Mr. Chairman, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, fellow panelists, your Excellencies, distinguished colleagues

UNIDIR has been part of the UN’s disarmament machinery for 30 years. As you know, Mr Chairman, the commemoration of the Institute’s 30th anniversary is the subject of a resolution before this Committee. So I will dwell on this milestone no further, except to thank the sponsors of the resolution and UNIDIR’s donors heartily for their support over these past three decades.

I will come back to the question of support for the Institute shortly. But first of all I would like to offer some insights that are less to do with UNIDIR’s own place in our collective disarmament machinery and more to do with the bigger picture. – That is, disarmament machinery writ large.

The UN Secretary-General’s High Level Meeting of 24 September has certainly brought disarmament machinery into the limelight. It has become a theme of this General Assembly. Whether or not the stagnation of parts of the multilateral disarmament machinery is viewed as a matter of universal concern, it is undeniable that it is receiving more attention than usual.

To state the obvious, this is particularly so in the case of the Conference on Disarmament. UNIDIR, as a body based in Geneva, follows the work of that Conference very closely. One of the actions suggested by the Secretary-General in the Chairman’s Summary of the High Level Meeting is for his Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters to undertake a thorough review of the issues raised on 24 September. I have recently brought to the attention of Board members and UN Missions in Geneva that UNIDIR stands ready to assist the Advisory Board – which is also UNIDIR’s Board of Trustees – in any way it can.

Ideas for revitalizing the work of the Conference on Disarmament and taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations have in various ways been a feature of UNIDIR’s research in recent years. And the topic of “fixing the broken disarmament machinery” has been a regular focus of the presentations by the Director of UNIDIR to the First Committee.

In regard to the Conference on Disarmament, a short paper published by UNIDIR in 2009 on “Getting the CD Back to Work” was tabled in the CD as a working paper. (It can be found online on UNIDIR’s website). In addition, several posts on our blog Disarmament Insight—read by the Geneva disarmament community and beyond—have raised for debate a number of topical aspects of the Conference’s rules of procedure, including the issue of the purpose of the annual work programme.

More broadly, over the last six years, UNIDIR has increasingly focused on improving the prospects for successful multilateral disarmament negotiations, in all concerned fora. Recent UNIDIR publications tracing the history of the negotiations of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions have reflected on what can be learned from these successful, yet very different, initiatives.

The case of the 1996 CTBT is especially pertinent as it represents the last negotiated outcome of the Conference on Disarmament. Following publication of this history in 2009, UNIDIR held a series of events with CD diplomats to see what lessons could be learned from this difficult, yet ultimately successful, negotiation which could be applied to current CD issues such as negotiation of a fissile material treaty.
Additional interdisciplinary work on improving the function of the disarmament machinery includes the Disarmament as Humanitarian Action Project, which ran from 2004–2008 and produced four volumes of work examining what conditions are most conducive to successful negotiations:

It is satisfying that this ground-breaking work is being increasingly referred to not only in academic articles and in civil society publications but also by Member States. I believe that the notion of focusing on nuclear disarmament “through the lens not of traditional arms control, but rather international humanitarian law”, to use the words of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament offers a valid new direction in this complex area.

The argument is that given the horrendous consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, nuclear disarmament is at heart a humanitarian imperative. The individual thus becomes the central object of protection from the impacts of use of such weapons, with humanitarian goals prevailing over traditional national security interests derived from their military utility.

I could offer a number of other examples of activities and work done by UNIDIR in support of the Conference on Disarmament, notably in the areas of weapons in outer space, negative security assurances and fissile materials.

The Institute’s activities range from organising seminars, talking to diplomatic missions, research and publishing the quarterly journal “Disarmament Forum”. This publication is one of the few peace and security journals produced in English and French. “Disarmament Forum” serves several purposes: it allows us to cover issue areas for which we might not have funding to undertake full-fledged projects, and perhaps most importantly, provides a venue to explore emerging issues for peace and security. For example, the latest issue covered the topic of maritime security – a problem that lately has been the focus of more and more international concern. In addition, UNIDIR often serves as a “safe place” for candid and in-depth discussions of relevant issues, by virtue of our autonomous nature outside UN constraints – a function that I would argue has been extremely important over the last decade of stalemate at the CD itself. We provide a forum for forwarding the issues on the CD agenda even in the absence of formal work.

It may surprise many of you that none of these activities or publications is supported by the UN’s regular budget. UNIDIR is virtually entirely dependent on individual Member States as donors. Concerns are growing about this state of affairs, especially in light of the global economic crisis. The Board of Trustees has resolved to pursue urgently an increase in the Institute’s subvention, which as it stands covers only slightly more than a single salary. This situation presents a challenge to UNIDIR’s independence, a vital ingredient of our research. Thus, I am grateful that those co-sponsoring the 30th anniversary resolution, graciously being spearheaded by the Government of France, are also echoing the Board’s recommendations regarding increasing the subvention – and I am hopeful we can together find a way to overcome this chronic difficulty.

Finally, let me thank wholeheartedly all delegations that have voiced expressions of support to me in the margins of this Committee and their best wishes on UNIDIR’s 30th anniversary. It has been very gratifying. Rest assured that UNIDIR continues to stand ready to support all UN Member States in our mutual efforts to forward the cause of disarmament, peace and security. Thank you.