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## More Bang for Their Buck: Enhancing the Sustainability of Surplus Ammunition Destruction Programs

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# *More Bang for their Buck:* Enhancing the Sustainability of Surplus Ammunition Destruction Programs

by Joe Farha [ BICC ], Matthias Krötz [ BICC ], and Einas Osman Abdalla Mohammed [ African Union Commission ]

**D**ealing with stockpiles of surplus ammunition<sup>1</sup> remains a key challenge for many African countries. In the last 10 years, at least 38 ammunition sites across Africa reportedly experienced unplanned explosions, causing injury and loss of life as well as significant damage to infrastructure and the environment.<sup>2</sup> Numerous reasons such as overstocking, inadequate storage facilities due to insufficient resources, inadequate capabilities of storage sites, or simply unstable ammunition may be the cause of these unplanned detonations. These factors are often exacerbated by personnel having a limited knowledge and awareness, or insufficient training on relevant subjects such as explosive compatibility groups or ammunition life cycles. Regardless of the reasons outlined previously, the destruction of surplus and/or deteriorating ammunition is required as part of a general physical

security and stockpile management (PSSM) regime, in particular to reduce the risk of unplanned explosions at ammunition sites (UEMS).

During the past decade the international community provided substantial funding for surplus destruction activities to countries in sub-Saharan Africa. However, this funding was primarily used by external implementing agencies to destroy existing stockpiles, rather than equipping the countries in which destruction activities are undertaken with the skill sets and tools to manage their own destruction programs, thus lessening their dependence on foreign expertise. This article is therefore meant to encourage donors, implementing agencies, and beneficiaries to consider interventions through a more locally sustainable lens and involve local parties more inclusively in the design and implementation of ammunition

(Above) Degraded and dysfunctional ammunition is often stored in munition depots across the continent despite its unserviceability. Reasons for the storage of degraded ammunition are due to limited awareness, care, or destruction capacities.

All images courtesy of Nikhil Acharya, BICC.

destruction processes. In order to affect a real change in surplus ammunition management, it is not enough to just deal with existing surplus stockpiles; the community needs to ensure that partnering countries are able to independently prevent the future buildup of surplus stockpiles.

This article draws attention to the common procedures and practices of implementing agencies, partnering countries, and donors, before outlining lessons learned and suggesting potential ways of creating more participatory, sustainable, surplus-destruction projects across Africa.

## **ISSUES WITH CURRENT APPROACHES TO THE MANAGEMENT AND DESTRUCTION OF SURPLUS MUNITION**

The need for local ownership over the management and destruction processes of surplus stockpiles of ammunition is reflected in myriad reports, international best practice standards, as well as relevant legal instruments in this field including the Bamako Declaration Article 3(iv);<sup>3</sup> the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention Article 17;<sup>4</sup> Kinshasa Convention Article 14; Nairobi Protocol Article 80;<sup>6</sup> and the Silencing the Guns Continental Plan of Action on the Control of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons. The International Ammunition Technical Guidelines implicitly call for the development of local capabilities in this area (10.2.5 and 10.2.6),<sup>7</sup> and external implementing partners conduct relatively short-term training and capacity-building projects. However this often happens in an ad hoc manner, depending on the nature, scale, resources of the intervention, and strategic priorities of the donors, and is not always approached with considerations of long-term sustainability in mind.

There is a need and desire for the skills and infrastructure gaps in this area to be filled by local, national, and regional bodies. This is needed in order to address the issue of ammunition destruction at an early enough stage to prevent the build-up of surpluses before they become a security and safety threat to the state and civilian population in the surrounding areas. For this to occur the capabilities must be developed and maintained at the local, national, or regional levels.

Short-term projects and interventions may fail to address related gaps in management and destruction processes outside of the narrow timeframe in which the implementing agencies operate. These capability gaps stem partly from the way in which donors operate. Thorough ammunition-life-cycle management is an expensive and time-consuming process, thus donors tend to favor short-term projects focusing on the destruction of specific stockpiles. As well as limiting the possibilities of embedding a national system capable of identifying and destroying surpluses or degraded ammunition,

interventions may only focus on parts of the destruction requirements that a country needs. This approach may be driven by a number of factors including the issue that implementing agencies will follow donor parameters and focus purely on the material destruction of ammunition instead of devoting the necessary time and expertise to building capacity of the local technical staff and decision makers.

Additionally, countries often request assistance that is limited to expensive infrastructure or equipment procurement. For donors, assistance with actual destruction activities is comparatively cheaper; however, capacity development, risk awareness education, and the development of locally applicable tools and institutional learning to generate knowledge for domestic security agencies are being neglected.<sup>7</sup> Although the provision of relevant equipment is often a necessary component of destruction programs, such equipment is often not used or maintained once the intervention from the implementing agency or donor concludes. This in turn decreases the likelihood of future funding, as donors question the commitment of the recipient. Countries receiving support should therefore not be passively involved in the implementation of activities by foreign intervention agencies but must operate in true partnership with them by actively taking part in the design and implementation processes.

