

CHAPTER 3

NGOS AND MULTILATERAL DISARMAMENT DIPLOMACY: LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES

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SUMMARY

This chapter examines the proposition that the greater engagement of civil society actors in multilateral disarmament processes can be a practical means to making the latter more effective by “being in the middle by being on the edge”—shaping and facilitating parallel processes. While the multilateral system is not working well for many reasons, for certain tasks related to human security it remains the only alternative. The conundrum for civil society actors is that, to get things done, they must accept the multilateral system, which itself is often a cause of ineffectiveness and in which—as concerns international security—they are usually marginalized.

INTRODUCTION

In the introductory essay to the first volume of this series,¹ John Borrie laid out some of the basic premises on which the *Disarmament as Humanitarian Action* (DHA) Project is based. Among these:

- that the usual multilateral arms control and disarmament mechanisms are failing to effectively meet today’s collective security challenges and demands;
- that human security and humanitarian approaches can have utility in assisting practitioners in multilateral arms control and disarmament negotiations; and
- that the greater engagement of civil society actors can be a “practical means to making multilateral processes more effective,

especially if they lead to questioning features that have lost their purpose and utility".²

This essay will explore the last of these points, but with the first two very much as orientations for the discussion. My intention here is to be exploratory and a bit provocative. My aim is to illuminate factors which limit the potential of civil society actors—hereafter non-governmental organizations—including some which are self-limiting, and those which can be seen as actual or potential directions for increasing their contribution to making multilateral processes more effective. In the essay, I seek to build on an earlier piece on a similar topic, published in 2002.³ My observations laid out here have their own limitations in that they are based on impressions gathered largely through the prism of Geneva as a centre of multilateral deliberation on disarmament and human security concerns, an important—but decidedly partial—perspective on the world. They reflect my own experience as an NGO “practitioner” in this setting over the last 11 years.

THE STATE SYSTEM AND THE LIMITS OF INCLUSION

The series of premises outlined above, while providing a useful framework for discussion, can lead us into a kind of “the king is dead, long live the king” cul-de-sac, if we are not careful. While the multilateral system is not working for many reasons, for certain tasks this approach is the only alternative. We believe that we can improve the system’s capacity to successfully deal with such tasks by broadening both the way in which work is undertaken and the range of actors involved. However, in order to do this, we must first accept the basic structure of the system, which at once defines it and is part of the cause of its ineffectiveness.

The conundrum exposed is that there are certain collective security challenges facing humanity which only correspondingly collective mechanisms (such as the negotiation of legally binding multilateral treaty instruments or other arrangements, their implementation and their review) and measures of global governance can solve. However, although we may or may not agree on what the causes of the ineffectiveness of current mechanisms are or on what kinds of things might be done to reduce this ineffectiveness, broadly we must accept the system in order to get there: we can have more or less effective multilateralism but that “more or less” is entirely dependent on working via the basic unit in the system, the state. If,

as we believe, NGOs have something to contribute to helping us out of this situation, they too are caught within it—at least when seeking to act on the system as it currently exists.

This is something of a caricature, of course. One of the features of our globalized world is that the state must compete, and learn to work, with a range of actors and that, as the concept of “security” becomes increasingly defined beyond simple notions of national security, there are many ways to work which do not require multilaterally negotiated agreements. Nevertheless, once the focus turns to weapons and the threats they pose, we find it necessary to turn at some point to the very system of states which is proving itself so inadequate. The enterprise becomes already one of “reform”, simply because there appears to be no alternative available.

This is a state of affairs Amitai Etzioni commented on in looking at the capabilities and limits of “transnational communitarian bodies” (TCBs) in contributing to the development of greater transnational governing capacity to cope with rising transnational problems.⁴ Etzioni described TCBs as being “those groups that have a set of shared beliefs and bonds among their leaders and their staff, as well as some of their members across national borders.”⁵ In this chapter, however, I shall use the term “non-governmental organizations” (NGOs). The many terms that are used to describe the phenomenon of transnational non-governmental activity—such as transnational social movements, civil society organizations, international non-governmental organizations—can produce endless definitional and analytical debate—which is useful, but well beyond the scope of this article. The point here, regardless of the term used, is the paradox that Etzioni observed:

