Civil society statement to First Committee on ways of work

Disarmament should not be an afterthought in discussions of international relations. Those that perpetuate the systems and tools of war often treat it as idealistic. Some people that describe themselves as realists limit their discussions to piecemeal “arms control” measures. Some seek to undermine efforts aimed at prohibiting their technologies of violence, which they perceive as sources of power or profit.

On the other side, those working to prevent the humanitarian impact of weapons despair at the reality of violence outside our conference rooms. Reality is the bombardment of towns and cities, the scourge of armed violence, the unregulated flows of arms and ammunition that fuel poverty and human rights abuses, and the vast waste of resources on weapons and war.

During the last weeks of First Committee discussions we’ve heard considerable frustration with the failure—of this forum and others—to make concrete progress on our objectives.

It is time again to reclaim the word “disarmament.” Instead, we must to continue to organize coalitions of concerned states, NGOs, faith groups, activist networks, political parties, media institutions, social movements, international agencies, and community associations to push back against the complexes of self-interested actors who push, peddle, and abuse technologies of violence.

Indeed, we seek a disarmament rooted in the notion of “humanity” that is common across international criminal, humanitarian and human rights law. We call for meaningful human deliberation about armed violence. We seek disarmament with a human face.

Civil society has a key role in this process, but we are often marginalized in discussions on “international security” at the United Nations, in particular in New York.

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 analyses that speak with an international voice. Civil society should be afforded a level of participation in all arms control and disarmament processes compatible with its commitment, seriousness, and collective experience.

We welcome efforts to improve the effectiveness and relevance of civil society participation in First Committee, including improving the current scheduling of the civil society interventions from the current timing at the very end of all of the debates. This reduces the impact of our contributions and means that our voices are often not heard by delegations that do not stay for this segment.

We cannot limit disarmament to the arcane discussions in grand rooms such as this one, though. We call on member states, multilateral institutions, and civil society to reinvigorate disarmament education. If we can engage in educational dialogue with the global public, we can empower citizens with the knowledge and necessary tools to shape decisions about their own security.

We applaud states that have been active in promoting disarmament education and we urge more states to submit contributions to the biennial reports by the Secretary-General on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education. States must recognize the importance of the recommendations set forth in the UN Study on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education and implement them.

This statement was drafted by the Reaching Critical Will programme of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and Article 36 and has been endorsed by the following organisations:

Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy
Article 36
Fundipau (Fundacio per la Pau)
International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons
International Committee for Robot Arms Control
Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, NY
Peace Movement Aotearoa
Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom