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Revisiting SALW Awareness Initiatives - armed with old and new tools

With a new project funded by the European Commission DG NEAR and launched on 1 September 2021, we at UNDP SEESAC are intensifying our efforts around small arms and light weapons (SALW) awareness work. Integrating into the process powerful new information tools and resources, and tapping into significant regional experience and know-how, we hope to build capacities for targeted, versatile, nuanced, and effective awareness approaches.

WHAT IS SALW AWARENESS REALLY?

At their core, SALW awareness programs are interventions designed to raise societal understanding of SALW issues and induce positive societal change. Frequently mistaken for simple, general-public campaigns alerting us to the dangers of firearms, SALW awareness programs should in fact be considered an essential component of any SALW Control Strategy that should be interwoven into a variety of its activities – not just implemented as stand-alone acts. Their optimal implementation is complex. It entails nuanced understanding of the problem and the existing political and legal frameworks, familiarity with the beliefs and norms of carefully identified target groups, development of tailor-made messages and their mindful delivery, and continuous testing, monitoring, and evaluation.

.. AND WHAT ARE ITS MANY OFTEN FORGOTTEN USES?

In 2018, when the *Roadmap for a sustainable solution to arms control in the Western Balkans by 2024* was adopted by 6 jurisdictions, it defined seven distinct goals. Although awareness raising was explicitly the subject of only one goal, several other goals clearly benefit from adding the SALW awareness perspective to their formula for success. Here are just a few of the examples.

Legislative changes and reforms: Jurisdictions in the Western Balkans are on the path to European Union integration and are harmonizing their SALW-related laws with the EU regulatory framework. As a result, many legal obligations are changing. Categories of weapons are redefined, restrictions are enforced regarding which weapons can be held by citizens, compliance frameworks are further defined for traders and producers, etc. But these processes are not completed until people affected by these changes – legal gun owners, gun traders and producers, etc., - are notified and encouraged to comply. This is best achieved through a SALW awareness program that takes the form of a targeted public information campaign or an internal compliance program.

One issue-driven campaigns: At times, specific SALW related problems peak or show an upward trend, and narrow-focused campaigns can be used to try and mitigate unwanted behaviours or alert the public of increased danger. For instance, if suicides with firearms are on the rise, or if we are approaching a time of the year when celebratory shooting is frequent, a SALW awareness campaign might be the best tool to address these challenges. See an example of a campaign aiming to deter celebratory shooting during New Year's holiday season that has just passed.

Throughout the region, institutions periodically conduct **voluntary surrender of firearms and legalization campaigns**. SALW awareness is a key pillar of these interventions that might have several elements aimed at different audiences. First phase of the campaign might involve advocating among political parties' leadership to ensure the campaign has their support and is not misused for political purposes. Following, a public information campaign provides all the operational details of the legalization: what can be surrendered, when, how, what safety precautions must be abided by, etc.

SALW awareness campaigns can also be used to educate illegal gunowners and more-widely citizens who might become victims of firearms, **about the risks and dangers** these weapons present. Such campaigns can inadvertently contribute to a reduction in demand of firearms. The campaign might also have a call to action, advocating for a reduction of illegal weapons circulating in citizens' hands.

Clearly, awareness raising can be applied to advance many aspects of SALW control.

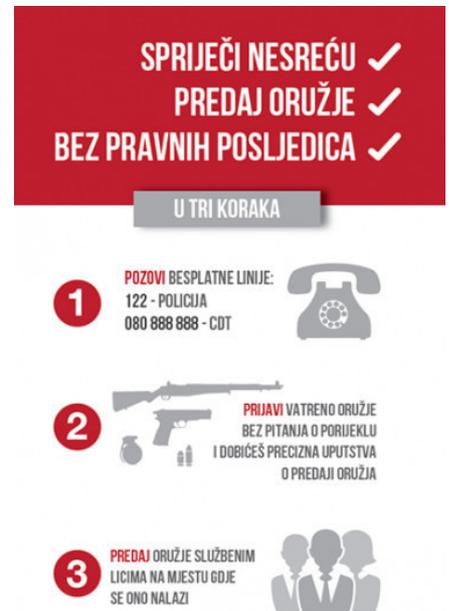
WHERE WE STARTED 20 YEARS AGO: EARLY STAGES OF SALW AWARENESS

When UNDP SEESAC began providing support to SALW awareness efforts, there was very little institutional know-how or resources set aside for their implementation. To provide needed guidance, in 2003, SEESAC published the SALW Awareness Support Pack (SASP) which laid out principles and procedures for safe and effective SALW awareness programming. Widely used throughout the region and beyond, SASP was updated several times with new best practices and research findings, concluding with SASP-3. In addition, SEESAC provided technical and financial support to numerous national, and implemented regional awareness raising activities.[1] Among others, these included campaigns conducted in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Moldova, alerting the public of the dangers posed by firearms while also informing them about the ongoing amnesty, as well as opportunities to surrender or legalize illegally held weapons.

ARMING OURSELVES WITH INFORMATION

Research has always been one of the cornerstones of SEESAC's work, but over the past five years we have made concerted effort to step up data-collection and shed more light on the 'who, what, where and why' of firearms incidents. We understand that working with granulated data and designing campaigns for a specifically targeted audience, greatly contributes to campaign effectiveness.

