete and surplus weapons, which, at a comparatively low cost, make a significant contribution to crisis prevention.

Even a single illegally diverted firearm (e.g. from national stockpiles into illegal networks) or an inadequately secured state weapons stockpile can perpetuate insecurity for years on end. Conversely, preventing illegal transfers, securing weapons and ammunition, and removing illegal firearms from circulation lead to direct benefits in the

areas of security, humanitarian aid and development. The control of SALW and their ammunition is therefore not merely a technical measure, but a strategic investment in human security, institutional resilience and peace.

Multilateral cooperation is essential in this regard. Illegal arms flows do not stop at borders, and networks that illegally divert arms exploit gaps between national control systems. Regional and international instruments, including the Nairobi Protocol, the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the International Tracing Instrument (ITI) and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), rely on common standards, interoperable procedures and sustainable cooperation between states. If measures are fragmented or short-term in nature, the illegal networks adapt. For this reason, coordinated, standards-based SALW control should be maintained, particularly when resources for peacebuilding as a whole are under pressure.

Germany: a strategic and valued partner

Germany has been a valued and strategic partner in this field for many years. Since 2012, RECSA, with the support of the Federal Foreign Office and under the technical guidance of [the Multinational Small Arms and Ammunition Group](#) and the [Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies \(bicc\)](#), has [established](#) a regional capacity for training of trainers in [the field of physical security and the management of weapons and ammunition stockpiles \(PSSM\)](#). The course was officially

To date, as part of this process, more than 500 specialists from the police, the prison service, the military and nature conservation have been trained, and a team of regional trainers has been certified, including lead trainers who are able to train and certify others: indispensable local resources for civilian crisis prevention on the ground.

handed over to RECSA in 2019. To date, as part of this process, more than 500 specialists from the police, prison service, military and nature conservation sectors have been trained, and a cadre of regional trainers has been certified, including lead trainers who can train and certify others: indispensable local resources for civilian crisis prevention on the ground.

As part of [the projects](#), ‘Support for SALW Control in Africa’ and ‘Prevention of Recruitment into Armed Groups in Africa (PAVE)’, [funded](#) by the Federal Foreign Office, bicc has continued to support RECSA and its member states in forums on cross-border cooperation, in political dialogue and in the harmonisation of legisla-



The value of this partnership with Germany lies in its approach. The German support, provided through technical assistance from the bicc, did not replace regional capacities but contributed to their development.

tion in accordance with the Nairobi Protocol. This also led to the adoption of a joint action plan for the region by the end of 2024, covering aspects of weapons and ammunition management (WAM) in the context of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes for former combatants. This

is a particularly important step for countries in the Great Lakes region, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic.

Here, arms control initiatives form an essential part of conflict prevention for the region. This support has contributed to an improvement in technical capacities, greater regional ownership and better implementation of the agreed SALW control, arms and ammunition management standards.

The value of this partnership with Germany lies in its approach. German support, provided through technical guidance from bicc, has not replaced regional capacities but has contributed to their development. The gradual transition from external implementation to implementation led by RECSA, and ultimately its member States, reflects best practice in the field of sustainable capacity development. This approach has enabled regional institutions and member States to internalise standards, deepen their expertise and strengthen cross-border cooperation.

Sustainable success requires ongoing commitment backed by adequate resources

At the same time, the sustainability of these achievements requires a reliable commitment from national, regional and international partners, particularly in times of increased pressure on financial resources and support mechanisms. The regional arms control architecture remains vulnerable, despite the progress already made by both states and civil society in many countries. There is still a lack of capacity, technical materials, equipment and infrastructure, which require external support. Short project cycles and a narrow donor base continue to make rapid progress and a sustainable commitment to arms control a challenge in many countries.

Despite the progress already made by both states and civil society in many countries, the regional architecture of arms control remains vulnerable. There is still a lack of capacity, technical resources, equipment and infrastructure, which require external support.

Maintaining teams of trainers, certification, electronic data collection, traceability and the integration of PSSM standards into national planning and budgets all require continuity. In this area, reliability is just as important as the scale of financial and material commitment, as well as support from external expertise, for example in the form of (short-term) secondments and visits by civilian and military experts to build local capacity. Strong German engagement in this area, through predictable, multi-year and flexible support for regional SALW control and arms and ammunition management, is valued by regional,

national and local partners and is of central importance. As a strong, multilateral partner, partners such as RECSA hope that Germany will continue to play an active role within the European Union and in multilateral forums – including the processes under the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the International Tracing Instrument (ITI) and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) – to advocate for African-led arms control.

Strong German engagement in this area, through predictable, multi-year and flexible support for regional SALW control, as well as for arms and ammunition management, is valued by regional, national and local partners and is of central importance.

Germany's ongoing commitment enables the gradual, albeit time-consuming, build-up of capacity at regional, national and local levels. In the long term, this leads to greater ownership by member states, institutionalisation and self-financing, which consolidate the capacity already established. The arguments in favour of continued engagement in the field of small arms control are strategic, practical and preventive in nature. It promotes civilian crisis prevention, strengthens institutions and reduces the means of violence before crises escalate.

The partnership between RECSA, bicc and Germany demonstrates what standards-based, owner-driven cooperation can achieve: arms control initiatives that save lives, protect communities and people, and support lasting peace both locally and at home.