

Input to the Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 32/31 on civil society space

Prepared by the Office for Disarmament Affairs

I. Introduction

In paragraph 18 of its resolution 32/31 of 1 July 2016, the Human Rights Council requested the High Commissioner for Human Rights to “prepare a report compiling information on the procedures and practices in respect of civil society involvement with regional and international organizations, including United Nations bodies, agencies, funds and programmes, and the contribution of civil society to their work and challenges and best practices”.

The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) is pleased to provide the following information pursuant to the request of the High Commissioner for input from relevant organizations and entities.

II. Procedures and practices with respect to civil society involvement

1. Overview

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors have made crucial contributions in recent decades to the fields of multilateral arms limitation, disarmament and international security. Non-governmental participants in these areas help to frame and inform relevant dialogue among Member States and their citizens, as well as to formulate substantive policy proposals and advocate for their advancement within complex institutional frameworks. In their roles as educators and activists, civil society actors have emerged as indispensable champions of international efforts to regulate conventional weapons and eliminate nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction. They are at the forefront of discussions on emerging weapons technologies such as cyberweapons, unmanned aerial vehicles and lethal autonomous weapons systems, and their substantial participation in intergovernmental processes appears certain to continue.

The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) endeavours to facilitate civil society engagement with United Nations entities and bodies in support of the organization’s strategic objective of achieving general and complete disarmament under effective international control. UNODA helps civil society to access and participate in intergovernmental processes by, inter alia, facilitating online accreditation and registration of NGO representatives in cooperation with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; arranging for presentations by NGO representatives when Member States invite them to address inter-governmental and other meetings; and providing administrative support for NGO side events and exhibits at United Nations Headquarters. In addition, the Office produces a variety of programmes and publications to assist NGOs in engaging on disarmament issues with Member States and the interested public. UNODA pursues ad-hoc disarmament education and outreach projects in cooperation with relevant NGOs, and it holds regular consultative meetings with the NGO community to promote effective cooperation through existing and emerging channels.

For the purpose of coordinating civil society participation in the First Committee and other major disarmament-related conferences, UNODA maintains close contact with two major NGO coalitions: the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA). These organizations coordinate the delivery of statements by NGOs operating in their respective areas of expertise—WILPF in the area of weapons of mass destruction and IANSA in the field of conventional arms—and they are instrumental in facilitating the participation of civil society speakers in intergovernmental meetings on disarmament and non-proliferation. IANSA has welcomed opportunities to engage with United Nations forums while noting difficulties in obtaining sufficient, consistent funding for NGO activities, in part due to administrative delays in grant dispersal.¹

2. First Committee

NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council or affiliated with the Department of Public Information can attend open meetings of the General Assembly First Committee, which addresses matters pertaining to disarmament and international security. The body welcomed a new level of participation by civil society in 2005, when it for the first time invited NGO representatives to address Member States at the conclusion of its general debate. Two NGO representatives subsequently delivered remarks during an informal segment of the First Committee during the 60th session, and the following years saw a steady increase in the number of civil society observers and speakers at First Committee proceedings.

3. UNODA Regional Centres

UNODA and its three Regional Centres² partner and cooperate with civil society organizations in the provision of capacity-building and technical assistance to Member States to enhance the implementation of their national plans and meet their obligations under the relevant multilateral instruments. The Regional Centres also partner with civil society to promote awareness-raising and advocacy on disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control issues. The Vienna Office has partnered with a wide range of civil society organizations to provide training on disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control education, in particular to women from the Global South.

4. Vienna Office

The UNODA Vienna Office collaborates with 28 United Nations system entities, international organizations, academic research institutions and NGOs to operate the Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education Partnership. Through this initiative, UNODA and its intergovernmental and civil society partners formulate educational activities to implement findings from the United Nations Study on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education,³ promote the linkages between disarmament and development,⁴ and facilitate the entry of women into the disarmament and non-proliferation field.

5. Publications

The online and print publications of UNODA help civil society actors to access and contribute to a range of perspectives on the activities of UNODA and

¹ International Action Network on Small Arms, e-mail statement, 19 October 2017.

² The United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa; the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean; and the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific.

³ A/57/124.

⁴ A/RES/68/33.

other disarmament stakeholders in the United Nations system. Its ad hoc Occasional Papers regularly feature the edited reports and lectures of NGO representatives and academic scholars, and its “Civil Society and Disarmament” series spotlights the activities of civil society in the context of relevant issues and perspectives.

UNODA has also encouraged civil society involvement in disarmament and non-proliferation issues through educational publications directed towards general audiences. In October 2017, UNODA published the fourth edition of “Disarmament: A Basic Guide”, providing general readers with a broad introduction to the disarmament field, as well as resources for further learning and participation. A 2014 publication, “Action for Disarmament: 10 Things You Can Do!”, specifically seeks to engage secondary school students with the goal of encouraging interest, conversation and activism.

6. United Nations Messenger of Peace

Since 1998, Mr. Michael Douglas has contributed his talent and public stature as an Academy Award-winning actor and producer to promote public awareness of multilateral disarmament efforts in his capacity as a United Nations Messenger of Peace. In a project that he personally conceived to improve understanding of the role that civil society advocacy plays in advancing the cause of nuclear disarmament, Mr. Douglas met with a series of NGO representatives and civil society actors on the margins of the 2016 Open-ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations in Geneva. Mr. Douglas has also served as a principal speaker or master of ceremonies at UNODA events, and he recorded 10 public service announcements released in 2016 to address disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control issues.

7. Other outreach initiatives

UNODA hosts periodic seminars, film screenings and exhibitions with civil society sponsorship, and its Disarmament Education website hosts both informational content produced by civil society and links to prominent NGOs in the disarmament field.

The Office conducts regular outreach to education professionals with the goal of facilitating effective communication on disarmament issues between teachers and their students. To this end, UNODA hosts an annual professional development day for teachers in New York City public schools, and its staff participate on an ad hoc basis in relevant events outside the United Nations system, including the annual Conference of the Committee on Teaching about the United Nations.

In 2015 and 2016, the Office sponsored the UN Poster for Peace contest to invite the creative engagement of civil society to highlight the need for a nuclear-weapon-free world. UNODA chose 12 winning works of art from more than 4,000 submissions from 123 countries, and the winners have appeared in UNODA publications and in public displays at United Nations offices, including the tour route at United Nations headquarters.

The UNODA website (www.un.org/disarmament) has undergone significant updates and improvements since 2016, increasing its value as a resource for civil society and other stakeholders. It includes content in all six official United Nations languages and provides public access to daily updates on UNODA activities, as well as to relevant documents and statements dating back to the organization’s founding.

III. Contribution of civil society involvement

1. Overview

Civil society plays a vital role in raising awareness and capturing the public conscience to advance disarmament and non-proliferation efforts by Member States. Women Strike for Peace, an NGO of the early 1960s, mounted a successful campaign in the United States for pursuing an international ban on atmospheric nuclear weapons testing. More recent contributions by civil society include its critical support for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the Arms Trade Treaty. The International Coalition to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, a civil society organization comprised of more than 400 member groups, received the 2017 Nobel Prize for Peace for its role in supporting the negotiation and adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

2. Education and outreach

Civil society actors have worked closely with Governments and the public to build awareness of and support for international disarmament and non-proliferation initiatives. Many thousands of NGOs have participated in intergovernmental processes to these ends; the biennial reports of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the United Nations Study on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education contain statements from numerous NGOs and academic institutions, as well as from Member States and regional and international organizations, about their efforts in this regard.

A number of NGOs produce valuable educational resources based on original research and aggregated data. Reaching Critical Will, a programme of WILPF, compiles fact sheets that summarize important issues and instruments, while more detailed studies by think tanks and research institutions can support related work by Governments and other NGOs.⁵

In addition, NGOs play a critical role in mobilizing victims of armed violence to share their experiences, highlighting the urgency of United Nations disarmament activities and illustrating the human consequences of developments in this field.

