



WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION MANAGEMENT - COUNTRY INSIGHT SERIES

# Republic of Costa Rica

## Introduction

In March 2025, the Republic of Costa Rica, through the Ministries of Public Security and Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), conducted a national weapons and ammunition management (WAM) baseline assessment. The assessment focused on the current state of WAM in Costa Rica and examined the existing national framework, institutional and operational capacities, processes, practices and procedures. The assessment, including a consultative multi-stakeholder meeting process, identified new approaches, options and recommendations for strengthening the national framework governing the control and management of weapons and ammunition in Costa Rica.

This Country Insight presents the main findings of the national WAM baseline assessment in Costa Rica, covering the period until March 2025. This publication is based on the full report prepared and submitted by UNIDIR, in cooperation with the OAS, to the Government of Costa Rica. It is recognised that significant progress has been made by the Costa Rican authorities since the in-country assessment.

### República de Costa Rica

**Population:** 5.2 million

**Region:** Central America

**Capital:** San José

**Annual GDP (2024):** USD 95.35 billion

**Assessment Date:** March 2025



Most of the key findings and options for strengthening the national framework remain valid. This Country Insight is structured as follows: after an introduction to the national context and WAM in Costa Rica, the main findings and observations are presented as key functional areas. Subsequently, the options identified and validated during the consultative process for each functional area are presented. The final section offers perspectives on the use of the assessment results and the implementation of options to strengthen the national WAM framework. This publication is part of a series dedicated to States that have conducted assessments using UNIDIR's reference methodology and annual updates on progress made in strengthening WAM frameworks, policies and practices.<sup>1</sup>

## **BOX 1: WHAT IS WAM?**

Weapons and ammunition management (WAM) is the oversight, accountability and governance over arms and ammunition throughout their entire life-cycle. This includes the establishment of relevant national frameworks, as well as processes and practices for the acquisition, storage, transfers, end use control, tracing, and disposal of such material in a safe, secure and responsible manner. WAM covers conventional weapons, including small arms and light weapons, ammunition, their components and related materials.<sup>2</sup>

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## **BOX 2: KEY FUNCTIONAL AREAS OF WAM AS PART OF A NATIONAL BASELINE ASSESSMENT**

The national WAM baseline approach and reference methodology developed by UNIDIR and used to date by 18 States worldwide for assessments, including El Salvador, Guatemala and Costa Rica in Central America, is based on key functional areas. This approach and methodology aim to assess, to the extent possible, the management of the entire life-cycle of weapons and ammunition, thereby promoting a comprehensive understanding of the institutions, capacities, practices, procedures and actors involved in WAM.

The key functional areas adapted to the Costa Rican context, predetermined by the national authorities were:

1. National coordination mechanism;
2. Legal and regulatory framework at the national level;
3. Transfer controls;
4. Prevention and combating the diversion and illicit trafficking of weapons and ammunition;
5. Stockpile management of weapons and ammunition;
6. Weapons marking;
7. Record-keeping and information management;
8. Processing of illicit weapons and ammunition and the fight against organised crime;
9. Final disposal, including destruction of weapons and ammunition;
10. Prevention of armed violence;
11. Private security and private security companies (PSCs).

The integration of gender-sensitive policies and practices into the WAM is a cross-cutting enabling functional area that contributes to strengthening the national security sector and the exercise of oversight, accountability and governance over weapons and ammunition. Women's leadership is evident in various aspects of WAM in Costa Rica, including the focal points for the in-country assessment and at the international level. A gender-sensitive approach to arms control and disarmament, as well as women's participation in WAM, is an integral part of the planning, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of a national WAM baseline assessment, and of WAM initiatives and activities.

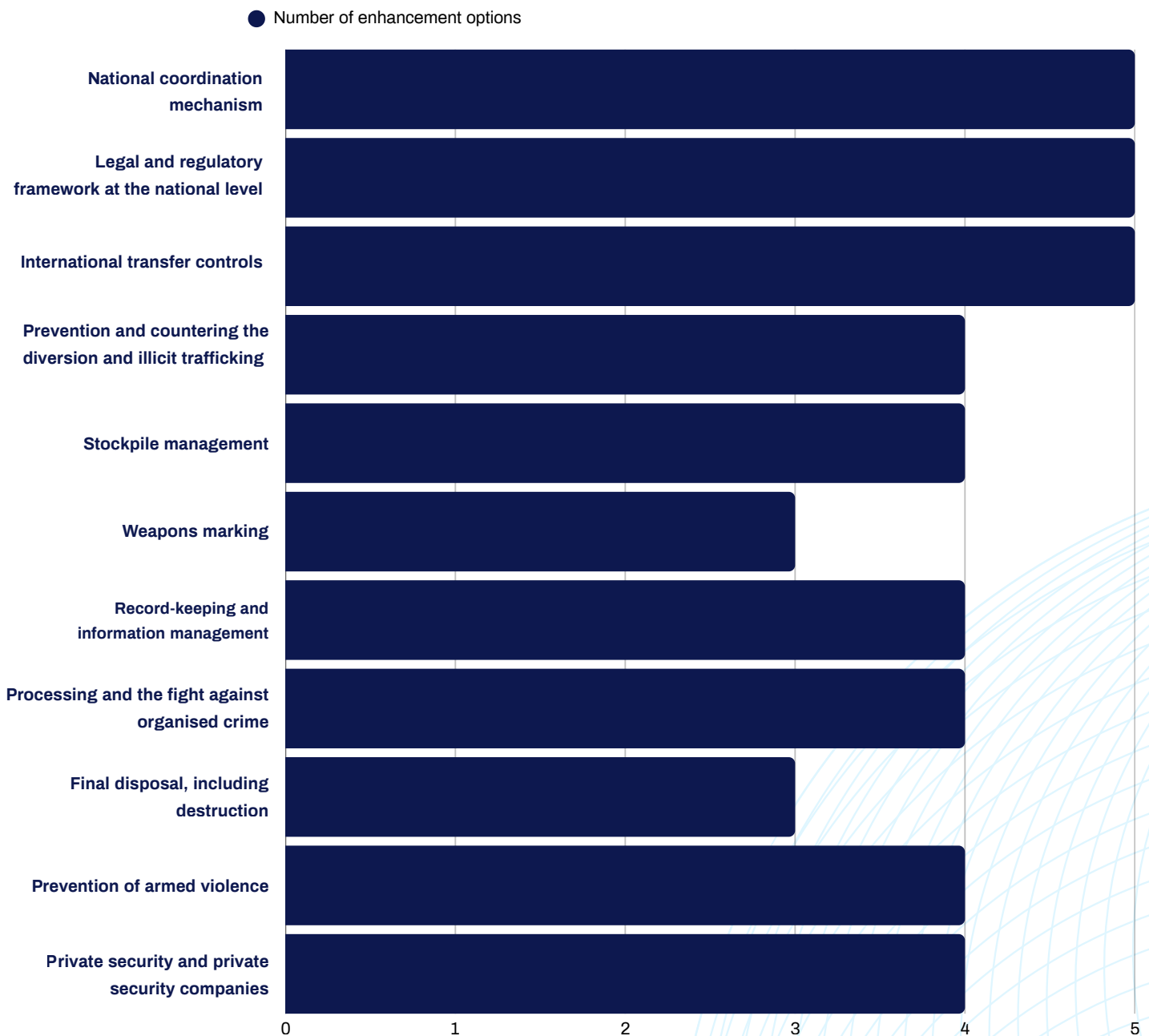
In Costa Rica, the methodology was adapted for the first time to focus on both supply-side controls and measures and demand-side aspects of weapons and ammunition. A supply-side approach focuses on the regulation and accountability regarding production, transfers, and end-use. A demand-side approach focuses on weapons already present in a given context, and an understanding of who misuses weapons and why, in order to reduce such misuse.

