If you could construct a venue to talk about anything related to disarmament, what would it look like? Would it be open to all governments in the world? Would they just talk, or would they get together to develop collective positions and action plans? Would those be legally binding, or expressions of majority views? Would you invite active participation from international organisations and civil society?

What would you talk about? What weapons would you cover? Would you about their production, their possession, their use, their trade, or all of the above? Would you talk about war, armed conflict, armed violence? Would you include a human rights perspective, a gender perspective, a socioeconomic perspective, a development perspective? Would you look at the systems and structures that sustain militarism? Would you try to figure out how to overcome the forces that perpetuate violent solutions to the world’s challenges?

Of course we have a venue in which to talk about disarmament, to develop collective positions, to negotiate action plans. In First Committee, governments can have their delegations talk about whatever they want related to disarmament and international security. Are they making the most of this opportunity? Could it be better?

Few would disagree that it could be.

In the past, civil society groups have expressed our frustration with the failure of First Committee to effectively address the security concerns of the majority. Governments often use this forum to articulate decades-old positions and table resolutions that change little in substance or result from year to year. Reports on the implementation of these resolutions are issued each year, with contributions from states trending downwards. New perspectives or approaches are generally considered too difficult to incorporate, as precedent seems to trump progress in almost every respect. Civil society is denied an effective place in the Committee’s work, relegated to delivering a block series of statements from the back of the room one afternoon every year – a session that tends to be one of the least well-attended, as if it were considered optional by some.
This state of affairs does not reflect the intended role of the UN as a problem-solving forum for the international community. In many cases, it is a handful of countries that prevent effective change on either substance or process. The civil society organisations, coalitions, and campaigns participating most actively at First Committee have argued consistently that we can and must replace stalemate and watered-down outcomes with alternative results that advance human security and social and economic justice. Governments and civil society alike should not continue to settle for less. We call for an approach to disarmament that is driven by the rights of people most affected by armed violence, not by the discretion of states and organisations most responsible for it.²

The groups that have contributed to this book work on many different issues and weapon systems from a variety of perspectives, but they all share one thing in common: the desire for more effective, transparent, and inclusive diplomatic work at the United Nations. We believe that most delegates seek true progress and the enhancement of human security. We hope that this briefing book will provide inspiration and alternatives as delegates engage in the important work ahead.

This briefing book provides a quick overview of the state of play on some of the most pressing issues that will (or should) be addressed at this year’s First Committee. It also outlines recommendations for governments from some of the key civil society groups working on these topics.

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2 Ibid.