Hibakusha Stories, a New York-based NGO, collaborates with UNODA on a regular basis to help atomic bomb survivors address guests, staff and delegates at United Nations Headquarters. Recognizing the need to preserve testimonies of the surviving Hibakusha, the Government of Japan launched “Youth Communicators for a World Without Nuclear Weapons” in 2013 to help transmit their memories to a new generation of civil society disarmament advocates.

In the area of conventional weapons control, the NGO coalition Control Arms organized an event in 2012 where Ismael Baeh, a former child soldier and published human rights spokesperson, briefed delegates then participating in the Arms Trade Treaty negotiations about his experiences of armed conflict.⁶

UNODA has found that personal testimonies of survivors, such as those described above, are effective in building an important personal narrative with respect to these issues and in creating an empathetic dynamic between the presenter and the audience.

⁵ UNODA, “Civil Society and Disarmament 2014: The Importance of Civil Society in United Nations and Intergovernmental Processes: Views from Four Delegates to the United Nations.” Available from <https://www.un.org/disarmament/publications/civilsociety/volume-2014/> (accessed 18 October 2017).

⁶ Ibid.

3. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Representatives from 101 accredited NGOs participated in the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards their Total Elimination from 27 to 31 March and 15 June to 7 July 2017. NGO representatives were invited to provide comments during the negotiation of the Treaty and the submitted materials were made available on the website of the Conference.

NGO initiative was central to driving commencement of negotiations and to the eventual adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This contribution was recognized through the awarding of the 2017 Nobel Prize for Peace to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

4. Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

NGOs have traditionally played a vocal role in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, particularly as it relates to the implementation of disarmament commitments made under the Treaty.

From 2 to 12 May 2017, representatives from 48 accredited NGOs participated in the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the NPT. It included a plenary meeting for NGO presentations conducted on 3 May 2017 in the afternoon session, as well as side events and exhibitions.

5. Arms Trade Treaty

Civil society made considerable contributions to the negotiation of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), beginning with a concerted push in the 1990s for a legally binding code of conduct on arms transfers. Rodrigo Pintado, who represented Mexico in the ATT negotiations in 2012 and 2013, credited NGOs for their “pivotal role” in highlighting negative human rights and humanitarian impacts of the conventional arms trade in arguments for its regulation. In addition, civil society joined many Member States in a successful push for the Treaty to cover small arms and light weapons.⁷

6. Security Council resolution 1540 (2004)

UNODA and the Committee established pursuant to United Nations Security Council resolution 1540 (2004) continue to organize and participate in outreach events on the implementation of resolution 1540 (2004), including, as appropriate, parliamentarians, as well as representatives of industry, academia and other segments of civil society. UNODA and the Committee have promoted the refinement of these outreach efforts to focus on specific thematic and regional issues related to implementation of the resolution.

Such events contribute to transparency and outreach and raise awareness of the importance of resolution 1540 (2004) in helping to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery. The “Wiesbaden Process”, which was established by the first Industry Conference on resolution 1540 in 2012, has become synonymous with outreach and cooperation between Governments and industry to support the implementation of the resolution.

⁷ Ibid.

IV. Conclusion

By participating in intergovernmental disarmament processes, civil society actors contribute in critical respects to cooperation on shared security challenges. NGOs promote consensus and interpret institutional language and priorities for varying audiences, forging and strengthening channels for dialogue and collaboration between States, multilateral organizations and the people they represent.

The need for strong non-governmental partnerships is clear in the context of an international security environment facing swift political and technological change. These partnerships will remain vital for the United Nations to respond nimbly and creatively both to emerging crises and to ongoing stalemates.

NGOs that specialize in disarmament and international security deserve particular recognition for consistently applying their energy, creativity and expertise in an area where substantive progress can require decades to be fully realized. Their dedication and fundamental optimism have never been more important to the international community in its pursuit of peace.