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### BOX 3. OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COSTA RICA

One of the key results of a national WAM baseline assessment, which constitutes the starting point for follow up activities to strengthen WAM, is the development and adoption of options and recommendations, summarised in a 'roadmap' (strategic document). In Costa Rica, these options and recommendations have been presented to the national authorities in the form of an executive summary, followed by a full report including an analysis of each functional area. The national authorities then prioritised the recommendations based on available resources and defined specific institutional responsibilities for each. It is expected that the results of the baseline assessment will support the development of a national strategy and/or action plan, thereby contributing to the implementation of broader national policies, the implementation of the Central American and Dominican Republic Roadmap, as well as regional and international instruments.

### OVERVIEW OF WAM ENHANCEMENT OPTIONS IN COSTA RICA



## KEY STAKEHOLDERS

### Ministries and Deputy Ministries (acronyms in the original Spanish):

- Ministry of the Interior, Police and Public Security: MSP
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship: MREC
- Judiciary
- Ministry of the Presidency
- Ministry of Justice and Peace: MJP
- Public Prosecutor's Office: MP
- Office of the Comptroller General
- Judicial Investigation Agency: OIJ
- Ministry of Finance
- Deputy Ministry of Peace of the Ministry of Justice and Peace: VICEPAZ

### Directorates and others

- Directorate-General for Armaments: DGA (MSP)
- Directorate-General of Customs (Ministry of Finance)
- Directorate of Intelligence and Security: DIS (MSP)
- Centre for Political Research and Studies: CIEP
- Coastguard (MSP)
- Directorate-General for the Promotion of Peace and Civic Coexistence: DIJEPAZ (MJP)
- Directorate-General for Migration and Foreigners (MSP)
- Directorate of the Air Surveillance Service: DSVA (under the MSP)
- Integrated Imaging and Operations Centre: CIIO (Ministry of Finance)
- Costa Rican Post Office (Ministry of Finance)
- Directorate of Intelligence and Security: DIS (Ministry of the Presidency)
- Directorate of Private Security Services: DSSP (MSP)

### Regional and international stakeholders (non-exhaustive list):

- Organization of American States: OAS
- United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research: UNIDIR
- Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Costa Rica
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: UNODC
- United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean: UNLIREC
- United Nations Development Programme: UNDP
- Central American Integration System: SICA
- Costa Rican civil society
- Costa Rica's commercial and manufacturing sector



## National Context

Costa Rica, situated on the Central American isthmus between the Caribbean and the Pacific, is renowned for its historic commitment to peace. On 1 December 1948, following the civil war of that same year, the country abolished its army, thereby paving the way for a development model centred on human welfare and investment in social policies, rather than military expansion. This decision enabled the consolidation of robust civil institutions and positioned Costa Rica as an international example for peace and democratic stability.

In recent years, this legacy has faced growing pressures stemming from the evolving security landscape in the region. The country's geographical location, on one of the main routes for international drug trafficking and in a context marked by the illicit proliferation of weapons, has facilitated the expansion of organised crime. Since the 1990s, Costa Rica has shifted from being primarily a transit country to hosting more complex criminal structures, capable of recruiting young people, disputing territories, and acquiring weapons and ammunition to sustain their activities. These dynamics have taken root particularly in communities affected by socio-economic vulnerability and weaknesses in local governance.

This context has contributed to a sustained increase in lethal violence. In 2023, 905 homicides were recorded,<sup>3</sup> with over 70% linked to drug trafficking and organised crime, the majority committed with firearms. In recent years, the country has failed to achieve a sustained reduction in these levels of violence.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies also indicate that the availability of weapons in contexts of socio-economic vulnerability creates conditions for epidemics of armed violence.<sup>5</sup> According to a survey by the Centre for Political Research and Studies (CIEP), insecurity and crime have become the main national concern.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, confidence in the state's ability to combat crime has weakened. Costa Rica thus faces a structural challenge in which its traditional democratic stability must adapt to transnational criminal dynamics. Against this backdrop, preserving Costa Rica's culture of peace requires strengthening

institutional responses to increasingly complex and transnational criminal dynamics.

National coordination and regional and international cooperation are essential to prevent the diversion and illicit proliferation of weapons and ammunition, as well as to protect the historic advances that have defined Costa Rica as a nation committed to peace, democracy and sustainable development.

## WAM Situation

In recent years, Costa Rica has strengthened its institutional framework for the control and management of weapons and ammunition, particularly within an increasingly complex national and regional context. The authorities have demonstrated a sustained commitment to enforcing existing legislation and improving oversight systems. However, high levels of illicit arms persist in Central America, linked both to past conflicts and to the activities of transnational criminal organisations. Added to this, in the Costa Rican context, is the increase in authorised imports, particularly by private and commercial actors, who imported approximately 7,875 small arms per year and over 58 million rounds of small-calibre ammunition between 2017 and 2023.<sup>7</sup> This combination poses significant challenges for existing institutional capacities.

Costa Rica's geographical position creates specific vulnerabilities. Its land borders with Nicaragua and Panama – often extensive and difficult to access – and its long coastlines on the Pacific and Atlantic facilitate the illicit transit of drugs and weapons, particularly through seaports such as Limón and Quepos.<sup>8</sup> These conditions reinforce the need for a robust and coherent national framework covering the entire life-cycle of weapons and ammunition, from import to final disposal.