A critical assessment of TCBs suggests that although they do help deal with transnational problems, they often draw on nation-states and intergovernmental organizations to do so. TCBs often seek to activate the state where it is neglectful, redirect its efforts, and monitor its work, rather than carry out the tasks themselves. This requires that there be states that can act effectively, which is precisely the problem. Given that these states are already unable to cope with the myriad problems that they face, leaning on them is like hitching one’s wagon to a horse that is already overworked.⁶

The above line of thought is a fairly obvious one. My point in making it here is to show that, where greater international governance is perceived to be

required in relation to security related concerns, NGOs find themselves constrained to a larger degree than perhaps in other global issue areas by the narrow parameters of the very system that they feel needs to change. They are dependent in their actions, to a large degree, on the limited space they are accorded by the state system when they work on these issues. This dependency extends even to major reliance on government funding for the work they are able to do.

In the early, heady days of the life of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, as new forms of NGO/government/UN agency partnership emerged to focus on the tasks of implementing the Convention, I was among those who felt that the bastions of traditional disarmament processes could hardly fail to be eroded by these new ways of working. With all actors seemingly sitting on the same side of the table with the problem to be solved on the other, how, I asked myself, could other multilateral settings fail to be affected by such obviously useful dynamics? How could many of the same governmental individuals taking part in the focused, constructive atmosphere of “mine action” initiatives go back and seemingly operate comfortably in other “unreformed” settings?

And yet, this is exactly what we have seen happen. Instead of the Mine Ban Convention experiment paving the way for new forms of doing business, it has been very much business as usual since 1997 in nearly all other settings in which multilateral diplomacy takes place. This has occurred despite a great deal of rhetoric about the importance of NGOs and some modest concessions to greater scope for NGO engagement. The Conference on Disarmament, the First Committee of the General Assembly, various treaty Review Conferences, and even “expert groups” established to explore the needs and the feasibility of negotiating new international instruments, have proven to be remarkably impervious to change in this respect. If anything, the example of “Ottawa” has been seen by some governments as something to prevent from ever happening again, rather than as an example of ways in which the international system might seek to work towards solutions to other security problems. While preaching the need for revolution with regard to issues of collective security, at the level of multilateral diplomacy NGOs find themselves settling for working within the narrow boundaries within which they are permitted to operate and urging the broken system to fix itself.⁷

This is, of course, only part of the picture. NGOs play many key roles in disarmament affairs beyond the multilateral diplomacy level. But the main purpose here is to try to show in what ways, within the narrow parameters allowed, NGOs can contribute to making multilateral processes more effective and what factors inhibit that contribution.

WHAT DOES “ACCESS” MEAN AND WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

In looking at how NGOs can make their contribution to multilateral processes, one of the assumptions often made by NGOs is that effectiveness in such settings can only be achieved if somehow they are given a formal role in the deliberative processes. But is this true? Because of the mine ban process, our standard for judging this sets a bar way above what has been achieved elsewhere. This experience tells us that in helping to reframe the landmine issue from a military one to a humanitarian one, and by including a range of types of NGOs beyond disarmament NGOs, NGOs helped to create a situation in which they were able to move the traditional boundaries to NGO involvement and hence to play a far more profound role than had ever been the case before. That shift has continued in the ways in which they have worked within the mechanisms developed for the implementation of the Mine Ban Convention.

But there is very little evidence that these “lessons” of the mine ban experience have had much impact elsewhere. The more recent Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) international process to deal with the problems created by explosive remnants of war (ERW) resulting in Protocol V continues its deliberations on mines other than anti-personnel mines, ERW and what to do about cluster munitions. For many of the same reasons that NGOs are understood to be central in the anti-personnel mine process—because of their expertise, their broad humanitarian basis, their field experience, their ability to deliver programmes in the field—the CCW process has, in fact, replicated many of the same forms of engagement by non-governmental organizations. But even with this degree of access, the results have not been notably successful. What made the mine ban process unique was its willingness to break what have become the traditional negotiating patterns in multilateral disarmament diplomacy, which are dominated by the consensus “rule”. Current CCW negotiations, constrained as they are by that traditional system, have not been notably

changed by including NGOs more fully. If anything, it could be argued that NGOs, while understandably feeling that it is better to be inside than out, have allowed themselves to be co-opted by the process. If being “in” means playing by the old rules, how then can being “in” be seen as essential to making a difference?⁸

Evidence seems to show that the more the weapon type being addressed is defined in traditional national security terms, the less actual formal political space will be accorded to NGOs at the multilateral level. Thus, beyond anti-personnel mines and the concerns of the CCW, the next type along the scale would seem to be small arms, if this logic has validity. Here, NGOs have made a huge contribution to the ways in which this issue is being understood. But, so far at least, they have succeeded hardly at all in achieving “access” to the mechanisms which define the way in which the issue is being tackled globally. So far, the reframing of the issue has not been profound enough at this level to allow Ottawa-style engagement by NGOs to even come close to happening. This is most recently illustrated by the ill-fated 2006 small arms Review Conference where, despite the protestations by many states that NGOs were the real experts on the issue of small arms and light weapons and needed to be included, virtually no concession beyond the traditional ones of having an NGO speech segment and according accreditation for NGOs to be present in New York for the Conference was made. NGOs were once again shut out of the very elements of the deliberations where that expertise could have been brought to bear usefully. It is at least arguable that the results of this Review Conference might have been more productive had a more inclusive approach to NGOs been adopted at least as far back as the first Biennial Meeting of States in 2003.

At the far end of our scale of access, by this traditional definition, must be the Conference on Disarmament. That it can still be the case in 2006 that consensus cannot be achieved on allowing NGOs to address the Conference directly at a time when the CD itself cannot agree a work programme would be laughable if it were not such a sad reflection of the lack of capacity of that key institution to grasp what could be in its own interests as an institution—to say nothing of how NGO contributions could actually assist the Conference in reaching some of its own alleged goals. To argue that it is the consensus process that perpetuates this situation and that most governments participating in the CD wish to see greater formal

involvement by NGOs is only a further reflection of the failings of what passes for multilateral disarmament diplomacy today.

That this is the current reality, however, does not actually tell us very much. While NGOs struggle for forms of access which would allow them more space to operate within the deliberative processes of multilateral disarmament mechanisms, and while symbolic gestures at inclusion probably have some value, it would seem that we must look elsewhere, given the constraints of the present system, if we are to see the actual or potential contribution of NGOs to making multilateral processes more effective. For the time being, the inclusive process which characterizes the current role of NGOs in furthering global deliberations and action on the problems of anti-personnel mines is likely to remain an exception.

PROMISING AVENUES FOR NGO ENGAGEMENT IN MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY SETTINGS

While access in the above sense remains minimal, NGOs nevertheless play many roles in advancing disarmament-related issues, not only at the international level, but regionally, nationally, and locally. These roles include the important functions of generating public awareness; building constituencies at the national and transnational levels; reframing issues for more appropriate types of engagement by actors, both governmental and non-governmental; advancing the development of new norms for national behaviour; conducting advocacy work necessary to build political commitment; providing research and expert policy advice; monitoring and evaluating actor behaviour; facilitating dialogue; and actually implementing some dimensions of policy decisions, such as mine action programmes.⁹ There is a growing literature describing how NGOs or transnational civil society organizations seek to play such roles across a range of global issues and how such factors as geographical distribution, funding, accountability and legitimacy can be understood to shape the influence of NGOs. This literature brings necessary critical analysis to this important feature of transnational relations.¹⁰ More work is needed to incorporate more fully disarmament affairs into this literature. This is beyond the scope of this article, but the DHA project as a whole is making an important contribution to this need. What I do wish to do here, however, is to highlight two promising avenues for engagement in support of the logic of the three premises outlined above, directions which represent a healthier prospect

than simply propping up the current orthodoxy in multilateral diplomacy that is increasingly being exposed as limited or actively unhelpful.

**“BEING IN THE MIDDLE BY BEING AT THE EDGE”:
SHAPING AND FACILITATING PARALLEL PROCESSES**

This rather ironic phrase—“being in the middle by being at the edge”—was coined to describe dimensions of “third-party” engagement in facilitating conflict transformation and settlement.¹¹ What this means in practice is described briefly by Diana Francis:

The informal nature of the processes and the absence of political profile or affiliation on the part of the mediators, *their political powerlessness* [emphasis added], are what fits them for their task, rendering them non-threatening and enabling them to be trusted by the different parties as having no axe to grind or to wield.¹²

Anti-personnel landmines mechanisms apart, NGOs simply are not—nor are they likely to become—central players in a formal sense in multilateral disarmament processes, at least in the short run. But this notion of third-party engagement in conflict prevention work gives a different sense of “being in the middle” which can be helpful to us to understand NGO contributions to progress in the multilateral system.

Traditionally, NGOs are seen as advocates of different desired disarmament or arms control outcomes. Moreover, NGOs’ positioning vis-à-vis governments is correctly described as adversarial in many cases. NGOs’ “power” comes from the public pressure they can marshal and bring to bear on decision makers. This remains an important dimension of NGO work. But, as noted above, at the multilateral level such power remains peripheral. NGOs, even those with mass memberships, may turn up in multilateral settings, may seek to bring pressure to bear on multilateral decision makers, and may be able to direct large media attention to the failures of the processes (although, in fact, we see very little of this). But, because they are not engaged as formal interlocutors in the processes themselves, their power in this sense remains largely elsewhere, principally at the national level. At the multilateral level, NGOs must remain “at the edge”.

So how can we understand this “in the middle” role? NGOs can be in the middle in this sense by making use of their “powerlessness”, by establishing their reliability and trust-worthiness as partners to those governments (and agencies) also seeking genuine improvement in the multilateral processes or as facilitators of dialogue processes which add parallel means for the system to move forward. While there are genuine differences in this “middle role” of NGOs in multilateral processes and that exercised by individuals or organizations in conflict mediation, in practice the behaviour is quite similar. An alternative form of power is accorded to such players in settings where accommodation and progress by the parties themselves has become difficult or impossible.

This role—at the opposite end of the activity spectrum from advocacy or campaigning—can be seen to be no less important. It is also a role that has gone largely unrecognized, under-analysed and underdeveloped. By its very nature, it will be an unpublicized role because it is in its very “invisibility” that it has strength. The effective mediator does not seek attention nor claim the victory when actions are successful. It is not a neutral role; it is one which is on the side of successful progress towards effective results rather than being focused on particular desired issue outcomes. The NGOs involved in this style of work are likely, but not necessarily, to be quite different ones from advocacy organizations.

Let me illustrate this line of argument with some brief examples of how NGO action of this sort can supplement, support and, in some cases, partially substitute for formal multilateral decision-making processes. These examples are drawn largely from our own experience at the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in Geneva. I highlight them not because I believe these are any more important than similar actions undertaken by others but simply because I am closer to them and have seen them at work first hand.

Facilitating key-actor dialogue in support of multilateral negotiations.

During the years of negotiation towards a Chemical Weapons Convention, QUNO in Geneva and the regional office of the American Friends Service Committee in Jordan facilitated a series of off-the-record seminars with senior leaders from Middle East countries. Their purpose was to promote dialogue and understanding by the states in that region of the world concerning their mutual interest in achieving a strong Convention. In this initiative it was clearly the “powerlessness” of the Quakers and trust in them as genuine “honest brokers” that made these exchanges possible and

contributed an important piece to the ultimately successful outcome of the Chemical Weapons Convention negotiations. A key factor in this was that participants knew that the off-the-record nature of the meetings would be respected and they could speak frankly and openly. This is often a critical feature of any successful mediation process, and it appears also to be true in third-party initiatives in the disarmament area. Hence, this important work undertaken by Quakers has not been written about in any detail to this day and the anonymity and interventions of the participants continue to be protected. An important feature of such processes is that the participants are able to gain a better understanding of the positions of those with different views, of what is happening from inside the policy units of their opposite numbers, and also in the knowledge that signals shared and new understandings gained in the formal and informal parts of such meetings will be shared with capitals.

A slightly different example of this kind of contribution NGOs can make can be seen in QUNO's work in the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention process. At various stages in this process—both before and after the Mine Ban Convention was achieved—QUNO sought to facilitate joint action by “like-minded” government and non-governmental actors through off-the-record dialogue opportunities. Within such a process an important feature can be the invention or furtherance of new multilateral ways of working, as has so much characterized the Mine Ban processes up to today.

Working in parallel with governments in promoting multilateral attention to key issues. The “Biting the Bullet” partnership organizations (Saferworld, International Alert, and the University of Bradford) have worked in recent years in tandem with the British government to move the issue of the development of conventional weapons transfer guidelines up the international agenda. While the United Kingdom has sought to build support among a range of governments for this through its “transfer control initiative” activities, Biting the Bullet partners have run a series of parallel processes (international and regional) with governments and NGOs to supplement and support this direction. This has been what might be called a “pull” process, while the “Control Arms” campaign, driven by Oxfam, Amnesty International and the International Action Network on Small Arms, holding up an eventual Arms Trade Treaty based in already agreed principles of international law as the eventual goal, has provided the equally important “push” factor. This demonstrates how this “third-party” role must be seen to be working along side many other types of initiatives by NGOs.

