Thank you Mr. President, for this opportunity to speak.

My name is Victor Amissi and I come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. My NGO is called Vision Gram International, and we are a member of IANSA.

Seventeen years ago when the Programme of Action was agreed by all Member States, the people in my country and others in the Great Lakes region been suffering from:

- crimes against humanity
- war crimes
- gross violations of human rights
- and even genocide – the crime of crimes

All of these crimes were carried out and facilitated by soldiers and non-state combatants, mainly using small arms and light weapons – and of course with the ammunition.

The last time the Programme of Action was being reviewed, armed men were still continuing to use – or we should say abuse – what the United Nations Secretary General called the “weapons of choice in civil wars and for terrorism, organized crime and gang warfare.”

Our people still suffer from such violence. Since August 2016, the Kasai provinces in the DRC have seen massive and systematic atrocities committed by all sides. An armed militia group called Bana Mura is accused of raping women and children, hacking or burning people to death, and mutilating villagers, including children.

On the other side of this conflict, the Kamwina Nsapu militia is accused of recruiting children, execution of police and officials, and decapitating police officers. It is estimated that 1.3 million people have been displaced by the conflict.

That is not all. The Ituri province of DRC has seen a surge in armed violence since December 2017. Dozens of people have been killed, thousands of houses burned down and more than 100,000 people have been displaced. That includes 42,000 refugees who crossed Lake Albert into Uganda.

Mr Chair, the Programme of Action was intended to strengthen action to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit manufacture, transfer and circulation of small arms and light weapons and (I emphasize) their excessive accumulation and uncontrolled spread in many regions of the world.
Yet in Africa, conflicts fought mainly with these weapons have continued raging for the last two decades. Gun crime by networks of gangs has become entrenched not only in my region, but in the West, the North, the East and the South of our continent.

I want to stress that African countries make very few of the guns and ammunition that are used in criminal activities against our people. For the last 17 years of the Programme of Action, these deadly weapons have flowed into Africa from other countries. Often the guns and ammunition are placed in the hands of insufficiently trained and un-accountable officials. The old weapons and ammunition are not destroyed when the new supplies arrive. Non-state actors may obtain their weapons through diversion, but sometimes guns and ammunition are supplied directly to powerful armed groups.

Too many government stocks are insecure and correct handling procedures are not followed, so weapons and ammunition leak out. Diversion is amplified by theft, bribery and corruption. Some of that illicit trade is done by officials and unscrupulous businessmen, and linked to the plunder of Africa’s rich natural resources, or to political rivalries, as United Nations and other authoritative studies have shown. Thus, it is not surprising that arms have reached the hands of militia and criminal gangs – resulting in murders, rapes, displacement, plunder, and thwarted economic development.

UNDP recently published a report called “Journey to Extremism in Africa”, based upon hundreds of interviews, including men in marginalized communities. The report makes clear that the most significant reason why African men join extremist armed groups is a sense of grievance towards, and limited confidence in, their governments and local authorities. Among the respondents, 71% mentioned ‘government action’, including ‘arrest or killing of a family member or friend’, as the immediate incident that prompted them to join an extremist armed group.

African governments say they are doing their best, but they lack resources. They need to fix gaps in our national legislation and regulations on small arms and light weapons. They need to create sufficient capacity to enforce those laws according to the best United Nations and international standards. For example, law enforcement operations must limit the use of force to the minimum extent necessary – but in our region, state security forces often commit violent acts with small arms and light weapons, even against unarmed protestors. A culture of militarism is often dominant in policing, rather than a culture of the rule of law and human rights. This exacerbates conflicts and violent dissent.

Mr Chair, this is why African civil society organisations insist that the success or failure of the Programme of Action depends on making real progress towards good governance. This requires a major push by the whole international community to work with Africa to implement the Sustainable Development Goal 16 and to put into practice the General Assembly’s November 2012 ‘Rule of Law Declaration’, including its applicability to the trade in small arms and light weapons.

Thank you very much.