Domestically, the deterioration in security has driven up demand for weapons and ammunition. The increase in imports requested and authorised for private, commercial and civilian recipients reflects this trend and highlights the need to strengthen

control, oversight, monitoring and accountability systems. Furthermore, the proliferation of armed municipal police forces, which report administratively to local governments, has created parallel structures that are not always fully integrated into national arms control systems, which may further increase the risks of diversion if not systematically addressed.

Costa Rica has played a leading role in promoting regional and international arms control norms, including its active participation in multilateral forums such as the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms,

its leadership in the processes leading to the Arms Trade Treaty, and the Global Framework for Through-life Conventional Ammunition Management.<sup>9</sup> At the national level, however, awareness of these instruments remains limited, and their effective implementation could be further supported by addressing gaps in resources and capacity. Implementing the required measures and good practices could strengthen the national framework and help to prevent and counter diversion, illicit trafficking, insecurity and armed violence in different parts of the country.

## Key Functional Area No. 1: National coordination mechanism

In Costa Rica, national coordination for the control and management of weapons and ammunition in 2025 happened in a decentralised and largely informal manner. In the absence of an active coordination mechanism, at both the strategic and operational levels, actions were mainly coordinated ad hoc, with limited exchanges between institutions and a weak link between the operational and higher levels of decision-making and allocation of available resources.

The MSP, through the DGA, plays a central role in this area, complemented by the MREC in coordinating regional and international cooperation. Other key entities include the Directorate-General of Customs (within the Ministry of Finance), the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP) and the OIJ. At the operational level, the Public Force (Costa Rica's police force) and the MSP's special units constitute the first point of intervention. While an inter-institutional coordination mechanism existed between 2014 and 2018,<sup>10</sup> in which the Ministry of the Presidency also participated, in 2025 this mechanism was inactive. This has contributed to a lack of common understandings and definitions, criteria and harmonised procedures, affecting the effective and efficient implementation of through-life WAM activities and operations.

Against this backdrop, the national authorities identified as a priority the reactivation or redesign of a formal coordination mechanism, based on a previous structure and on recommendations from earlier assessments, to enable a clearer articulation of institutional roles, strengthen communication and align strategic and operational actions. Likewise, the need for a national forum to facilitate the coordination of international cooperation and reduce the risk of fragmented efforts was highlighted. In this context, the momentum generated by the Roadmap for Central America and the Dominican Republic served as a catalyst to begin developing, in 2025, a more integrated national action plan aligned with the Costa Rica Segura Plus (2023–2030) national public security policy. As key enabling factors, the importance of investing in the professionalisation of staff, ensuring the continuity of technical training and establishing clear institutional focal points was emphasised, with the aim of sustainably strengthening the country's capacity to manage the life-cycle of weapons and ammunition.

## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL COORDINATION MECHANISM

- ➡ Immediately reactivate, based on an existing decree, the national coordination mechanism at the strategic level (inter-institutional and inter-sectoral), including all national entities and focal points for regional and international instruments and processes, and relevant institutions/agencies; use this mechanism for the coordination at the national level of cooperation and even international assistance.

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- ➡ Establish technical bodies (working groups, standing committees, etc.) under this mechanism, for example, for the following:
  - Review, develop and validate procedures (written, formal, national) at the technical level and/or assess their effective implementation; focusing on:
    - The licensing process, including the assessment of risks of diversion in international transfers (imports) of weapons and ammunition, based on criteria and indicators to be defined
    - The risk-based approach to access by private entities (private security companies), civilian entities and civilians to arms, ammunition, parts and components (licensing system and procedures, authorisations, monitoring and follow-up, etc.)
    - The process for handling weapons and ammunition recovered from the illicit sphere, from initial registration, custody, storage, profiling and tracing, through the legal process, to final disposal, including destruction
  - Review, develop and keep the national control list, which forms part of the national control system, up to date.

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- ➡ Develop and adopt, amongst the relevant and competent institutions, a national action plan to combat diversion and illicit trafficking, integrated with and/or contributing to broader strategies, and taking as a reference both the results of this assessment and the Roadmap for Central America and the Dominican Republic adopted in February 2025 by Costa Rica.

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- ➡ Ensure that the competent national authorities, including those within the national control system, are equipped with the necessary resources and capacities to implement priority actions (which can be achieved both through the national budget and by mobilising resources via international cooperation and assistance)

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- ➡ Develop a sustainable and comprehensive approach to the continuous training of staff, aligned with international (MOSAIC, IATG) guidelines and regional standards using resources already available. For example, through train-the-trainer approaches, specific yet integrated staff training plans for each institution, and the inclusion of modules/training from diplomatic, police and other academies.

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## Key Functional Area No. 2: Legal and regulatory framework at the national level

In Costa Rica, the legal framework governing the control of arms, ammunition and explosives is based primarily on Law No. 7530 of 1995,<sup>11</sup> supplemented by specific reforms and secondary legislation, such as the Law on the Regulation of Private Security Services and provisions of the Criminal Code. While the country has carried out specialist studies in cooperation with partners,<sup>12</sup> the consultative process revealed that the current legal and regulatory framework at the national level contains gaps, inconsistencies and ambiguities that create vulnerabilities, some of which can be exploited by actors willing to operate in legal grey areas and by organised crime.

Among the main challenges identified are the lack of clear definitions of arms, ammunition, parts and components, as well as insufficient regulation of key activities throughout their life-cycle, such as transfers, including brokering, marking, tracing and final disposal. There is also a lack of clarity and specificity regarding actors that are subject to regulation and regarding the powers and responsibilities of the authorities tasked with

enforcing the legal framework, which limits the effectiveness of security and control institutions. It was also observed that national legislation has not yet fully incorporated key provisions of international and regional instruments to which Costa Rica is a State Party and has undertaken to implement.

Therefore, national authorities and experts identified as a priority the need to move towards strengthening the legal framework, building on previous studies and recommendations, with a view to its eventual modernisation. This process could be led by a national coordination mechanism, an inter-institutional technical group, and supported by international cooperation. Whilst progress is made on a more far-reaching reform of the legal and regulatory framework, the usefulness of adopting regulatory measures and strengthening capacity-building and awareness-raising on the applicable legal framework were highlighted. These would aim at reducing operational risks and improving the coherence and effectiveness of the national weapons control and ammunition management system.



## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

- ➔ Strengthen the current legal and regulatory framework at the national level (including primary and secondary legislation, regulations, administrative procedures, etc.), taking into account recent studies and recommendations already made by the OAS and UNODC, to reflect the reality of public security and armed violence in the country; thereby addressing current and emerging issues; identifying gaps and necessary changes, taking into account regional and international obligations, commitments and standards.

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- ➔ Conduct a comprehensive review of the current legal and regulatory framework at the national level, identifying gaps, inconsistencies and opportunities for improvement, with an inclusive and participatory approach that is sensitive to gender and age, and, if necessary, the creation of a new law on the control and management of firearms and ammunition.

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- ➔ Implement the resulting actions through the national coordination mechanism (for example, a working group with legal expertise), ensuring the consultation and participation of all relevant societal stakeholders for the comprehensive reform of the regulatory framework.

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- ➔ Adopt interim measures such as administrative procedures or circulars based on Article 4 of Law 7530, whilst a new law is being developed.

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- ➔ Conduct continuous awareness-raising campaigns among all relevant national stakeholders, including state entities at ministerial level, non-governmental organisations within Costa Rican society, regarding the applicable legal and regulatory framework (national, regional and international), and in light of possible future changes to this framework.

## Key Functional Area No. 3: Transfer controls

In Costa Rica, the control of international transfers of arms, ammunition and related material in 2025 was the primary responsibility of the MSP, through the DGA, and the Ministry of Finance via the General Directorate of Customs, which is responsible for border controls. The MREC coordinated international commitments, whilst the MP and the OIJ were involved in the prevention and prosecution of diversion and illicit trafficking, including cross-border trafficking.<sup>13</sup> As a non-producing and non-exporting country, Costa Rica participated in international trade primarily as a transit and importing country.

In recent years, state imports have been limited, whilst those destined for private actors have reached significant volumes. A central element of the national control system is the control list, updated in 2018.<sup>14</sup> However, national experts noted that its definitions

were not sufficiently clear and that they did not adequately incorporate ammunition nor recent technological developments, which hindered their practical application. Furthermore, Costa Rica lacked a specific approach to regulating arms brokering, which created risks of transactions going unrecorded or remaining unknown to the competent authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Import authorisations were managed by the DGA via the ControlPas digital system. However, the sustained increase in applications, coupled with resource constraints, was creating significant pressure. In the face of these challenges, national discussions identified several options to strengthen the national control system. Among these, the need to review and update the national control list more regularly to reflect changes in trade and

technological advances was highlighted, as was the need to strengthen the DGA's institutional and technical capacities to manage the growing volume of applications. The importance of improving the assessment of diversion risks and end-user controls was also emphasised, through strengthened

coordination with customs authorities and other relevant entities, with a view to moving towards more consistent and effective controls that are aligned with the regional and international obligations and commitments by Costa Rica.

## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL TRANSFER CONTROLS

- ➔ Under a national coordination mechanism, establish a technical entity, for example a working group, for the ongoing review of the national control list, taking into account existing gaps as well as new threats, developments and emerging technologies; and adopt an updated list, with clear national categories and definitions, which maintains consistency and coherence with the forthcoming reform.

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- ➔ Reposition and elevate, within the Ministry of Public Security, the DGA – the competent national authority within the national control system, with primary responsibility for the control and management of legally held weapons and ammunition in Costa Rica – by granting it greater independence and the necessary resources to fulfil its assigned functions and missions, through national budgetary allocations and/or the mobilisation of resources via international assistance.

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- ➔ At a minimum, strengthen the DGA's capacity, in terms of officers and administrative staff, for the classification of arms, ammunition, and related materials, and for the assessment of applications and licensing, in order to address the high demand for import permits, registration and permits for possession of firearms by civilians and security/private companies.

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- ➔ Involve the national civil aviation authority in transfer control efforts and strengthen cooperation with the sector (airline companies) for awareness-raising, for example through campaigns, and/or aviation security, and/or customs controls (pre-screening, verification of required documentation, etc.).

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- ➔ Provide customs and agencies responsible for border control with clear and regularly updated risk indicators and profiles (see below) to enable the channelling of limited resources and capacity to key points, interventions and interceptions.

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## Key Functional Area No. 4: Prevention and combating the diversion and illicit trafficking of weapons and ammunition

In Costa Rica, national authorities such as the MSP, the MP and the OIJ noted in 2025 that understanding of patterns of diversion and illicit trafficking of weapons and ammunition remains limited and fragmented. The lack of consolidated information on origins, routes, actors involved and methods that are used reduces the State's capacity to effectively prevent, detect and respond to these activities, and hinders efforts to combat organised crime and

impunity. This limited visibility constitutes one of the main challenges to a preventive approach based on the management of risks.

During the assessment meetings held in March 2025, with support from the OAS and UNIDIR, the authorities began to assess the various types of diversion more systematically throughout the life-cycle of weapons and ammunition.<sup>16</sup> Types of

diversion included unauthorised manufacture; diversion during transfers through false documentation or redirection; losses or thefts from state stocks; thefts or unauthorised trade by private companies; irregular circulation between private individuals; and illicit cross-border movements in small quantities; amongst others. Several national experts also referred to the important role of technological developments and their impact on types of diversion. This initial typology has fostered a more structured understanding of the diversion and illicit trafficking of weapons and ammunition.

Based on these discussions, several avenues were identified to strengthen prevention and the state's response. In particular, the importance of building a common understanding among all relevant institutions regarding how diversion occurs was

drawing on both existing tools and international cooperation. An opportunity to expand arms transfer risk assessments beyond the MSP, by involving other key agencies more systematically, was also emphasised. An additional opportunity exists with the joint development of clear and up-to-date risk indicators, which would allow limited resources to be better directed towards priority detection and interdiction actions. The urgency of examining, establishing and implementing controls on brokers was also noted. In the longer term, strengthening the national registration system and information management was identified as a key enabler for improving preventive analysis and supporting sustained efforts to reduce and disrupt illicit flows of weapons and ammunition (see key functional area 7 below).



## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE PREVENTION AND COMBATING THE DIVERSION AND ILLICIT TRAFFICKING OF WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION

- ➡ Under a national coordination mechanism, establish a technical entity, for example a working group, to develop indicators and risk profiles for diversion, integrating information and intelligence; and use these profiles for the detection of diversions and interception efforts
- ➡ Strengthen the capacities of existing special units on illicit trafficking in weapons and ammunition, for example, within the OIJ; and support the creation of new units, for example, within the MP or other bodies, to investigate diversion and illicit trafficking
- ➡ Establish, as a matter of urgency, a process to review, establish and implement controls on intermediaries (brokering), informed by best practices, instruments and relevant international and regional standards
- ➡ Develop inter-agency operational cooperation protocols and hold regular operational working meetings between the institutions involved

## Key Functional Area No. 5: Stockpile management of weapons, ammunition and explosives

In Costa Rica, responsibility for the management of weapons and ammunition stockpiles in 2025 was distributed according to the type of material and its end-use/users. The national arsenal and the stocks of the Public Force were managed primarily by the DGA of the MSP, whilst the stocks of the PSCs were under the joint supervision of the DGA and the DSSP. Material recovered from the illicit sphere was managed by the MP and the OIJ, although its final storage was, in many cases, carried out at DGA facilities.

Technical assessments carried out with the support of the OAS and other specialist partners identified vulnerabilities in the infrastructure and procedures, some of which have been partially addressed. However, the 2025 assessment highlighted persistent challenges, including risks associated with the accumulation of material and new threats arising from the use of technology by civilians, such as drone overflights of critical infrastructure, which underscore the need to strengthen mitigation and protection measures for such infrastructure.

National authorities identified several options for strengthening stockpile management. Firstly, priority should be given to the maintenance and rehabilitation and/or construction of the critical infrastructure necessary for the storage of national stockpiles, including the National Arsenal. Likewise, the need to modernise technological equipment, improve interoperability between institutional control systems and plan for sustained investments to address both the increase in stockpiles and emerging security and protection risks was highlighted. As key enabling factors, the importance of personnel, technical capacity-building, ensuring the continuity of specialised training, and strategically leveraging international cooperation — including active participation in the regional Roadmap— to consolidate a safer, more modern, and more effective stockpile management system was emphasised.

## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING STOCKPILE MANAGEMENT

- ➔ Prioritise the maintenance, refurbishment and/or construction of the physical infrastructure required for the storage of growing national stockpiles, including those managed by the National Arsenal, based on assessments carried out or implemented to date
- ➔ Modernise technological equipment, including the technical interoperability of weapons and ammunition control systems across different state institutions
- ➔ Review current protocols and develop, where necessary, new related protocols to strengthen control and improve the efficiency of processes within national institutions responsible for the life-cycle management of weapons and ammunition, in line with international best practices
- ➔ Strengthen national capacities through training and technical assistance provided by international organisations in the various areas of weapons and ammunition life-cycle management

## Key Functional Area No. 6: Weapons marking

In Costa Rica, state-owned weapons have a national identification code aligned with regional and international standards. However, regulatory gaps persisted and measures were lacking regarding additional, secondary markings of weapons imported by private and commercial actors, a practice that had not been established despite previous efforts. During the meetings held in March 2025, a critical deficiency was also identified in the tracking and tracing of small-calibre ammunition, as it was technically difficult to distinguish between small-calibre ammunition in state and private use, which hindered criminal investigations and increased risks to public safety.

To strengthen this critical aspect of the national framework governing control, management and

tracing, the authorities identified as priorities the strengthening of the DGA's capacity to mark weapons imported for state use autonomously in the future, and the mandatory introduction of secondary marking for weapons imported and intended for civilians and private security companies. In the case of ammunition, it was proposed to explore — through international cooperation, and including with the private sector — the use of technological solutions allowing advanced marking measures. Furthermore, national authorities proposed measures that would allow for lot/batch identification by region or municipality of use, or to pilot technological solutions for monitoring private stockpiles, complemented by stricter reporting requirements for private actors.



## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING WEAPONS MARKING

- ➔ Establish secondary markings for imports of firearms intended for civilians and private security companies.
- ➔ To explore, through regional and international cooperation, specific collaboration with manufacturers and the possibility of closing any gaps in the marking of firearms and the additional marking of ammunition at the point of manufacture in order to improve tracing processes; to promote batch marking according to the region/municipality of use (law enforcement); to review controls on different calibres; and to review the regulations governing shooting ranges.
- ➔ Explore and pilot, through international cooperation and assistance, technologies and technical solutions that could strengthen the monitoring, verification and tracing of weapons and ammunition (from private/commercial entities).

## Key Functional Area No. 7: Record-keeping and information management

In Costa Rica, the national record-keeping and information management system in 2025 was largely centralised within the DGA of the MSP, which maintains the National Register (database) of all legally held weapons and ammunition in the country. For PSCs, the MSP's Private Security Directorate maintains a separate register. For its part, the Directorate-General of Customs, under the Ministry of Finance maintains a general customs information system and register. As for weapons recovered from the illegal and/or illicit sphere, the MP and/or the OIJ maintain a register containing the relevant information, whilst the DGA maintains the register of weapons and ammunition destroyed in the country. The national system is maintained, according to discussions in March 2025, almost entirely through computerised and electronic systems, with some authorities having a manual backup. Participants highlighted various challenges, both structural and relating to the practical implementation of the current registration system in line with its purposes. Some of these challenges also stem from the legal framework, which does not clearly define coordination including information-sharing between national authorities. In recent years, the DGA and other national authorities have made significant efforts to overcome these difficulties, including

the creation, piloting and transition to new information management systems, many with the support of international cooperation.<sup>17</sup>

Given this situation, there is a significant opportunity to move firmly towards, first and foremost, the review and strengthening of the national accounting system. This involves the preservation and maintenance of records, and the management of information relating to the control of arms, ammunition and explosives, thereby facilitating the fight against diversion and illicit trafficking. A prerequisite could be a mapping of both existing records and platforms, as well as recent initiatives. A study could then provide options and assess the feasibility of a new system, which would need to take into account various national criteria and regulations. It was recommended that any technological transition should align with national cybersecurity standards and international good practices and be accompanied by standardised procedures for the preparation of national reports, facilitating both accounting and reporting as well as compliance with obligations and commitments at regional and international levels.

## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING RECORD-KEEPING AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

- ➔ To supplement a mapping of all existing records and IT systems/platforms in use (record custodians, types/elements of information maintained and managed, users, purposes, and existing initiatives and projects); to consider commissioning a study of options and the feasibility of a new system, taking into account various applicable national criteria and regulations.

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- ➔ The DGA, with the support of the coordination mechanism, should ensure that the new accounting system integrates all weapons, ammunition and explosives held by the state and civilians into a single centralised register.

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- ➔ Any transition to the use of software for inventory management must comply with established best practices in weapons and ammunition control, encompassing records of transfers, national stockpiles, weapons and ammunition in civilian hands, weapons and ammunition recovered from the illegal or illicit sphere, and disposals.

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- ➔ Develop, adopt and implement a national document setting out procedures for reporting (based on the register(s)) on progress made in implementing various international and regional instruments, in accordance with their relevant provisions.

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## Key Functional Area No. 8: Processing of illicit weapons and ammunition and the fight against organised crime

In Costa Rica, the management of illicit and illegal weapons and ammunition involves several institutions with complementary mandates. The General Directorate of Customs and, most importantly, the Public Force are involved in the initial recovery and registration of the material, whilst the OIJ and the MP are responsible for its investigation, custody and analysis. In recent years, the OIJ has strengthened its capacities by establishing the Firearms Unit, using international tracing tools such as iARMS and eTrace for information exchange via INTERPOL and bilateral cooperation, and operating its own ballistics laboratory.

However, the 2025 assessment identified persistent challenges that limit the system's effectiveness. These include gaps in the chain of custody, inconsistencies in the collection of information necessary for tracing, and legal loopholes that hinder the proactive investigation of illicit arms trafficking. These weaknesses, coupled with operational and resource constraints, have contributed to a lack of evidence usable in court cases and the prolonged accumulation of seized weapons in the MP's facilities—and by extension those of the DGA—giving rise to security risks and elevated costs. It was also noted that there is a clear need for greater standardisation of procedures, a

single national procedure, and systematic personnel capacity-building for frontline officers, as well as for strengthening specialised capacities, including through a specialised prosecutor's office.

Against this backdrop, authorities and experts agreed on the desirability of moving towards a more coordinated and structured approach. Among the options identified is the harmonisation of the procedures of various authorities into a single national procedure for the management of illicit weapons and ammunition throughout the entire cycle, from initial recovery to final disposal, with the aim of establishing a clear national standard supported by joint personnel capacity building. More broadly, emphasis was placed on strengthening the national tracing system by bolstering the operational capacity of the Firearms Unit and enhancing interconnectivity between the databases of the MP, the OIJ and the DGA. Finally, the importance of expanding regional and bilateral cooperation with neighbouring countries to address the transnational nature of illicit arms trafficking was emphasised. This includes the logical sequencing of (domestic and international) tracing operations, and maximising the use of existing resources and mechanisms, with the aim of consolidating a more coherent, effective and sustainable response to diversion, illicit trafficking and organised crime.

### OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE PROCESSING OF ILLICIT WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION AND THE FIGHT AGAINST ORGANISED CRIME

- ➡ Strengthening the national tracing system for weapons and ammunition; that is, the operational capacity of the designated/competent national entity/national focal point (OIJ, UITRAM, and INTERPOL's NCB); populating the database of illicit weapons and ammunition; domestic and international tracing operations; use of judicial evidence; and creation of information and/or intelligence products; and their use to report on risk indicators and profiles for lines of investigation into diversion and illicit trafficking, including cross-border trafficking (routes, key points, entities and individuals).
- ➡ Develop at a technical level and standardise across institutions a national standard or standard operating procedure (SOP) for all police units of the Ministry and other relevant agencies covering the entire process for weapons and ammunition recovered from the illicit sphere, from the point of discovery/registration to the point of final disposal, including an annexed identification guide.

➔ Strengthen inter-agency cooperation (between the administrator of the registry of legal arms and the administrator of the registry of illicit and illegal arms) to ensure the sequence of tracking and tracing operations, namely: first, the conduct of domestic operations; second, if necessary, international operations, ensuring coordination between these and tracking operations.

➔ Strengthen regional and international cooperation, including in the areas of law enforcement and the tracing of arms and ammunition, using all existing and available mechanisms for Costa Rica (including the US eTrace system; iARMS and IBIS, via INTERPOL; the Panel of Experts assisting UN Security Council Committee 2653; bilateral commissions; etc.).

## Key Functional Area No. 9: Final disposal, including destruction of weapons and ammunition

In Costa Rica in 2025 final disposal of weapons and ammunition was carried out primarily through destruction. The process is overseen by the DGA of the MSP, which requires prior authorisation granted by a competent judge of the Judiciary.<sup>18</sup> Weapons seized, confiscated or otherwise recovered from the illicit sphere remain in the custody of either the MP or the DGA of the MSP, and can only be destroyed if no longer required as evidence in legal proceedings.<sup>19</sup> Given the challenges with final disposal through destruction in a timely manner (and the economic cost associated with storage), the main point that emerged in March 2025 was the need to strengthen coordination and communication channels between the MSP, the MP, and the Judiciary. This includes the definition of a common procedure, clear responsibilities, and reasonable timeframes for authorising the final disposal of weapons and ammunition.

Costa Rica has established itself as a regional leader in this area. Between 2005 and 2023, the country destroyed more than 65,000 weapons,<sup>20</sup> with significant support from the OAS's Programme of Assistance on Control of Arms and Munition (PACAM), which facilitated the destruction of nearly 42,000 weapons and more than 3.6 million rounds of ammunition up to 2024. Costa Rica had also previously cooperated with UNLIREC and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), which since 2016 have provided technical assistance, including the first destruction of weapons no longer used by private security companies.<sup>21</sup> By 2025, however, more than 500 weapons were still awaiting a court ruling, leading to prolonged accumulations with security risks and high costs, hampered by the absence of standardised procedures and clear deadlines for authorising destruction.



In the face of these challenges, national discussions identified as a priority the strengthening of coordination between the MSP, the MP and the Judiciary. Among the options identified are the adoption of a common procedure and formal protocols for destruction, the allocation of additional resources to the DGA – in particular for the disposal of ammunition – and the incorporation of safe

recycling practices. It was also recommended that inter-institutional agreements be formalised to streamline the judicial decision-making process and that international cooperation continue to be leveraged to consolidate technical capacities and ensure the sustainability of the system for final disposal.

## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING FINAL DISPOSAL, INCLUDING DESTRUCTION

- ➡ Establish an inter-institutional agreement between state authorities on a common procedure and decision-making regarding final disposal, including destruction, in a timely and as rapid a manner as possible, of all weapons and ammunition that have been or are currently being used as evidence in legal proceedings; and ensure its full implementation.

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- ➡ Institutionalise procedures for the destruction of weapons and ammunition through the adoption of protocols.

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- ➡ Continue to take advantage of the assistance offered by international institutions, such as the OAS, in the field of weapons and ammunition destruction, with the aim of consolidating capacities and ensuring the continuity of processes.