These approaches may lead to uneven coverage of destruction activities, with assistance being concentrated in certain regions and focusing on specific types of intervention. These interventions may be more attractive from a short-term “marketing” perspective, producing swift, publicly verifiable outputs rather than more anonymous long-term benefits. Assistance measures therefore often support physical measures such as the destruction of surplus ammunition or the construction/rehabilitation of ammunition sites in countries that are already of interest to the international community rather than those with more basic infrastructure or with complex bureaucracies. It is therefore the case that funding tends to cluster around prominently positioned countries who may not be able to absorb the assistance provided while other countries with similar or higher demands command less attention and do not receive assistance in overcoming existing difficulties relating to surplus destruction.

The questions of strategic relationships and/or geopolitical dynamics also feed into determining which states may benefit from intervention support. These points all have the potential to create a cyclical knock-on effect: countries who do not receive support focus less on the very governance issues such as ammunition management and capacity that deter donors from investing in the first place. Therefore better coordination is needed between donors and established African institutions, such as the African Union, the Regional Economic



**Surplus and damaged RPG warheads. These explosives pose a serious threat to the lives of storage keepers, military personnel, and civilians. By separating and destroying surplus ammunition, UEMS can be reduced significantly.**

Communities, or regional bodies to avoid duplication and ineffectiveness of the support provided. Apart from inefficiency, duplication of efforts by different agencies and their donors might even hamper progress by creating competition among implementing agencies and undermining national ownership.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INTERVENTIONS**

As discussed, interventions are focused on the destruction of ammunition through external implementing agents. However, this approach may only relieve the burden for a short period of time, failing in the longer term to address broader questions relating to the material conditions and management activities undertaken in the intervention countries. These potential gaps ultimately result in the formation of a dependency

cycle of ongoing external interventions for ammunition surplus destruction. Therefore in order to lessen the dependence of beneficiary states on repeated interventions from external donors and to allow states to overcome UEMS caused by overcrowded unstable stockpile depots the following changes in approach are proposed.

Implementing agencies must work more closely with respective countries in the design and execution of surplus destruction programs. Rather than treating surplus destruction as an activity in isolation, states and implementing agencies may consider the design and establishment of joint, tailored, life-cycle-management systems for ammunition in accordance with international standards. Using this broader approach would involve the inclusion of PSSM into

the national curricula of relevant security forces, the development of specific policies relating to management systems, as well as the introduction and implementation of functional standard operating procedures, all of which are necessary to generate functioning surplus munition destruction capabilities. This is crucial, as long-term threat mitigation of surplus ammunition can only realistically happen through improving and streamlining the acquisition, distribution, and disposal processes of ammunition. This has the double benefit of reducing both the costs and the risks around surplus stockpiles, which then require further interventions to resolve. Additionally, specialized and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) capacities and equipment must be acquired in order to build in-country capabilities.

The onus to ensure sustainability cannot solely be the donors'; beneficiary countries must also follow through on the commitments they give to donors. Each state has an individual obligation to limit the risks and hazards of ammunition stockpiles, both to personnel working directly on those sites as well as civilians living in the surrounding areas. States should thus be obliged to report on their own activities in this area on a regular and standardized basis and should actively seek ways to mitigate potential risks at an early stage, rather than ignoring the issues posed by increasing stockpiles.<sup>9</sup> Reports should be publicly available and aimed at donors, relevant international mechanisms as well as stakeholders and implementing agencies.

For countries with capacity and capability issues where it may not be possible to develop or maintain EOD or arms and ammunition destruction expertise, states should request support from regional economic communities and regional bodies dealing with these subjects to establish regional pools of experts—such as train-the-trainers programs to support national surplus management and disposal undertakings. Promising examples of the approaches that may be used can be drawn from the activities of ECOWAS and the Regional Centre on Small Arms in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and Bordering States in their PSSM train-the-trainers programs.

Donor countries and institutions are bound to short-term, high-impact timelines. Projects are thus often commissioned for only two-to-three years. Sustainable change is, however, not achieved in such a short time frame; changing personnel and institutional behavior requires time to adjust. Therefore, donors should consider committing to selected projects for a longer period of time, rather than distributing available funding across a larger number of countries for shorter periods. In order to allow partnering countries to overcome surplus stockpiles and the dependency on external actors in driving interventions, priority should be given to supporting

partnering countries in combating the root causes of surplus accumulation. This would decrease the dependency on foreign financial resources and capacities, a situation that is clearly in the interest of all donors, as financial resources can be channeled into a sustainable solution, rather than a quick fix, thus representing more bang for donors (and taxpayers) buck than the current situation allows. ©

See endnotes page 63

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