First Committee 2013 civil society presentations

“Ways of work”

There is often more to be frustrated about than satisfied with when it comes to General Assembly discussions on disarmament issues. That said, in this past year there has been some noteworthy progress in disarmament and arms control. Just a few weeks ago the General Assembly held its first ever high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament, at which the majority of delegations who took the floor reaffirmed their determination to work to outlaw and eliminate nuclear weapons. On the same day, the Security Council adopted its first resolution on small arms and light weapons. In Geneva, while the Conference on Disarmament continued to flounder, the open-ended working group sparked discussions that moved states away from entrenched national positions. And just since June, over 100 states have signed the Arms Trade Treaty.

But now is not a time for resting on laurels. During the last weeks of First Committee discussion we’ve heard considerable frustration with the failure—of this forum and others—to make concrete progress on our objectives. We are frustrated by the failure of the disarmament machinery to meet expectations—both of our governments and our publics—of addressing the security concerns of the majority. These failures undermine the UN’s legitimacy as a problem-solving body. The context in which First Committee operates reflects the concentrated power structure and decision-making created by the Security Council. This generally means the ways of work in First Committee serve that “higher” body’s interests. But this structure is anachronistic. The entire system must be reformed. First Committee is one piece of this system that we will focus on here, while noting that the problems faced in our Committee represent bigger problems of the whole.

Consensus

The abuse of consensus is a common factor behind all the stalemates and failures in disarmament fora. “Consensus” at the UN is often more a barrier to commitment than the engine of its development. In this context, it too often means a consensus of the lowest-common denominator, failing to meet the UN’s high calling to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

Blocking consensus suits those that benefit from the status quo or do not want the international community to set norms and rules that could affect their room for maneuver. The failure to reach agreement privileged the interests of those states that do not want to eliminate their nuclear weapons; that want to preserve the possibility of putting weapons in space; that want to continue to buy or sell conventional arms regardless of their intended or probable use; that want lax regulation of the arms trade; that turn a blind eye to the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. Consensus protects the complacency of those who pour ever more of the global common purse into weapons and war while poverty and inequality increase throughout the world. The current stalemates only further the interests of the few.

Even with the vast majority of governments supporting the Arms Trade Treaty, for example, it was blocked by three states and subsequently adopted by a vote in the General Assembly. If the treaty had been negotiated just by the states that voted in favour of it at the General Assembly, it would have been a much stronger instrument than the one generated with the involvement of those who have now chosen to not sign the treaty anyway.

While some governments argue that the rule of consensus protects their security interests, it in fact undermines the security of the majority who must rely on the rule of law for protection. The abuse of consensus runs counter to a basic principle of the UN—the sovereign equality of states—by allowing the
interests of a small number of hold-out states to trump the interests of all the others. It undermines the UN’s promise and possibility of achieving real change in the lives of people threatened by armed violence.

Civil society participation

This leads to some broader questions about civil society participation in UN fora on disarmament and arms control.

Civil society provides a unique and valuable perspective on the pressing issues faced by this body. Some of us bring technical, legal, or political expertise. Some of us bring personal or professional experiences. Some of us speak as victims and survivors of armed violence. We can often advocate for robust transnational positions that individual governments tend to be unable to adopt given narrow interpretations of “national interests”.

Our engagement with the UN is meant to provide an opportunity for diplomats to hear from and interact with non-governmental sources of information and analysis that speak with an international voice. Our engagement is meant to elevate the UN’s work. But our capacity to participate varies wildly across UN forums, even across the disarmament forums. Our voice is too often restricted. As seen in the last few months at the open-ended working group on nuclear disarmament in Geneva, civil society’s comprehensive participation enhances discussions, enables broader perspectives in working papers, and encourages diplomats to consider new ideas.

Civil society can provide innovative lenses through which to assess and analyze disarmament and arms control. For example, some of our groups bring survivors, public health practitioners, humanitarian aid workers, scientists, and other unique perspectives to the table. We also try to facilitate women’s participations in these discussions, which are traditionally dominated by men. Last year, First Committee adopted a resolution on women and disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation, which encouraged all governments to promote equal opportunities for women in disarmament decision-making processes. Women’s groups were also instrumental in ensuring that a gender perspective was recognized in the Arms Trade Treaty. The ATT is the first treaty to recognize the link between gender-based violence and the international arms trade. It represents a step towards more comprehensive recognition of the relationship between weapons and gender.

Recommendations

We offer here recommendations on dislodging the logjam created by current international disarmament “ways of work”:

- Resolutions establishing new mechanisms should not base their methods of work on the rule of consensus. Ongoing processes should stop relying on an interpretation of consensus that equates it with absolute unanimity. Consensus should be treated as a process of finding common ground for the vast majority; not as a veto; not as the final product itself.

- Civil society should be recognized as an integral component of the work of First Committee and other UN disarmament fora. Discussions should be held on extending across all UN forums the good practices that allow for meaningful NGO participation in international discussions.

- Member states should incorporate a gender perspective into their disarmament and arms control-related programmes and policies. They should also discuss and identify ways of strengthening and improving the resolution on women and disarmament, such as by including strengthened language on incorporating a gender perspective in disarmament-related programmes and policies.
and by recognizing progress in other elements of the UN system.

- We must also do more to facilitate the engagement of victims and survivors of armed violence in international deliberations. Their participation will strengthen our collective response to disarmament challenges and together we can develop an architecture that better ensures victims’ rights.

- States should seek to avoid the constant repetition in First Committee resolutions. Resolutions that have been tabled without substantial change for years could become triennial resolutions. At the same time, we encourage you to use the opportunity for these resolutions to be creative and explore new ground.

**Conclusion**

Creativity and new human-centered approaches must be a requirement for all states advocating nuclear disarmament, conventional arms control, and reduced military expenditure. Continued discussion on whether or not the problem is the machinery itself or lack of political will is pointless. Many states do not seem interested in changing the status quo and the existing machinery is incapable of pushing ahead. This cannot be used as an excuse to do nothing. It is not acceptable to sit back and wait for political will to magically appear, nor for the machinery to fix itself.

A handful of countries should no longer be allowed to hold back the rest of the international community in tackling some of the most dramatic problems of our age. We can and must replace stalemate and watered-down outcomes with alternative results that can be used to advance human security and social and economic justice. Governments and civil society alike should not continue to settle for less. In sum, we call for an approach to disarmament that is driven by the needs and rights of people most affected by armed violence, not by the discretion of states and organizations most responsible for it.

*Delivered by Matthew Bolton, Article 36*

**The following civil society organizations endorse this statement:**

- Article 36
- Global Action to Prevent War
- International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War
- International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons
- Instituto Sou da Paz
- IKV Pax Christi (Netherlands)
- Project Ploughshares
- Norwegian People’s Aid
- Nuclear Age Peace Foundation
- Toxic Remnants of War Project
- Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom