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## FEATURE

# INCREASING EFFORTS IN SSMA: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

by Ursign Hofmann, Samuel Paunila [ Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining ],  
and Katherine Prizeman [ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs' ]

**T**he inadequate management of conventional ammunition results in negative consequences such as diversion to illicit groups and unplanned explosions at munitions sites (UEMS). Both diversion and unintended blasts can result in a severe humanitarian impact, undermine development efforts, compromise defense capabilities, and lead to instability.

In recognition of this recurring danger, political, normative, and operational efforts have increased to promote the safe and secure management of ammunition (SSMA). As the issue enjoys greater national, regional, and international attention, stakeholders should simultaneously take stock of achievements, consider if current efforts address the challenges at hand, and appreciate what further steps are needed to achieve greater success.

This article builds on a Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) study depicting the current state of SSMA.<sup>2</sup> It reviews recent normative developments and identifies capacity and implementation gaps for further consideration by relevant stakeholders.

## Better Safe Than Sorry: The Case for SSMA

Ammunition is usually stored in a legal, state-owned stockpile. Unfortunately, diversion from state-owned stockpiles is not uncommon. Such diversion risks fueling regional proliferation as recently evidenced in Libya, Southeast Europe, Kenya, and Côte d'Ivoire, and is increasingly understood as a major threat to peace and security.<sup>3,4</sup>

Diverted conventional ammunition can be leveraged by non-state actors, including terrorist groups. Ammunition diversion and use by such third parties is widespread, including as energetic material for improvised explosive devices (IED). Considering the manufacture of IEDs, large-caliber ammunition such as artillery shells and mortar bombs are particularly dangerous due to their substantial high-explosive content and casings designed to spray quantities of lethal fragments over a wide area.

Poorly-managed ammunition also poses a safety threat—a development experienced by half of the world's countries in

the last forty years.<sup>5</sup> In 2017, at least one major incident involving a UEMS was reported every month.<sup>6</sup> In light of the sensitivities surrounding ammunition management and the reputational concerns of states, the actual number of incidents may be significantly higher than reported.

When ammunition depots are located in urban areas, explosions can have an even greater humanitarian impact, further resulting in considerable socio-economic, environmental, and financial repercussions. The implications for national defense capabilities are also apparent. A sudden loss of serviceable ammunition may reduce the state's ability to defend national territory, and the armed forces may attempt to resupply with an urgent procurement for an often-significant cost. Conversely, preventing incidents is known to cost a fraction of repairing the damage and replenishing stock. Beyond financial considerations, regaining trust with affected communities is also a formidable task.<sup>7</sup>

To address the risks of diversion and unintended explosions, SSMA is growing as a political, normative, and operational priority. What are the key recent developments related to ammunition safety and security, and what are their implications for the future direction of SSMA?

## Expanding Normative Framework

In the early 2000s, poor ammunition-management practices became obvious. In response, and after a recommendation by a Panel of Governmental Experts in 2008, the United Nations created a set of International Ammunition Technical Guidelines (IATG) in 2011. The IATG are meant to offer practical, coherent, authoritative, step-by-step advice for those who wish to improve the safety and security of ammunition storage sites. Simultaneously, the U.N. SaferGuard Programme was established, which provides the United Nations with knowledge management to oversee and disseminate the IATG. Both were welcomed in the U.N. General Assembly by resolution 66/42. With universal acceptance of the IATG, a clear and coherent reference point is now available for national ammunition management regulations and relevant regional initiatives, as well as state- and non-state-led SSMA programs.<sup>8</sup>



The terrifying scale of the blast of an arms warehouse that sparked a mass evacuation of 20,000 people in Balakleya, Ukraine, March 2017.

*Images courtesy of YouTube/Oleksii Tamrazov.*

Since ammunition was initially addressed under U.N. guidance in a 1997 report of a Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, a patchwork of international and regional instruments—particularly well developed on the African continent—now address ammunition.<sup>9,10</sup> Most instruments have approached ammunition through specific reference to small arms and light weapons (SA/LW). Adopted in 2013, the

Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is the latest addition to this framework through its prohibitions and export assessment criteria, which apply to ammunition utilized in weapons covered by the ATT's scope. This includes all major categories of conventional weapons as well as SA/LW. In exporting ammunition, adequate stockpile management is key to mitigating the risk of diversion. Stockpile management also features areas for



A good example of an ammunition depot: ammunition warehouse ASP 7 (Ammunition Supply Point 7), Italy. Image courtesy of Dino Fracchia/Alamy Stock Photo.

treaty-related international cooperation and assistance.<sup>11</sup> It remains to be seen how ATT States Parties will concretely share good practices and report on effective measures taken to address the diversion of transferred ammunition.<sup>12</sup>

Current frameworks, which sometimes differ in their definition of ammunition, pose challenges to their effective and coherent implementation.<sup>13</sup> More systematic scrutiny on how to bring regional regimes closer to global frameworks is also warranted. A positive example of this is the call by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Ministerial Council in 2017 to explore the possibility of voluntary use of the IATG in relevant OSCE assistance projects.<sup>14</sup>

### Toward More Coherent Political Action

In parallel to normative developments, several political processes on ammunition management have taken shape within and outside of the United Nations.

