

Civil Society: A Central Role

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The role of civil society in nuclear disarmament issues is longstanding, with many ups and downs in terms of effectiveness. In the past, civil society often took a confrontational stance, with peace activists protesting against nuclear weapons and warning governments about impending disasters if they did not at least “freeze” nuclear development if they could not “ban the bomb” entirely. Governments have customarily shown their disdain for the importuning of civil society, countering that NGOs didn’t know enough about the issues or, as was claimed during the Cold War, served as unwitting “commie dupes.”

Despite government attempts to shunt aside the views of nuclear activists, public pressure is responsible for many of the gains that have been made in curbing nuclear weapons. This is a point Lawrence S. Wittner, professor of history at the State University of New York, Albany, emphatically makes in his scholarly trilogy, *The Struggle Against the Bomb*. His final volume, *Towards Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement* (Stanford University Press, 2003), described how the Nuclear Freeze campaign in the United States, the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign and comparable movements around the world forced government officials toward nuclear arms control and disarmament. During the 1980s, when the Cold War peaked and the

deployment of nuclear weapons exceeded 65,000, an educated, middle class movement became a force to be reckoned with.

At an exceptionally dangerous juncture in modern history, when numerous governments scrambled to build nuclear weapons and threatened to employ them for purposes of annihilation, concerned citizens played a central role in curbing the nuclear arms race and preventing nuclear war.

All this activity shows the growing maturation of the work of civil society in nuclear disarmament. It is buttressed by disarmament education programs, now growing in many countries. While former U.N. Under-Secretary-General Jayantha Dhanapala's call for the expert work of civil society to be "integrated" into the Non Proliferation Treaty process has not yet fully developed, civil society is speaking out. However, the major governments do not appear to be hearing. Their primary allegiance is to their own policies and alliances, not to the common good of humanity. Governments do not usually welcome sharing what has traditionally been their preserve. Many NGOs feel that they are not heard and that their participation has little impact on outcomes. For their part, governments frequently question the representivity, legitimacy, integrity or accountability of civil society groups. This tension may well continue to exist until a Parliamentary Assembly at the U.N. is some day elected to represent the will of the people of the world. This is certainly a long way off, but a number

of current developments suggest that the voices of parliamentarians and civil society at the U.N. are getting stronger.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union, an international organization of 144 Parliaments of sovereign states founded in 1889, is currently positioning itself to take on the role of a formal advisory body at the U.N. This may one day lead to a directly elected People's Assembly at the U.N. Some kind of advisory, consultative or even decisive civil society assembly at the U.N. is talked about today to give flesh to the opening words of the U.N. Charter: "We the peoples of the United Nations ..."

The Civil Society Millennium Assembly convened by Kofi Annan in 2000, brought together more than 1,000 representatives of activist groups around the world, whom Annan dubbed "the Second Superpower." In 2005, the role of civil society took another step forward when consultations were held with key NGO figures on key elements for the 60th anniversary declaration: freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom to live in dignity and strengthening the United Nations.

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Throughout history, most great social movements, from the abolition of slavery to women's equality, have begun not with governments but with civil society. The integration of these pioneers into government processes

was not, strictly speaking, essential. They built up public opinion for their causes and made governments respond. The measurement of civil society's effectiveness is in the results obtained.

A 2004 U.N. study of the role of civil society, headed by former Prime Minister Henrique Cardoso of Brazil showed that effectiveness is growing. Previously, Cardoso said, governments would come together to discuss a new issue until there was sufficient consensus for an intergovernmental resolution, which then led to action by governments. Today, it is more likely that civil society and a crescendo of public opinion bring an issue to global attention and that initial action is taken through working coalitions of governments and civil society. The development of the International Criminal Court is a case in point. Cardoso wants this work stepped up. His recommendation that the U.N. General Assembly establish better access to enable systematic engagement with civil society organizations was endorsed by the U.N. High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, which said: "We believe that civil society and non-governmental organizations can provide valuable knowledge and perspectives on global issues." Kofi Annan followed this up by stating, in his response to the High Level Panel, that the U.N. should engage "much

more actively” with civil society. “Indeed, the goals of the United Nations can only be achieved if civil society and governments are fully engaged.”

In this current cycle of history, the results in achieving the abolition of nuclear weapons appear to some to be minimal. Actually, there is a historical momentum for it. Though the obstacles in the way of abolition are gigantic, nuclear proponents are finding that they have less and less ground to stand on to justify retention.

The nature of the nuclear weapons problem – the very concept of human security – now requires a renewed two-pronged strategy by civil society: a push by abolition groups, constantly enlarging the critical mass of public opinion, augmented by the informed work of specialized groups integrating their ideas into government policies. Both approaches reinforce each other. The job of the Middle Powers Initiative and its counterparts is to show realistic ways to make progress; the job of Abolition 2000 and its partners is to build up the public demand for that progress. As more Western governments become disenchanted, even alarmed at Washington’s nuclear policies, the prospects of making an impact on governments go up. This is a time to move forward with creative, practical ideas, not succumb to the Washington wall.

When a debacle like the 2005 NPT Review Conference occurs, it demoralizes many in civil society (not to mention the few dedicated government officials who have committed their personal work to progress in this area). Money is hard to raise for nuclear disarmament work. But those who truly understand the dimensions of the nuclear weapons threat must dive into their interior wellspring to restore the vision, energy and drive to find new and creative ways to challenge the political elitism that has caused so much discord and suffering. The continuing challenge to the status quo to make the culture of war give way to a culture of peace must be uppermost in our minds. A new spurt of activism by an enlightened civil society, fed by instant worldwide electronic communication, provides hope for change.