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## Crossing the Fence: Challenges of Operationalizing PSSM

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## FEATURE

# CROSSING THE FENCE: CHALLENGES OF OPERATIONALIZING PSSM

by Elvan Isikozlu, Matthias Krötz, and Claire Trancart [ BICC ]

**P**hysical security and stockpile management (PSSM) can be broadly defined as a series of activities that make national stockpiles of weapons and ammunition safe and secure. Over the last decade, PSSM has become a highly requested form of intervention to curb the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons (SA/LW) and conventional ammunition (CA), as well as to keep communities safe from unintended explosions. Donors have provided substantial funding for PSSM activities to countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where we have learned that the impact of PSSM assistance depends a great deal on how actively improvements are maintained.<sup>1</sup>

Maintaining PSSM improvements has to do with influencing human behavior. Organizations supporting national institutions with PSSM are well aware of this but are often overwhelmed by immediate, tangible needs on the ground such as demands for new depots, fencing, or training. While these activities are critical, they will easily go to waste if PSSM is not practiced on a daily basis. This article will discuss three challenges that we have observed and present some critical questions for organizations to consider when providing PSSM assistance.

## Challenge #1: Leadership of PSSM

Traditionally, PSSM falls within the purview of defense and security institutions. However, since the *Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects* (PoA) was adopted in 2001, as well as the entry into force of, among others, the *Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons* (2006), States Parties are mandated to establish national SA/LW commissions to advise their governments, security, and defense forces in developing a small arms policy.<sup>2,3</sup> PSSM is part of this policy and is therefore in the purview of national SA/LW commissions. However, these commissions are often not recognized or treated as the legitimate leaders of PSSM, nor are they given adequate authority by the top echelons of government. This lack of clarity challenges the ability of implementing organizations to roll out their assistance, as they may have to coordinate with more than one national body in order to access storage facilities, interview personnel, and/or assist in setting priorities.

Apart from which entity is the physical leader of the PSSM portfolio, there is also the question of whether this entity provides conceptual leadership of PSSM. This has also been referred to as national ownership of the PSSM portfolio. In some cases, strong national leadership is overlooked by donors due to conflicting interests. However, when national leadership of this kind is missing, it is often provided by outside organizations or donors who may implement their own priorities for PSSM. There are a number of reasons why national and local leadership of PSSM may be missing. For example, these leaders may prioritize other security-related



SA/LW records, smoke grenades, and coffee mugs are in a local armory. The image demonstrates the lack of standard operating procedures. All photos courtesy of Nikhil Acharya, BICC.

issues over PSSM, and some may even benefit from the status quo. There are also practical reasons why national and local leadership of PSSM may be missing—namely a lack of motivation and capacity to practice PSSM—to which we turn to next.

## Challenge #2: Motivation to Practice PSSM

Requesting assistance for PSSM does not necessarily mean that motivation to practice PSSM exists. Even if motivation for PSSM is high at the top level of government, it does not automatically trickle down. Motivation needs to exist at lower levels of government by those doing the job. It is not enough to train security service personnel and armorers on what they should do for PSSM, they should also be taught why. In most cases, this means understanding some of their grievances and finding ways to relay them to national leaders of PSSM. For example, some individuals working in armories expressed frustration over the lack of career opportunities for PSSM personnel, especially given the potential health hazards and physical danger of working around decaying weapons.<sup>4</sup>

It is also important to consider whether there are motivations to not practice PSSM. Some individuals may benefit financially from having unregulated access to SA/LW by renting them out, selling them on the black market, supporting poaching activities, or committing robberies.<sup>5</sup> Addressing motivations against PSSM is a significant challenge for implementers and, more importantly, for national governments. They can be mitigated through greater job recognition, career advancement opportunities, access to regular training, and salary increases. These qualitative and quantitative benefits can also serve as incentives to recruit and retain PSSM personnel.



A Congolese armorer locks up his armory. The note on the door and the lock show cost-efficient measures to secure an armory.

### Challenge #3: Capacity to Practice PSSM

The lack of institutional capacity to practice PSSM—and the consequent outsourcing of capacity to perform certain tasks—is another challenge to maintaining PSSM improvements over the long term. Conflict-affected countries particularly struggle to take on the many responsibilities of PSSM. Tasks such as drafting standard operating procedures (SOP), organizing trainings, and coordinating armory inspections need to be assigned to a particular institution with the ability to absorb these tasks as part of their ongoing operations. In the absence of these institutions or skilled personnel, external or seconded staff is often invited to take over some of these tasks. The benefit of outsourcing is clear: improvements to PSSM are made in a relatively short period of time. The disadvantage is that little of the expertise and skills necessary to operationalize PSSM are left behind.

Dealing with this challenge means considering how any type of PSSM improvement will be operationalized before the work begins. It means assessing what kind of managerial capacities exist within responsible institutions and building these capacities in lieu of or in addition to material assistance. For example, PSSM requires skills in project management, budgeting, human resource management, etc., none of which are specific to PSSM per se but are critical to its practice over the long term. It also means adjusting the expectations of donors and implementers to match the realities of the local context and not the other way around. Many institutional capacities required to meet regional and international PSSM guidelines are limited. Rather than overburden these governments, it may be more realistic and effective to search for localized, low-cost options for stockpile safety and security that can be maintained and improved upon in the future.

### Looking Ahead

To date, PSSM assistance has understandably focused on urgent needs and threats by providing material assistance, technical

guidance, and equipment to sub-Saharan countries in particular. Our concern is that these needs and threats will reappear if assistance does not address the less tangible, more human-oriented and longer-term needs for PSSM. The impact of PSSM comes from how actively any and all improvements are maintained. This means that PSSM needs to be practiced on a daily basis and integrated into the ongoing operations of designated institutions. It is time to reflect on the extent to which donors and implementing organizations are supporting these needs and hence the operationalization of PSSM.

PSSM does not occur in a vacuum. The challenges that we have outlined in this article are also shared with the wider SA/LW and CA management agenda. It is difficult for any donor or external implementing agency to influence lasting change on this issue if a country does not have a national weapons control framework in which to legitimize and prioritize activities. There is only so much work that can be supported and sustained from the bottom up in the absence of top down directives and leadership. The best way forward for donors and implementing organizations is to support a combination of both, and to continue to reflect on the impact of their contributions. ©

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1. Loughran, Chris. "Developing good practice for measuring the success, effectiveness and impact of PSSM", Manchester: MAG, May 2016. Accessed 4 August 2017. <http://bit.ly/2weqsLy>.
2. Other agreements that are in force in the region include the *Nairobi Protocol for the Prevention, Control and Reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa, and Bordering States* (2004) and most recently, the *Kinshasa Convention* (2017).
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