Thursday afternoon saw the introduction of the final theme of the MGE, international assistance and capacity-building. As the Chair and many delegations noted, this theme has been an underlying issue for many of the other discussions throughout the MGE, for without effective capacity and assistance it is difficult for states to develop sufficient marking, record-keeping, and tracing mechanisms and procedures.

Daniel Prins of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)’s Conventional Arms Branch gave a presentation highlighting UNODA’s work on “reporting, compiling, and alerting” that it undertakes in order to assist states in implementing the International Tracing Instrument (ITI) and UN Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons (UNPoA). Mr. Prins explained the new online reporting template, available at www.poa-iss.org, which is a tool for communicating a country’s implementation efforts, assistance needs, and information on available resources. He noted that the online tool integrates the reports for both the UNPoA and the ITI and that its standardized format will allow for easy analysis and assessment.

A representative from Coordinating Action on Small Arms (CASA), the small arms coordination mechanism within the UN, also spoke briefly in the course of this thematic discussion. He explained that CASA brings together UN partners whose activities are affected by illicit weapons and provides a framework for the UN’s armed violence prevention programme. He noted that CASA is currently developing international small arms and ammunition control standards, which should be out by the end of the year.

Several countries, including Belgium, Germany, referred to specific assistance they have offered to other states. Belgium sponsored a research project on tracing of illicit arms in Colombia, done by a university in cooperation with Colombian NGO and authorities. Switzerland’s delegation highlighted its projects in Mali and Bosnia while the German delegation mentioned the seminars it has held for Arab states to demonstrate how SALW control is organized and implemented in Germany. Others offered examples of assistance they have received. Belarus’ delegation highlighted the joint OSCE-UNDP project it has been implementing since 2007, which focuses on capacity-building for storage and safety of small arms stockpiles at 15 military sites. The
delegation also noted that it is prepared to share the software it has for automated record keeping with other countries.

Other delegations noted where more assistance is required. Algeria referenced its efforts at cross-border cooperation with its neighbours and said more assistance is needed in this area, especially with the continuously deteriorating situation in Libya. Algeria’s delegation also pointed out that good legislation is not enough—a country needs resources, good governance, and socioeconomic development. It appealed for international assistance to give substantial targeted assistance to states that are structurally incapable of fighting illicit flows of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and also specifically to development programmes of developing countries, which would indirectly help them eliminate or mitigate illicit trade in SALW. Kenya’s delegation also highlighted the importance of integrating developing into disarmament programmes.

A number of countries, including Cuba and Iran, highlighted the importance of non-discriminatory assistance. Cuba’s delegation also noted the importance of the assistance bearing in mind specific needs of states and giving priority to national capacity-building, including legislative systems, procedures, training, and coordination. Cuba’s delegation also called for donor countries to provide more information on available resources and for greater participation of UN Regional Centres in helping states implement the UNPoA and identifying available resources.

Some delegations focused on the challenges to provision of assistance. The US delegation emphasized the comprehensive nature of assistance, saying that a donor cannot just provide funds or equipment but that it also needs to consider the training needed to use the equipment, the provision of support equipment, the provision of logistical support such as vehicles or gas, etc. It argued that follow-up by donor countries is important to ensure that training and equipment is being maintained and that the initial momentum has not been lost, with equipment gathering dust in a warehouse. Switzerland’s delegation likewise noted the importance of an holistic approach to assistance and capacity-building.

The Japanese delegation noted that it might be prudent to have foreign aid specialists in the room when discussing international assistance as the budgets of many governments are controlled by different departments than the substantive branches. And the Regional Centre for Small Arms (RECSA) highlighted the need for coordination among donors that are supporting programmes in regions that have regional mechanisms, noting the importance for donors to bear in mind regional priorities so that countries can coordinate, especially those with shared problems.

A healthy degree of critical analysis
Katherine Prizeman | Global Action to Prevent War

On the final day of discussions at the first MGE on small arms, the Mexican delegation aptly called upon member states to conduct a critical and deep analysis of the UNPoA so that not just the issue of implementation is reviewed, but also key aspects of implementation that have and have not yet been successfully realized. This appeal for a healthy degree of critical analysis is absolutely essential to the implementation of the UNPoA and, ultimately, the control and eventual eradication of the illicit trade in SALWs—a concern that is truly global as it affects every region whether as manufacturer or importer, post-conflict or civil war-ridden, supplier or consumer.

This week’s highly technical discussions were focused principally on the challenges of implementation on the UNPoA and ITI, particularly marking, recordkeeping, and tracing. References to recordkeeping mechanisms, marking techniques, and tracing software dominated what was a thorough and beneficial exchange of views of government experts and other national practitioners who directly apply these methods in their capitals. Discussions of regional cooperation and international assistance
were also highly beneficial for addressing implementation challenges. Suffice to say, the mandate of the meeting has been effectively fulfilled through a viable exchange of information and experiences. The conversation alone has ultimately been an end in and of itself.

It is equally important, however, that the international community take a broader approach in the analysis of the illicit trade of SALWs in other fora. In this sense, Mexico’s appeal to discuss other SALW-related issues—including border controls, ammunition, intermediary brokers, and civil society cooperation—is necessary in addition to the technical aspects of marking, tracing, and recordkeeping in order to improve implementation of the UNPoA. This more expansive discussion, although not necessarily appropriate during this experts’ meeting, provides a valuable context for devising a comprehensive strategy for the control, prevention, and eradication of trade in small arms and light weapons. Consensus on all these issues will surely not be reached among member states, but honest analysis is nonetheless indispensable to complement a forward-looking approach to the UNPoA.

Also important to note, the Mexican delegation called to have the MGE, the first of its kind, institutionalized during the 2012 Review Conference of the UNPoA in order to provide a recurring medium for exchange on implementation. A need for continual discussion is most evident in the context of rapidly evolving technologies and the resulting “weapons obsolescence” that undeniably changes the SALW debate. Diplomats and experts must be given the opportunity for regular and robust updates to better implement their national UNPoA commitments.

We believe this week of discussions has been a tremendous contribution to the control of the illicit trade in SALWs with confidence that, in many cases, state needs and resources have been effectively matched, information exchanged, and best practices communicated. Our hope is that further and deeper contextual analysis will provide even greater movement forward in the process of eradicating illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.

Closing arguments
Robert Zuber | Global Action to Prevent War

The final day of the MGE was rich in content, cooperation and wisdom to help drive the PoA process towards greater levels of consensus and implementation. In part due to the creative, hands-on leadership of the Chair, the discussions this week have mixed practical results and broad-based technical support with ideas that can capture the imagination and help us convince the skeptical that progress on the PoA is both feasible and in the best interests of the global community.

Among the many helpful concepts and images, one provided by the Swiss called for ‘comprehensive life cycle management.’ This echoes a point made previously in the Monitor—that small arms remain lethal long past the point that they are relevant for use in the formal security sector and that dependable marking and tracing protocols for the international community must be able to provide ‘cradle to grave’ coverage of the movement of such weapons.

Comprehensive management, as we have seen this week, is an ambitious goal incorporating a myriad of technical, communications and capacity issues. Towards that end, diplomats and their experts have negotiated challenging terrain this week—helping to resolve communications and tracing obstacles while providing practical and political incentives needed to achieve broad agreement and enhance implementation prospects.

The results are encouraging. While consensus on all provisions remains elusive, there has been broad assent within conference room 1 to the proposition that global security requires strong measures to dry up unmarked stockpiles, end the illicit trade in small arms, eliminate incentives for weapons diversion, and
affirm measures of regulatory coherence that can encourage confidence and fair play. We all have plenty to do before the next RevCon – including broad constituent outreach and conversations in many capitals. But we also hope and urge that the diverse experts gathered this week can be enlisted as an informal committee to help address issues and questions that our conversations have failed to resolve. The more ongoing clarity can be provided to delegations by these experts, the more likely that the next RevCon will fulfill some of its loftiest promises.