SEESAC established the 'Armed Violence Monitoring Platform (AVMP) where information on incidents of firearms misuse, taking place in seven jurisdictions, is collected daily and continuously. The information gathered on the platform is being used to identify, observe, analyze and report on key issues and trends related to SALW incidents in a variety of formats (Monthlies and Quarterlies, thematic In-Focus issues, and



tailor-made analysis, etc.).

For the first time government authorities of all seven jurisdictions in SEE agreed to, using a unified methodology, collect large swaths of relevant official data, share it with SEESAC, and allow SEESAC to analyze and publish these figures in national SALW Surveys. Surveys not only filled a years-long information gap[2], but provided a much more detailed, reliable, and comparable picture of the presence, use, misuse, and attitudes towards SALW across the region. Our research on SALW and Gender also substantially informs this 'portrait' of the region.

These new knowledge tools enable a more accurate mapping of major issues for different subgroups of the population and allow us to define messages that resonate with specific audiences. Despite progress, there is still room for improvement.

TAPPING INTO AND BUILDING THE REGIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

On 1 September 2021 we launched a new project *Support for Enhancing the Fight Against the Illegal Possession, Misuse And Trafficking of SALW In The Western Balkans*, funded by the European Commission's DG NEAR. One of its four goals is dedicated to increasing response to factors fuelling demand and misuse of firearms in the Western Balkans by narrowing the knowledge-gap and continuing to help build capacities of key stakeholders to implement SALW awareness activities. We will do so in several ways.

One of the key components will be an in-depth research of forces that fuel demand for SALW and shape risky behavior, with a **closer look at perpetrators of firearms incidents**. Coordinated closely with governments' authorities, this regional research will be grounded in information gathered from new surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus-groups and it will allow us to better address key target audience in many of SEESAC's awareness raising efforts.

The project will establish a carefully selected **Regional Task Force (RTF)** constituted of experts from key institutions of participating jurisdictions who will gather biannually to discuss regional trends and approaches, share experiences and plan domestic or joint SALW awareness work. On a jurisdiction level, the Task Force will help to ensure awareness raising programming is better utilized and integrated into various operational aspects of SALW Control measures. For RTFs review and use, SEESAC will also develop a new series of **Guidelines for Policymakers on Awareness Raising** based on the framework laid out in SASP-3. The Guidelines will outline general key steps of planning/implementing/monitoring/evaluating a campaign, but also provide instructions and practical tips for more specific purpose/topic-oriented campaigns.

Finally, the project will continue its decades-long practice of providing **technical and financial support for the implementation of awareness raising campaigns**, anchored in newly collected data on trends and attitudes, as well as in the knowledge and data provided by regional experts' networks facilitated by SEESAC.

In other words, the project will work to elevate the effectiveness of awareness raising through several approaches; by getting a more refined understanding of trends and various target audiences, by advocating for a wider use of awareness raising techniques, by providing technical assistance and best practices to national counterparts engaged in awareness raising efforts, and by creating a regional network of those counterparts facilitating information exchange and cooperation among them. Brick by brick, we are building a strong foundation of knowledge and know-how that will be instrumental for the region as it works to achieve its seven Roadmap2024 Goals and create a #SaferRegion for all.

The project *Support for Enhancing the Fight Against the Illegal Possession, Misuse and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Western Balkans* funded by DG NEAR has four specific goals.

1. Establishing a network of functioning Firearms Focal Points (FFPs) in the Western Balkans.
2. Strengthening capacities of authorities in the Western Balkans to conduct crime scene investigations in accordance with relevant EU good practices and guidelines.
3. Increasing response to factors fuelling demand and misuse of firearms in the Western Balkans.
4. Strengthening capacities for mainstreaming gender into SALW control by institutions in Western Balkans.

Stay tuned for more details on other components of the project...

by Alain Lapon, Chief Technical Officer, UNDP SEESAC

[1] Read more about our work on awareness-raising and collection campaigns at:

<https://www.seesac.org/Collection-Campaigns/> (2017-2019)

<https://www.seesac.org/Collection-and-Awareness-Raising/> (2014-2016)

<https://www.seesac.org/SALW-Collection-and-Awareness-Campaigns/> (2010-2014)

[2] The last national SALW Survey, conducted by SEESAC, was done in 2006. Other organizations have published more narrow-focused surveys since.

← Back

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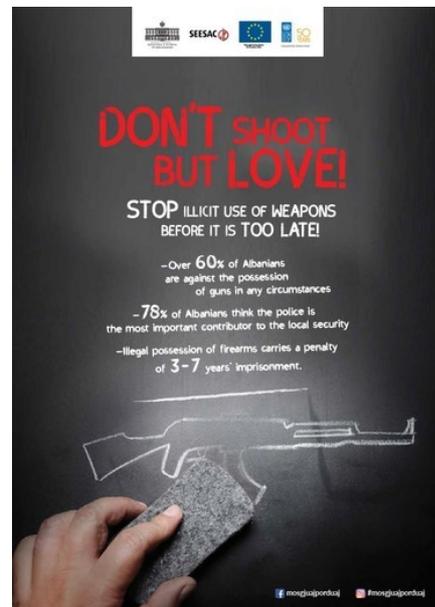


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