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## Key Functional Area No. 10: Prevention of armed violence

In Costa Rica, the prevention of armed violence is underpinned by a comprehensive legal and policy framework – including the Arms and Explosives Act, the Criminal Code, the Explosives Regulations, the Private Security Services Act, the Psychotropic Substances Act, and the Costa Rica Segura Plus (2023–2030) national public security policy. This framework was complemented by regional commitments, in particular the OAS Roadmap, as well as by historic peace-promotion initiatives, such as the 2010 national campaign highlighting the benefits of living in a country without an army.<sup>22</sup>

However, the recent rise in homicides and the consolidation of criminal economies in areas such as Limón and Puntarenas contributed to the normalisation of the use of arms in everyday conflicts and to an increase in civilian demand for firearms, driven by a perception of insecurity.<sup>23</sup> Although relevant preventive programmes existed, such as those run by the Vice-Minister for Peace

(VICEPAZ) and the Civic Peace Centres, the evaluation found that many of these initiatives did not explicitly incorporate the dimension of arms control nor did they systematically use data on weapons circulation and patterns of violence to guide specific territorial interventions.

Against this backdrop, priority options were identified to strengthen the prevention of armed violence. Among these, the need to coordinate existing programmes more coherently and to explicitly integrate arms control into community prevention strategies was highlighted. The importance of reducing civilian demand for weapons by addressing cultural factors associated with violence and strengthening the use of data to design evidence-based interventions was also emphasised. As a concrete measure, the possibility of a one-off, temporary, and time-bound amnesty was considered, with a legal basis granted by the competent national authority, for the regularisation

or voluntary surrender of unregistered or unwanted weapons, accompanied by public information

campaigns and secure disposal mechanisms, in line with the recommendations of the regional Roadmap.

## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE PREVENTION OF ARMED VIOLENCE

- ➔ Strengthen programmes, capacity-building initiatives and education specifically aimed at local-level gun control in the communities most affected by armed violence; these initiatives promote a gender- and youth-focused approach and support the Costa Rica Segura Plus (2023–2030) (MSP) national public security policy and the Civic Peace Centres at national level (Ministry of Justice and Peace)

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- ➔ Consider and implement, in cooperation with local authorities and community associations, transitional measures for the management of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and their ammunition within communities (containers, safes or lockups), to reduce risks to communities and individuals (women, men and children)

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- ➔ Consider designing a public campaign offering the regularisation of unregistered weapons; and/or the voluntary collection or handover of weapons that are unwanted or deemed ineligible for registration under national legislation. This would involve the use of amnesties or reductions in penalties or fines for a limited period with a required legal basis, taking into account other international experiences and good practices. This could take the form of a one-off, temporary, comprehensive amnesty for the regularisation of all unauthorised, unlicensed or unregistered small arms in the country, whether held by civilians or by private or commercial entities

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- ➔ Implement the recommendations on the prevention of armed violence in the OAS Roadmap.<sup>24</sup>

## Key Functional Area No. 11: Private security and private security companies (PSCs)

In Costa Rica and by early 2025, the private security sector had experienced rapid growth with more than 524 companies and nearly 30,000 registered agents. This volume positioned private security companies as central actors in the life-cycle management of weapons, concentrating significant quantities of authorised and imported SALW (see section on the situation regarding the management of weapons and ammunition above).

Despite previous technical cooperation efforts (for example, in cooperation with UNLIREC and DCAF) and the development of good practice manuals, state oversight remained insufficient. The Directorate of Private Security Services (DSSP) and the DGA operated primarily through documentary checks, without sufficient resources for regular physical inspections. Regulatory gaps also persisted,

particularly regarding ammunition management and the closure of companies, as well as limitations in the exchange of information between state databases. The authorities reported critical cases of fictitious or bankrupt companies that disappeared without returning their arsenals, creating gaps in traceability and leading to diversion into illicit markets.<sup>25</sup>

The priority options for strengthening governance of the private security sector include the need to update the regulations applicable to private security companies, enhance the professionalisation of personnel, and allocate greater resources to supervisory functions. It was proposed to require strict compliance with obligations regarding inventory reporting and the location of stocks as a condition for licence renewal or the authorisation of

imports, as well as to strengthen physical inspections through more robust control protocols. In addition, it was recommended to establish regular channels of communication with sector associations to promote due diligence and the gradual adoption of

monitoring technologies. Finally, it was emphasised that continued participation in relevant international forums is a key factor in consolidating these improvements.

## OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING PRIVATE SECURITY AND PRIVATE SECURITY COMPANIES

- ➔ Strengthen the oversight of private security companies (PSCs) by allocating greater human and financial resources to ensure adequate oversight, including the review and creation/strengthening of protocols

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- ➔ Focus on compliance with the legal and regulatory framework by private security companies. This includes the obligations of private security firms to report regularly to the authorities on inventories and their actual location, both in confirmed and significant cases of diversion; as part of accounting and the re-/evaluation or renewal of licences and/or applications for transfers, including new and to be authorised imports applied for by licensed dealers that private security firms use to purchase weapons and ammunition

