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Conceptual Document

*Preventing Armed Violence and Promoting a Culture of Peace.
Guidance for Programming in Latin America and the Caribbean*

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Introduction

This document aims to provide material for the Regional Workshop of Regional Multidisciplinary Commissions. The problem of small arms and light weapons requires not only a response to this situation of armed violence, but also violence prevention measures and the promotion of a culture of peace. Within this framework, the document demonstrates to national commissions and other actors how programming on this aspect can help prevent armed violence. Similarly, it offers a selection of key documents on the issue and a synthesis of strategies developed over many years. It also aims to provide tools to support the development and programming of integrated violence prevention interventions.

The document opens with a perspective on the relationship between weapons, violence, peace and development. Then it explores programming elements for violence prevention. It lists the legally binding and politically persuasive instruments related to the arms and violence issue. Then it shares some reference documents that promote a preventive focus and can serve as a guide for multisectoral work in violence prevention. Finally, it provides a list of initiatives that have put the theories into practice.

A Perspective on Armed Violence with a Focus on Prevention

According to the World Health Organisation, violence is defined as 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation'.¹ It is not an inevitable consequence of the human condition, but rather a form of behaviour that is increasingly accepted in our societies.

Latin America and the Caribbean constitute the region with the highest level of violence in the world, with 42% of all murders committed here.² The impact of violence today has traumatised homes, schools and communities. Data also suggest that social violence and armed crime in general are on the increase in most countries of the region.

The easy availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has increased the level and deadliness of violence in society. A large number of firearms are in the hands of the civilian population and the number of weapons produced and in circulation is increasing, a fact that generates questions about how people accept the presence of firearms in their lives.³

It is important to stress that children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to violence. They witness violence, they are directly or indirectly impacted by it, and they are involved in it. The violence forces them to lose opportunities, resources, family members and the hope for a better life. This violence threatens not only their health, but also their ability to learn and to grow into adults capable of forming families and productive communities.⁴

All citizens have the right to a life free of violence. Violence prevention for the building of a culture of peace is a transcendent issue that requires investment in human development. It arises from a more fair and tolerant society. Violence prevention programmes must go beyond the symptoms to treat the causes. This implies the development of social services and the provision of access to

¹ World Health Organisation, *World Report on Violence and Health*, 2002

² Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences), *Armas pequeñas y livianas: Una Amenaza a la Seguridad Hemisférica*, 2007

³ UNICEF, *The Impact of Small Arms and Light Weapons on Children and Adolescents in Central America and the Caribbean: a case study of El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago*, 2007

⁴ The United Nations Secretary General's Study on Violence Against Children. *World Report on Violence*, 2005

opportunities and includes: economic support for families, support for parent-child relationships, community care centres, rehabilitation programmes, etc. Violence prevention requires respect for human rights within all institutions of society.

All children and adolescents have the primordial need to grow up in a safe and protective environment. The State is responsible for ensuring their well-being and for taking any measures necessary in order to offer opportunities for full and positive development. In this perspective, adolescents can become positive agents in the building of a culture of peace, and investment in their development can ensure a fairer and less violent society.

The building of a culture of peace demands that all actors contribute on a basis of justice and social inclusion. A citizen culture of respect for the rules of coexistence and conflict prevention implies a society that is supportive and respectful of human rights.

Elements of Analysis for Violence Prevention

Any violence prevention action will have to meet various challenges, and recommended toolkits are available to support analysis. This section presents four schemes to support violence prevention initiative programming.

The first of these – the ecological model of violence – helps to examine the factors that influence the behaviour of an individual, increasing or reducing their probability of becoming the victim or perpetrator of acts of violence. Certain levels are highlighted:

- the individual level - covering the biological factors and personal history of the individual;
- the interpersonal level - the nature of relationships with other people;
- the community level - the dynamics of a neighbourhood, and;
- the social level - the general characteristics of the society where a person lives.

The second scheme describes the environments and actors that play a role in violence prevention. This scheme stresses the need for an inter-agency response in violence prevention, explaining that better coordination will lead to greater effectiveness. Players found in one specific environment within the scheme can also be related to other schemes, and their functions can be transferred to a different environment.

The third scheme identifies different levels of programming for violence prevention. It works from a public health perspective, and states that an intervention can take place on a primary, secondary or tertiary level, according to the target population. Primary prevention refers to the group of activities implemented before the problem appears; secondary prevention impedes development of the problem through early identification and screening based on an at-risk population, and; tertiary prevention supports rehabilitation following the impact of violence.

The fourth scheme presents different elements or activities that can be included in violence prevention interventions from various different perspectives: individual, interpersonal, community, within service systems, and as general measures. Any violence prevention initiative may contain a selection of these activities, and the interrelations between the various perspectives must always be borne in mind.