Recent data shows that global civilian deaths and injuries from the use of explosive weapons have gone up for the third year in a row. Deaths and injuries and guns and firearms remain unabated. Prohibited weapons such as cluster munitions and chemical weapons have been used in recent conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. Nuclear weapons are still not subject to a categorical legal ban and hundreds remain on high alert. Profits continue to soar from the design, manufacture, and sale of arms.

It’s a dangerous world and our weapons make it more dangerous. The United Nations should be a place where states, international organisations, and civil society groups come together to figure out how to best integrate our approaches and solutions to the collective crises we face, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental devastation, patriarchy, militarism, and violence. First Committee could play a crucial role in confronting these crises holistically, through disarmament and arms control. Creative and bold measures to reduce, restrict, prevent, and end the development, production, trade, use, and threat of use of weapons can help embolden our so-called international community to communicate with one another through nonviolent means to solve tensions and overcome challenges.

Unfortunately, delegations often use First Committee 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.

This briefing book provides an 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 from some of the key civil society groups working on these topics.

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.