

Case study 1:

Viva Rio (Brazil)

The NGO **Viva Rio** was created in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1993 in response to the August 1993 killings of eight street children and 22 urban poor by the provincial police. Since its creation Viva Rio has worked on violence and SALW issues in the State of Rio de Janeiro which includes the megalopolis of Rio de Janeiro and the surrounding cities. However, it has simultaneously worked equally intensely on issues of social and economic justice, urban environmentalism and education for the poor. At times Viva Rio works in opposition to local, provincial and national government, but generally engages government agencies in a collaborative fashion. It is a large grassroots NGO in that it employs more than one thousand employees full-time and part-time, including extension workers in the communities.

Since 1993, Viva Rio has worked to combat a growing wave of urban violence—a problem that mainly affects young people—in Brazilian cities. Campaigns for peace and against the proliferation of small arms, as well as projects aiming to reduce criminal behavior and armed violence, are the hallmarks of the organization's work. Activities to confront problems associated with the proliferation and misuse of firearms are carried out at the local, national, and international levels. Viva Rio concentrates its work on three objectives:

- 1) To reduce the demand for guns (actions to sensitize civil society to the risks involved with using or carrying firearms and to respond to the gun industry lobby);
- 2) To reduce supply of guns (curb illicit arms trafficking and control the production, sales, exports and imports of small arms and ammunition); and
- 3) To improve stockpile controls (destruction of excess guns and improvement of secure storage facilities).

The main activities of the Viva Rio arms reduction project over the past years have been:

- SALW collection and destruction.
- Establishing a firearms data base.
- Public awareness campaigns on the need for civil disarmament (so that "honest citizens" and their families do not become victims of their own guns in accidents or do not fall victim to armed assailant if they try to defend themselves with a gun) and in favor of a culture of peace (through the peaceful resolution of conflicts between individuals), with a focus on youth, women, public health, and the mobilization of churches.

A large grid of small dots for taking notes, consisting of 28 rows and 40 columns of dots.

- Campaigns to reform permissive and inefficient legislation on arms controls, seeking to end the civilian use of firearms (a new law in Rio, for example has made it much more difficult to purchase firearms). Pressure on the Brazilian Congress to combat the strong influence and well-funded lobbying of the gun industry, so that the ban on civil use of firearms can pass at the national level (78% of Brazilians have declared that they are opposed to allowing civilians to carry guns, and 60% say they support a total ban).
- Campaigns to promote voluntary weapons collection programs, with church-based support.

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's largest city, as in the rest of Brazil, the SALW problem is not related to a war, but rather to high levels of common armed violence and armed confrontations between rival drug gangs from Rio's *favelas* (shantytowns) and police forces. The majority of assailants and victims are young, uneducated males that come from the *favelas*.

Viva Rio has been involved with several efforts to collect and destroy weapons since the late 1990s. The organization began getting involved in SALW collection and destruction when they discovered that thousands upon thousands of weapons confiscated from criminals were stored by the state police with little security measures and only manual written registries. It was thought that many weapons re-entered the illicit market from these storage sites. To help improve this situation Viva Rio offered the time of its personnel to computerize the information on behalf of the provincial government of Rio de Janeiro, taking information on make, model, caliber and serial number.

Before the weapons were entered into the database there were two prevailing myths in Brazilian society regarding SALW: 1) that the weapons used in crime were foreign made and, 2) that most were high-caliber assault weapons. The computerization exercise determined that the majority of weapons were Brazilian-made pistols and revolvers, not foreign assault rifles, and that a significant number of these were legally exported to neighboring Paraguay and had made their way back into Rio's black market.

This process increased trust between the provincial police and Viva Rio and also provided important information for policy makers and law enforcement. As a result Viva Rio assisted in the computerization of an additional 650,000 legally registered weapons into the database. The database with information on 750,000 firearms registered and/or seized in the state of Rio de Janeiro, is managed in partnership with the Arms and Explosives Control Division of the Rio Civil Police (DFAE). Detailed lists and information on these weapons is available on the website www.desarme.org. This, coupled with public events organized with the Rio state Secretary of Public Security, draw attention to data on Brazilian and foreign weapons seized by the police and encourages international co-operation to trace the routes of small arms used by criminals.

A large grid of small dots for taking notes, consisting of 20 rows and 40 columns of dots.

As a consequence of the data base project, Viva Rio successfully lobbied the government to reduce the amount of time weapons had to be held in storage for judicial purposes to five years. This latter measure resulted in the public destruction of 100,000 SALW in June 2001 and was organized jointly by Viva Rio and the state government. The weapons were destroyed by a steam roller and later melted in a steel mill for industrial use. Public campaigning and other activities also accompanied the activity.

A year later on July 12th, 2002, 10,000 guns that had been apprehended by police in irregular situations were destroyed and Viva Rio joined with the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) in establishing International Small Arms Destruction Day on 9th July of each year. In 2003 another 4,158 SALW were destroyed at the annual event in a 'Flame of Peace'. By the summer of 2004 Viva Rio and its government partners began destroying the weapons with an over-sized sledgehammer after the information from each weapon is recovered for information purposes.

- The public destruction of 100,000 guns on June 24, 2001 in Rio de Janeiro was the largest simultaneous gun destruction in the history of the world;
- The Governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro, as well as representatives from the UN, the OAS, and PNUD were present at the 2005 public act. A documentary film is currently being made about this destruction.

The other areas of Viva Rio activity also provide useful ideas.

Research Action

- Viva Rio, together with another organization, ISER, have worked to produce reliable information on the **consequences of the use of firearms** and their proliferation, as well as on ways to reduce the number of gun-related deaths. Studies include: the impact of gun use on public health (including the economic impact), victimization (who are the most frequent victims of armed violence, under what circumstances accidents and murders occur), legislation, illicit arms trafficking, and children and young people involved in organized armed violence.
- Viva Rio has also worked with the police to reform the **classification methods** and conditions for stockpiling small arms at the Civil Police facilities in Rio, aiming to create a standard applicable to the whole country, to increase the security of stockpiled weapons and to allow seized weapons to be traced so that the routes of illicit trafficking come to light; a classification manual for the data collected on seized weapons is being put together for the Rio de Janeiro state Secretary of Public Security.
- Viva Rio has also conducted research on the issue of **children and armed violence**, seeking to define the problem of children affected by organized armed violence in the national context as well as internationally, and to develop solutions that offer alternatives and press for policy change. Direct work with at-risk children to get them out of crime and armed violence was also embarked on as result.

A large grid of small dots for taking notes, consisting of 20 rows and 40 columns of dots.

- Viva Rio has recently completed a research paper entitled Harmonizing laws for the prevention of illicit firearms transfers: **analysis of the firearms control laws** of MERCOSUR (South American) countries and their compatibility with OAS-CICAD's model regulations.

Events in support of civil disarmament:

Many popular popular activities (marches, shows, murals, etc.) in support of reducing the demand for guns, were carried out intensively over the period of a few years. These included:

- Free concerts in urban shantytowns (*favelas*) in Rio, with hip hop artists whose music discourages involvement in criminal gangs and the use of guns.
- Creation of an artwork, the "Mural of Pain" which was exhibited in Rio and at the national congress in Brasilia. It is currently being showed around cities in the United States, with support from the World Council of Churches.
- A film production team is currently producing a documentary film on small arms destructions to train NGOs and law enforcement agents. Other films, on women and armed violence, the impact of violence on public health and economics, community policing, voluntary small arms collection programs, and advocacy for gun control legislation are in planning.
- A Gun-Free March "**Brasil Sem Armas**" supporting the Disarmament Statute was organized by Viva Rio on Copacabana beach and brought together various actors of civil society. Despite the cold rain, 50,000 participants gathered that day. Following the structure of a carnival parade, the march was divided into groups: victims of gun violence, law enforcement forces, members of the justice system, and a special group with actors from the highly popular local sitcom "Women in love" , with full support and broadcasting by the TV Network Globo. In total, more than 20 different groups integrated the march.
- "**Choose Gun Free! It's Your Weapon or Me!**" program mobilizes women in support of the disarmament movement to take an active role in disarming their husbands, boyfriends, sons, brothers or friends.
- Another program, **Mother, Disarm Your Son!** appeals to mothers in low-income communities to protect their sons from the dangers of firearms through hip hop shows and gun destruction events.
- A national campaign — **Put Down That Gun** — to inform society about the need for civil disarmament, was an expansion of the campaign initiated in Rio de Janeiro to other states.

Partly as result of these activities, a recent survey of 2,000 citizens in 147 Brazilian cities conducted by IBOPE (18-22 October, 2003), showed that 80% of the surveyed are in favor of a ban on gun sales for civilians and 65% believe that the measures of the Disarmament Statute could contribute to reducing gun violence. These findings had an impact on domestic legislation.

A large grid of small dots for taking notes, consisting of 20 rows and 40 columns of dots.

Legislation:

Part of Viva Rio's popular action has been directed at the government, with the intent of demonstrating popular support for firearm control legislation. Consistent work to collaborate and pressure state and federal governments to take more effective measures to contain small arms proliferation was undertaken. All throughout the process Viva Rio and several other Brazilian NGOs throughout the country and like-minded government officials and politicians brought the SALW issue all the way to the national congress which, by 2004 resulted in a national law prohibiting the public carrying weapons by citizens, mandated a public referendum where Brazilians will decide whether or not to prohibit all weapons sales and, established a national disarmament campaign exchanging weapons for cash based on a sliding scale based on weapon condition and type, and their later destruction. As of August 2004 more than 45,000 SALW were collected country-wide in this effort set to last until the end of the year.

International activities and effects:

Viva Rio has recognized that the arms problem is not only a Brazilian one, and that even the solution cannot be wholly Brazilian, since arms can be transferred from one country to another in the same region. Accordingly, Viva Rio has embarked on a number of international activities.

- The International Day of Weapons Destruction celebrated on the 9th of July was established by the UN in 2001 so that the local governments could promote the destruction of the firearms surplus and could debate with the society about the proliferation of firearms and the increase of crime rates, searching for a solution that would involve the action of the governments, of the society and of the military institutions. On the 12th of July 2002, the State Government and Viva Rio, in support of the first International Day of Weapons Destruction conducted the destruction of 10 thousand weapons apprehended by the police in 1997. A tractor smashed pistols, revolvers, machine guns, and rifles. Most of these weapons had been taken from criminals. On the same day, ambassadors of 27 countries that produce this kind of armament (USA, Spain, Argentina, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Austria and the Czech Republic) participated on a meeting that discussed the illegal weapons traffic in Rio de Janeiro.
- A network of NGOs from the MERCOSUR region (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay) that work on disarmament was formed and meet periodically for workshops to discuss their activities.
- Viva Rio and other regional NGOs encourage research centers in Brazil and Latin America to develop works that reveal the harmful effects of the proliferation of small arms. Together they also conduct NGO training in campaigns and research.
- A joint website on disarmament and human security was launched (www.desarme.org), with content in Spanish and Portuguese. The site contains news and information, updated daily, as well as research, links, and photos.