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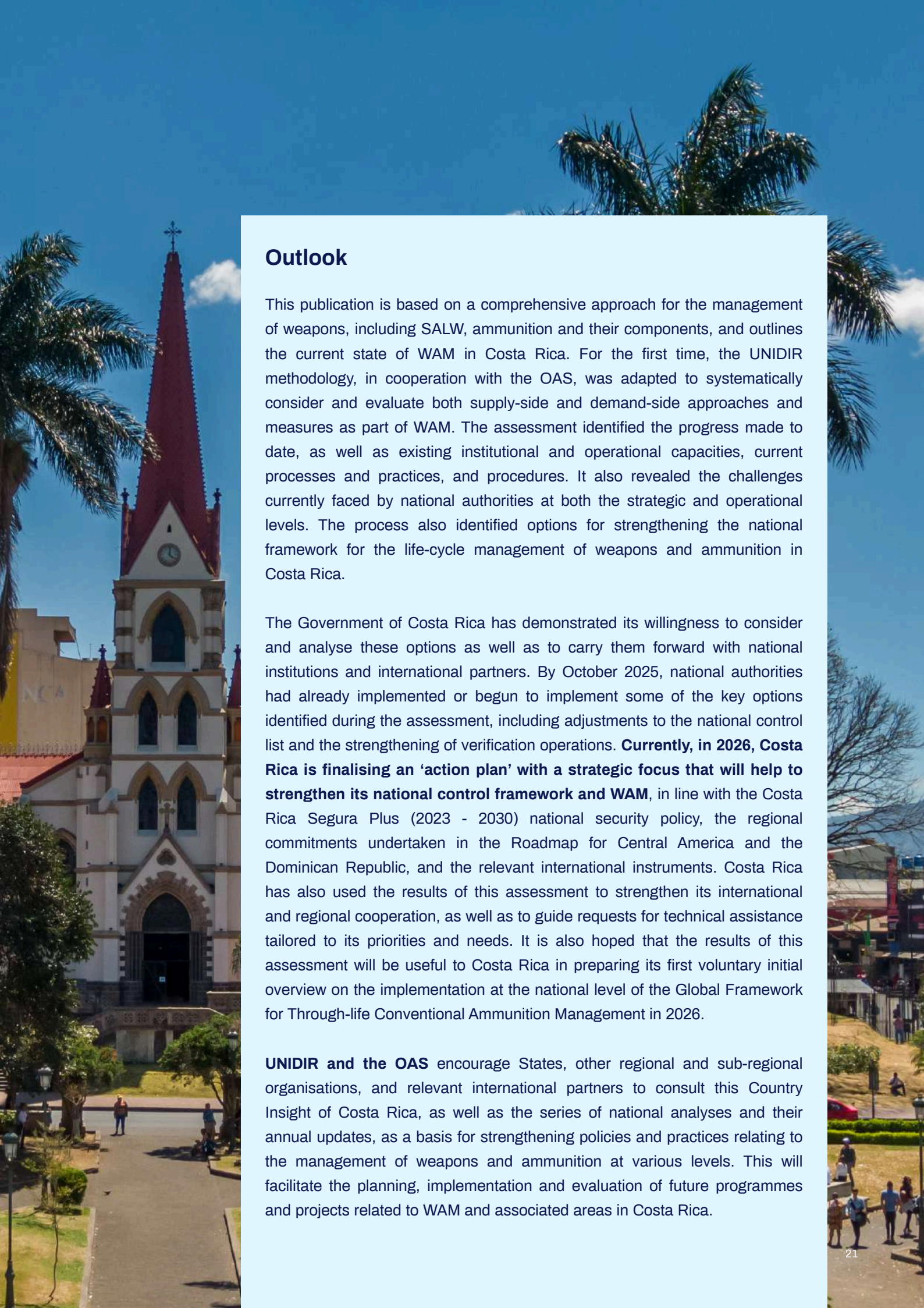
- ➔ Establish more regular channels of engagement with associations and private security companies to provide information on the applicable national, regional and international legal and regulatory framework; jointly explore due diligence programmes; and other initiatives such as, for example, the use of technology to strengthen the national control system, responsible arms transfers, and the opportunities and contributions of the technology sector to prevent and counter diversion

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- ➔ Continue participation in international forums on private security governance, and continue to promote international initiatives on private security controls, such as the Montreux Document Forum and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoC)

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## Outlook

This publication is based on a comprehensive approach for the management of weapons, including SALW, ammunition and their components, and outlines the current state of WAM in Costa Rica. For the first time, the UNIDIR methodology, in cooperation with the OAS, was adapted to systematically consider and evaluate both supply-side and demand-side approaches and measures as part of WAM. The assessment identified the progress made to date, as well as existing institutional and operational capacities, current processes and practices, and procedures. It also revealed the challenges currently faced by national authorities at both the strategic and operational levels. The process also identified options for strengthening the national framework for the life-cycle management of weapons and ammunition in Costa Rica.

The Government of Costa Rica has demonstrated its willingness to consider and analyse these options as well as to carry them forward with national institutions and international partners. By October 2025, national authorities had already implemented or begun to implement some of the key options identified during the assessment, including adjustments to the national control list and the strengthening of verification operations. **Currently, in 2026, Costa Rica is finalising an 'action plan' with a strategic focus that will help to strengthen its national control framework and WAM**, in line with the Costa Rica Segura Plus (2023 - 2030) national security policy, the regional commitments undertaken in the Roadmap for Central America and the Dominican Republic, and the relevant international instruments. Costa Rica has also used the results of this assessment to strengthen its international and regional cooperation, as well as to guide requests for technical assistance tailored to its priorities and needs. It is also hoped that the results of this assessment will be useful to Costa Rica in preparing its first voluntary initial overview on the implementation at the national level of the Global Framework for Through-life Conventional Ammunition Management in 2026.

**UNIDIR and the OAS** encourage States, other regional and sub-regional organisations, and relevant international partners to consult this Country Insight of Costa Rica, as well as the series of national analyses and their annual updates, as a basis for strengthening policies and practices relating to the management of weapons and ammunition at various levels. This will facilitate the planning, implementation and evaluation of future programmes and projects related to WAM and associated areas in Costa Rica.

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## About UNIDIR

UNIDIR is an autonomous institute within the United Nations, funded through voluntary contributions. It is one of the few research centres in the world dedicated exclusively to disarmament. Its work consists of generating knowledge and promoting dialogue and action on disarmament and security. Based in Geneva, UNIDIR supports the international community in developing concrete and innovative ideas to provide solutions to major security challenges. UNIDIR prioritises conducting research, developing tools and providing guidance to its partners, with the aim of strengthening the management of conventional weapons and ammunition and supporting the integration of conventional arms control into the United Nations' conflict analysis, prevention and management activities. [www.unidir.org](http://www.unidir.org)

## About the OAS

The Organization of American States is the world's oldest regional organisation, tracing its origins back to the First International Conference of American States, held in Washington, D.C., from October 1889 to April 1890. At this meeting, it was agreed to create the International Union of American Republics, and work began on weaving a network of provisions and institutions that would come to be known as the "inter-American system", the oldest international institutional system. The OAS was established in 1948 when the OAS Charter was signed in Bogotá, Colombia, and entered into force in December 1951. The Organization was founded with the aim of achieving, in its Member States, as stipulated in Article 1 of the Charter, "an order of peace and justice, to foster their solidarity, strengthen their cooperation, and defend their sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence". Today, the OAS brings together the 35 independent states of the Americas and constitutes the hemisphere's principal governmental forum for political, legal and social matters. In addition, it has granted Permanent Observer status to 70 States, as well as to the European Union (EU). To achieve its most important objectives, the OAS relies on its main pillars, which are democracy, human rights, security and development. [www.oas.org](http://www.oas.org)

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**Author of the baseline assessment report on Costa Rica's WAM:** Adam Baird (UNIDIR)

**Authors of the Country Insight:** Adam Baird, Lara Maria Guedes Gonçalves Costa (UNIDIR)

**Team of experts for the baseline assessment on WAM:** Adam Baird, Hardy Giezendanner (both UNIDIR), Carlos J. Orozco S., Juan Carlos Melgar (both OEA), María Eugenia Mata Chavarría (Dirección de Armamento, MSP), and Marcela Zamora Ovares (MREC).

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