When it comes to nuclear weapons, people around the world have overwhelmingly rejected their creation, their use, and their continued possession. Public mobilization against these weapons of terror has been a consistent force through most of the nuclear age. There was first the moral horror of scientists who worked on the Manhattan project in advance of the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.\(^{135}\) In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a movement to achieve a ban on nuclear weapons testing. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, protests emerged against the deployment of ballistic missiles. In the 1980s, the movement focused on getting the US and Soviet governments to stop building nuclear weapons and delivery systems during the height of the arms race, and demanded nuclear disarmament.\(^{136}\)

Since the end of the Cold War, however, there has only been one instance of large-scale mass mobilization around the issue of nuclear weapons: in the early 1990s, people around the world reacted en masse to protest the plans of the major nuclear powers to resume nuclear testing.\(^{137}\)

Since then, despite the continued possession of nuclear weapons by nine countries, and despite vast sums of money being poured into their maintenance and modernization, the movement for nuclear disarmament seems to have been largely silenced. Anti-nuclear activism has been overshadowed by mobilizations around issues of climate change, governance and economic structures, and global inequalities. Given the interconnected nature of these challenges, the opportunities for collaboration are abundant. But laying the groundwork for such collaboration is a complex task requiring purposeful and concerted effort. And in the meantime, groups working to abolish nuclear weapons must overcome significant challenges to their own work.

With the end of the Cold War, most publics and many activists assumed that the dissolution of the Soviet Union would lead to the dismantlement of the enormous arsenals both sides had built up during the arms race. Even some prominent government and military establishment elite assumed disarmament would be the most logical step.\(^{138}\)

Instead, the industrial and military establishments in the nuclear-armed countries have sought new justifications and roles for nuclear weapons and have insisted on the continuing relevance of nuclear “deterrence” doctrines.\(^{139}\) In response, governments have poured billions of dollars into their maintenance and modernization.

At the same time, the popular anti-nuclear movement diminished. Perceptions of the immediate danger posed by nuclear weapons diminished among the general public, membership of popular peace and disarmament organizations shrank, and some of these organizations adopted other priorities.\(^{140}\) In addition, many civil society groups eschewed social mobilization in favour of competing within established political institutions.\(^{141}\)

Some grassroots organizations and activists kept monitoring nuclear weapon laboratories and tried to raise awareness that operations were not only continuing but becoming more sophisticated.\(^ {142}\) However, in most of the nuclear-armed states where civil society had once been active on this issue, policy elites increasingly consolidated their control over information, engagement, and funding around nuclear weapon issues. While the earlier waves of anti-nuclear activism had been composed of diverse and largely nonspecialized coalitions, after the Cold War these issues were predominantly taken up by professionalized, single-issue organizations.\(^ {143}\)

This has limited the engagement of grassroots activists as well as groups working on disparate issues such as poverty, inequality, humanitarian aid, climate change, ecology, peace, or even other disarmament issues. It has also meant that the civil society discourse on nuclear weapons was curtailed. Advocates calling for disarmament were shunned; thus to retain institutional access many started working for arms control or reductions that were in conformity with government comfort levels.\(^ {144}\)

These barriers make social movement organizing extraordinarily difficult. Coupled with increasingly bleak economic and material circumstances today that make voluntary activism financially infeasible for many people, the demobilization of grassroots activists and the institutionalization and professionalism of civil society has made it increasingly difficult to build up popular constituencies on key subjects, including nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, it is unclear if mass mobilization will be truly effective for achieving nuclear disarmament in any near-term scenario. The millions of voices clamoring for disarmament in the 1980s had only partial effect, and those trying to prevent the Iraq war in 2003 failed entirely.

In this challenging context, it is imperative that civil society create connections between international and national activism on nuclear weapons.

Campaigners with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), currently active in over 90 countries through more than 350 civil society organizations, are working together to affect both the international and domestic contexts. At the international level, the campaign seeks to change the political and economic environment...
in which nuclear weapons exist, by consolidating international norms and making it generally illegal to research, develop, acquire, test, manufacture, deploy, use, possess, or finance nuclear weapons. This could affect political and economic calculations in the nuclear-armed states: successful international stigmatization would alter political incentives within the nuclear armed states, boosting the effectiveness of coordinated domestic action against nuclear weapons.

The campaign’s assessment is that a treaty banning nuclear weapons, even if entirely negotiated, adopted, and implemented by nuclear-free states, will alter incentives within the nuclear-armed states. It will make it harder for them to justify and sustain domestically their continued possession and modernization of these weapons. A ban would undermine the concept of “nuclear deterrence,” which was developed after the invention of nuclear weapons to provide an intellectual justification for the retention of nuclear weapons. In the same way, it will also make it more difficult for these governments to continue pouring money into their arsenals, especially if the ban prohibits financial investment in nuclear weapons. The divestment campaign accompanying the treaty banning cluster munitions has been useful in affecting the financial interests of corporations producing these weapon systems and related components. Some governments have already begun divesting from nuclear weapons producers.

Of course, it is the countries that possess these weapons that will have to eliminate them. This means that while campaigners internationally are generating momentum for outlawing nuclear weapons, activists in the nuclear-armed states will need to simultaneously undertake initiatives that put pressure on strategic points of power and influence in the nuclear weapons enterprise. This will include actions aimed at preventing the construction of new nuclear weapons facilities and new nuclear weapons and preventing financial investments to these ends. Strategic pressure will also require undermining domestic arguments for maintaining nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century. Just as the international discourse is actively reframing nuclear weapons as a humanitarian threat, activists in nuclear-armed states will need to stigmatize their governments’ policy of mass destruction and portray nuclear weapons as a symbol and manifestation of the violence, inequality, and injustice of the political and economic systems that sustain them.