Since 2015 and through its SSMA initiative, Switzerland has stimulated open and inclusive discussions among policy-practitioners and technical experts on ammunition management implementation challenges and responses.<sup>15</sup> By doing so, the Swiss initiative has contributed to setting the stage and focusing political attention to an issue that has historically been sensitive and sometimes difficult to address in multilateral settings.

The General Assembly has addressed “problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus” since 2004 when it first decided to include this topic as a stand-alone agenda item.<sup>16</sup> The resolution has been generally adopted on a biennial basis with the latest iteration from 2017.<sup>17</sup> In this context of heightened political momentum on SSMA, the latest version established a multilateral platform for discussions. Coordinated by Germany, the lead sponsor, the resolution mandated to identify urgent issues on which progress can be made in the area of conventional ammunition. These informal discussions are intended to inform the work of a Group of Governmental Experts, which will be convened by the U.N. Secretary-General in 2020.<sup>18</sup> In parallel, the African Union (A.U.) adopted its regional Ammunition Safety and Security Management initiative in 2017 in support of the A.U.'s vision of silencing the guns in Africa by 2020.

Importantly, the scope of discussions in international and regional fora appears to be expanding from surplus ammunition to address broader issues related to the safety and security of ammunition management. This development is positive as the risks of diversion and explosions are best addressed through a comprehensive, whole-life-cycle approach to ammunition management. Proper management of all conventional ammunition, including but not limited to surplus stocks, is necessary.



An example of an exposed, insecure, and potentially unsafe stockpile of ammunition in Kosovo.  
Image courtesy of PCM ERW Risk Management and MAT Kosovo LLC.

Deliberate efforts are now needed to ensure that the various political initiatives do not duplicate one another. The U.N. General Assembly track has thus far prompted substantive exchanges on trends in diversion and on the provision of technical assistance and capacity building, thereby clarifying current gaps and possible remedial actions concerning ammunition safety and security. Concurrently, the rather regional and more 'operational' SSMA initiatives of Switzerland and the A.U. could be harnessed to complement and enhance the General Assembly platform.

### Seeing Big: From Providing Security to Broader SSMA Dividends

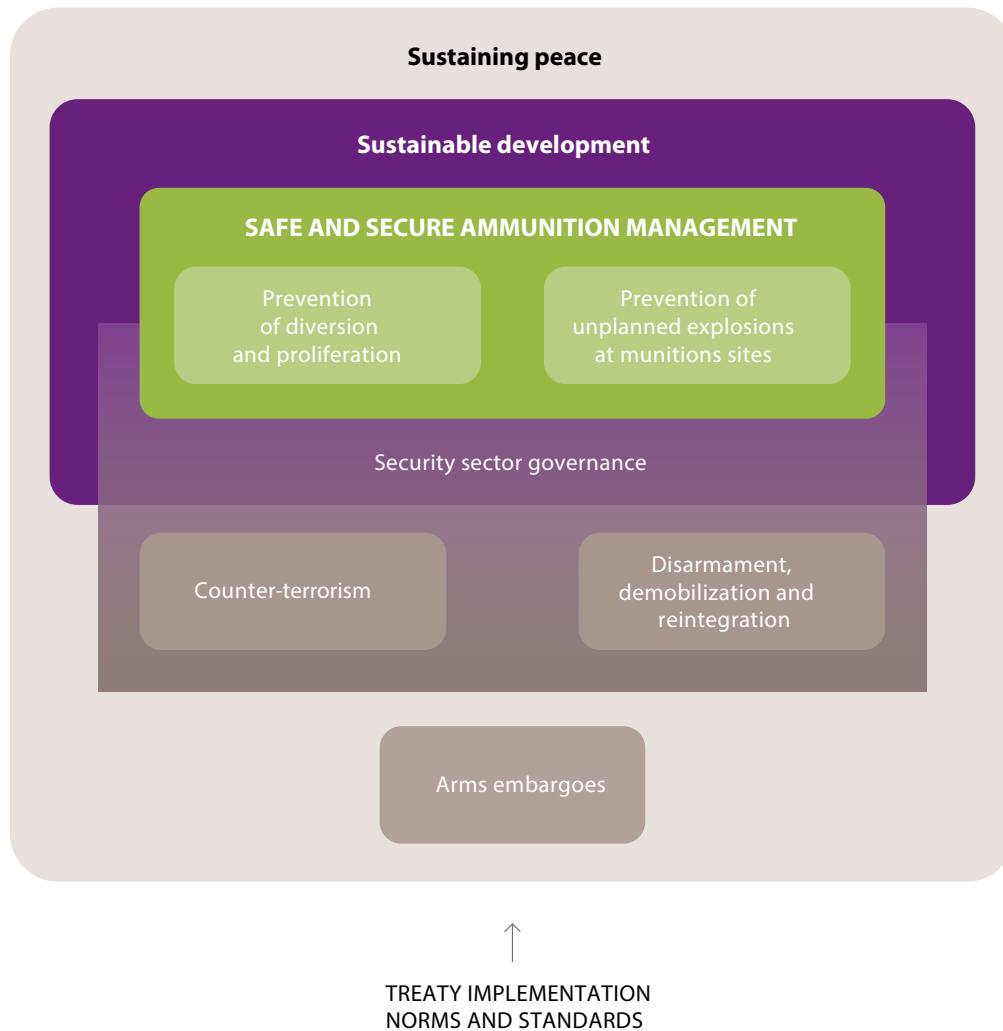
Historically, policymakers have perceived ammunition management as a highly technical activity involving only armed forces and state security preparedness. This perspective has, however, started to encompass the bigger picture, including the community safety and environmental contamination aspects of ammunition management, as well as to recognize the complementary role and capabilities of non-military personnel and organizations. Indeed, SSMA can demonstrate considerable dividends in view of broader peace and security efforts and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see Figure 1, next page). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) provide a framework to systematically articulate the many dividends of ammunition management.

Improving stockpile management and data collection capacities is key to curbing illicit arms flows and helps to prevent unplanned explosions, enabling at-risk countries to better protect civilians; increase urban safety for all groups of society such as the safety of housing, basic services, and education facilities; and provide a safe and secure work place for ammunition storage guards. The SDGs can also serve as a vehicle for strengthening national institutions in charge of SSMA and promoting their effectiveness, accountability, and transparency, as well as for more consistent participation of women in decision-making. Finally, the international cooperation and assistance in SSMA contributes to reducing inequalities among countries, supporting those in greatest need.<sup>19</sup> The U.N. General Assembly has called on states to consider ammunition management as part of their national efforts to achieve the SDGs and to consider the development of ammunition-related national indicators.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, by reducing the risk of diversion, SSMA can be understood as a means to sustain peace and represents a tangible contribution to the U.N. Secretary-General's new agenda for disarmament. "Securing Our Common Future," the newly minted disarmament agenda, argues that poorly-managed stockpiles of conventional arms and ammunition constitute humanitarian hazards and pose threats to peace and security. The Secretary-General acknowledges that proper physical security and stockpile management supports and sustains

FIGURE 1

## BROADER POLICY LANDSCAPE OF AMMUNITION MANAGEMENT



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Figure 1. Broader policy landscape of SSMA.  
Figure courtesy of GICHD.

development efforts and is an important component of how disarmament saves lives.<sup>21</sup>

At a time when many donors consider their political and financial support as concrete investments, implementing partners are called upon to demonstrate tangible impacts. Whether or not these investments are perceived to pay off may determine future funding trends and modalities. To date, SSMA has largely remained reliant on output-based measurements (e.g., the number of munitions destroyed or storage areas refurbished).<sup>22</sup> Approaching SSMA as an element of wider frameworks, such as normative (treaties, IATG), development

(SDGs), governance (security sector reform), or peace and security, and embracing a longer-term, broad perspective for support, could help identify and better demonstrate the long-term impact and effectiveness of SSMA projects.

### From Ad Hoc to Investing in Sustainable Change

Years of practice in the SSMA domain have shown that immediate, short-term interventions can be essential in preventing a disaster from materializing and saving lives. However, experience has also illustrated that a comprehensive, gradual approach to institutional, legislative, and operational changes

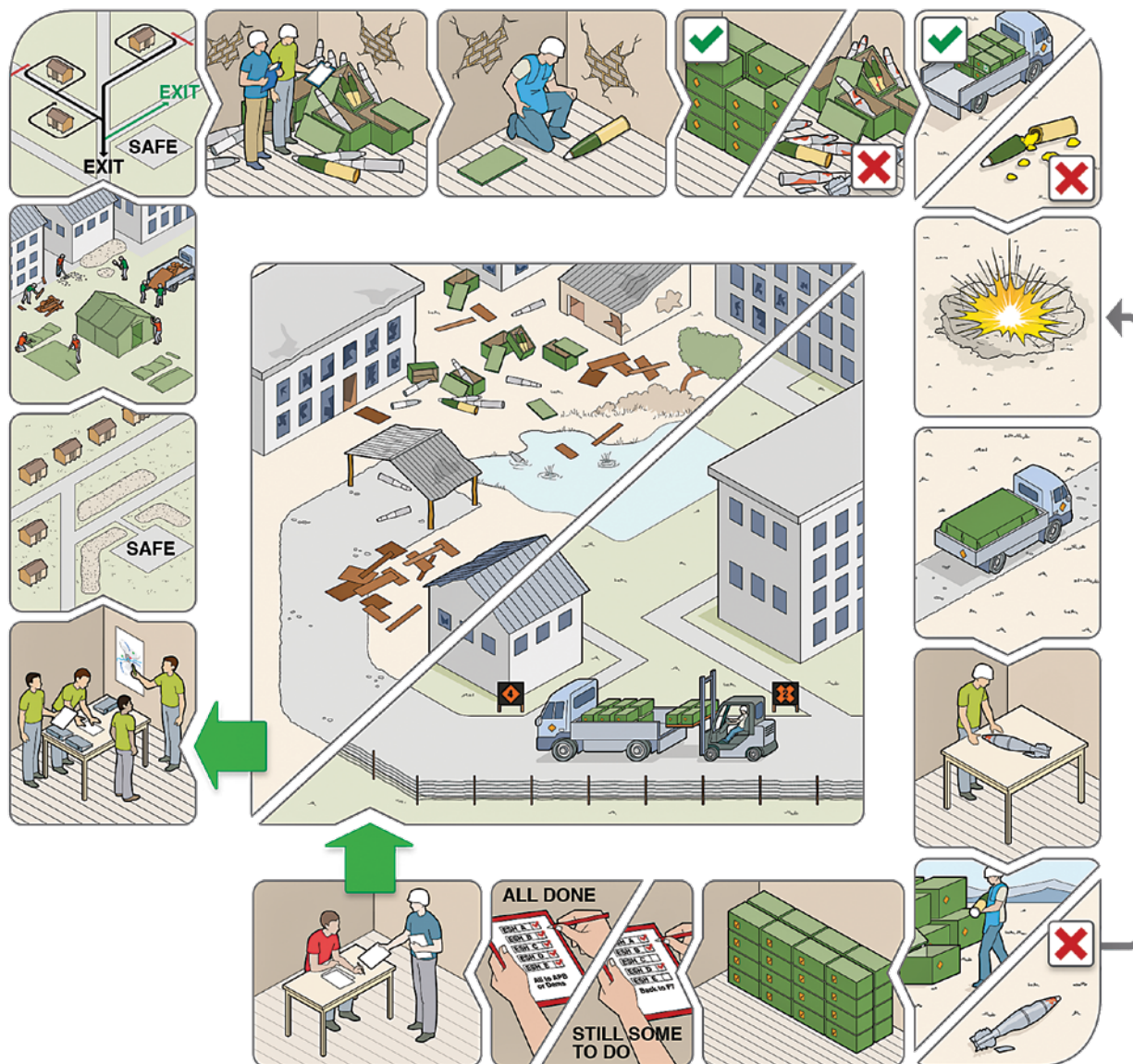


Figure 2. GICHD Ammunition Safety Management tool set—step 2F: how to rehabilitate an existing ammunition storage area. Figure courtesy of GICHD.

in ammunition management is necessary to attain sustainable solutions.<sup>23</sup> Supported by international and regional good practice, expertise, and guidelines, international assistance has taken place through direct engagement with national authorities. Investing in lasting change should logically drive international assistance. For example, ammunition planning should entail its entire life cycle: all technical, financial, and normative aspects concerning its safe arrival in a stockpile, security of stocks, sheltered and cool storage locations, inspections and maintenance protocols, trained personnel, transport, use, and final disposal. Whole-of-life assistance should become the norm rather than the exception.

National ownership has not always been sufficiently prioritized in international assistance frameworks. In the area of ammunition management, assistance has sometimes lacked adequate national responsibility and accountability. This, compounded by a persisting lack of awareness of the risks associated with the consequences of inadequate ammunition management practices, has hampered progress in SSMA. A mix of tailored incentives must be offered more convincingly to increase appreciation of these risks and foster understanding of the breadth of measures an appropriate response entails. As opposed to focusing only on the Ministry of Defence and relevant departments of the armed forces, greater awareness is



GICHD Ammunition Safety Management training, Switzerland, 2015.  
Image courtesy of GICHD.

required across state institutions on the accountability of the state for ammunition management. Sensitizing and involving oversight bodies such as parliaments could be considered to that effect. Moreover, national commitment may need to be nurtured from the top all the way down to the keeper of a local ammunition store. To do so effectively, trust building over time is essential and presupposes a long-term partnership with international stakeholders.

Effective and well-coordinated national structures are evidence that ammunition management is nationally owned. Yet the reality is that structures often lack adequate authority, skills, and resources if they exist at all (e.g., national SA/LW commissions). The establishment, equipment, and empowerment of national institutions should thus be given increased attention, which includes the development of skills and knowledge specific to stakeholder groups at all levels. Equally important is to anchor a clear division of labor and

responsibilities between national and international partners in national action plans and/or roadmaps.

As important as such documents are in activating national ownership, they may not succeed without concurrent competent guidance and capacity development. This is particularly true for identifying and establishing context-specific, needs-based national priorities. Failing to do so presents the risk of open-ended, ineffective international assistance.

In this vein, the development of a national normative and technical framework that draws on the IATG is crucial for sound implementation and the sustainability of SSMA. Certain national norms might often be in place, but these are generally spread over disciplines associated with fire safety, construction standards, inventory controls, and transport and storage of hazardous materials. They are rarely considered together as one entity to address the full scope of SSMA. Additionally, national principles of ammunition management may not always reflect the latest normative or technological developments. There may also be challenges related to oversight and enforcement. Therefore, familiarity with the IATG should be increased at an early stage in those contexts where national regulations are incomplete or not yet established.

### Matching Needs With Resources

In the last decade, countries that are considered at risk have increasingly benefitted from international assistance. Assistance has been provided through multiple channels and by an array of governments and other actors, sometimes resulting in duplication of efforts, lack of coordination, and ensuing inefficiencies. The various coordination mechanisms have largely not kept up with the speed at which support has grown. This is compounded by the difficulty to fully grasp the magnitude, modalities, and destinations of assistance globally; mapping the available technical expertise in this field, taking into consideration regional and language needs, and then matching it with the needs at a national level. Furthermore, many governments may not yet be fully familiar with the IATG as an international baseline for good practice. This knowledge gap risks thwarting a wider donor



involvement in SSMA and continues to impinge on the effectiveness of matching resources, needs, and expertise. The conduct of the comprehensive survey of assistance provided and expertise available, the review of national reports submitted pursuant to the U.N. Programme of Action on the illicit trade in SA/LW and requests for assistance contained therein, and the fostering of knowledge and use of existing good-practice tools under the U.N. Safeguard Programme could help transcend that gap.

Accelerated IATG rollout, establishment of national regulatory and strategic frameworks, and enhanced international cooperation may not sound particularly revolutionary as possible solutions; however, they remain essential components of effective and sustainable SSMA efforts. There is significant potential to promote more structured in-country coordination to overcome the often-fragmented responses, with the national counterpart in the driving seat. Similarly, where strong regional leadership is in place, regional mechanisms should be strengthened to better respond to and act on requests, including by developing and availing local training capacities. The A.U.-Germany coordination platform for the Greater Sahel is a useful example in this regard. At the international level, an effective multilateral forum for donor coordination could also be beneficial.

## Conclusion

SSMA is becoming a key consideration of the international community at various levels, from the normative to the technical. International support has stepped up to strengthen national efforts. These are highly positive developments in recent years. However, major bottlenecks persist, particularly in view of more effective and sustainable SSMA. Greater awareness around the risks stemming from inadequate ammunition management should be a priority, along with communicating available expertise and instilling national responsibility in risk-mitigation measures. Additionally, more efforts are needed to move away from ad hoc and short-term responses toward sustained efforts in building national capacities, designing laws, standards and roadmaps, and seeking systemic improvements. In parallel, international cooperation and assistance must be coordinated and allocated more effectively.

The GICHD and the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) have deepened their collaboration and continue to work to address these gaps jointly with their partners, in line with the spirit of partnership called for by the U.N. Secretary-General's new Disarmament Agenda.<sup>24</sup>

In particular, the GICHD and UNODA collaborate closely on operationalizing the U.N. Safeguard Programme, from establishing a truly global roster of expertise to the further updating of the guidelines and making them more accessible. In light of the challenges ahead, many SSMA stakeholders, from donor and at-risk countries to implementing partners, are resolved to scale up their engagement. Deepening commitment and expanding activities are promising developments toward the safe and secure management of ammunition. ©

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