The result of these “push” and “pull” dynamics has meant that the whole issue of the requirement of globally agreed rules of behaviour with regard to arms transfers has advanced much farther than many would have predicted at the time of the 2001 Programme of Action, even if this progress is far less than many had hoped.

Non-formal complements to official multilateral deliberative spaces.

NGOs have long played a role alongside official processes in offering space for engagement by official negotiators and other key actors to discern and discuss possible ways forward and explore the possibilities of accommodation. For example, the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1995, have for many years not only sought to bring real expertise to bear on key security areas where more concerted joint action appears required, but have also been spaces in which government officials have been encouraged to participate across major divisions. These Conferences were an especially important space during the years of the Cold War, when dialogue in so many other ways was blocked. What this illustrates is that NGOs can often provide environments for engagement between governments that the latter have difficulty in achieving by themselves.

In the multilateral disarmament setting of Geneva, the work of the Geneva Forum, a partnership arrangement by an NGO (QUNO), a UN body (the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research), and a university research programme (the Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies of the Graduate Institute of International Studies) demonstrates similarly how non-formal processes can be seen as significant adjuncts to official mechanisms, particularly when those mechanisms are stalled or dysfunctional. Over the years of its work in Geneva, the Geneva Forum has added to its original role of providing seminars for the expansion of awareness and understanding around relevant topic areas to being seen by key actors as being able to provide essential environments for dialogue, encounter and discernment. In addition to a central small arms focus, this has included dialogue promotion work on biological weapons and so-called “non-lethal” weapons developments. The work of the “Geneva Process”, an ongoing mechanism of governments, international agencies, and NGOs on the implementation of the 2001 UN Programme of Action on small arms, coordinated by the Geneva Forum, has, in effect, put in place a non-formal multilateral “institution” where none seemed possible. This has contributed not only to there being vital regular discussion at the

multilateral level on issues related to small arms (there being no formal mechanism to do so), but also to consolidating Geneva as a key generator of energy around small arms issues, providing a contrast to New York-based processes.¹³ In a variety of ways, the Geneva Forum is clearly demonstrating the potential of “being in the middle by being at the edge” at the multilateral disarmament level.

This particular dimension of the contribution of NGOs to multilateral disarmament processes has gone largely unexamined, in part because, as noted, it is in the under-played and in some cases invisible nature of this work that that contribution is best made. It is not a role that has gone unappreciated by governments, however, which have increasingly demonstrated that they recognize the value of this role by means of their partnerships with NGOs, their important financial contributions to this kind of work, and their active participation in such processes. This role is being played even while the formal dimensions of access for NGOs in disarmament affairs remain highly constrained compared to many other transnational issue settings. Further analysis is clearly needed to fully lay out the various dimensions and possibilities of this role and measure the real impact of such activities. But it suggests one important refinement of the meaning of “the greater engagement of civil society actors” as contributors to making multilateral processes more effective.

APPROACHES TO REALIZING SYNERGIES IN LANGUAGE AND ACTION BY NGOs ON HUMAN SECURITY AND HUMANITARIAN APPROACHES TO MULTILATERAL ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

That NGOs have been key actors in helping to broaden the ways in which governments understand the humanitarian impact and the costs to different dimensions of human security of a range of weapons types is without doubt. That this has had some influence on how governments approach multilateral arms control and disarmament also seems incontestable. This can be seen most visibly in work on anti-personnel mines, explosive remnants of war, cluster munitions, and small arms. While so-called weapons of mass destruction—chemical, biological, and nuclear—if actually used, would have profound humanitarian impact, few inroads have actually been made so far into the approaches to the management and elimination of these weapons from other than traditional national security points of view. Partly as a result of post-11 September 2001 “terrorism” concerns, there are new dimensions to understanding the possible effects

of the misuse of such weapons both by states and non-state armed groups. So far at least, however, these concerns have had very little impact on the formal ways in which states address such issues.

Beyond the issues noted above, to which NGOs appear to have most successfully been able to bring human security or humanitarian perspectives to bear, it is in the domain of preventing poisoning and deliberate spreading of disease (due to growing potential for the hostile misuse of advances in the life sciences) that would seem to offer the most promising next “frontier” areas for broader human security and humanitarian approaches to be brought to bear. Existing norms against biological and chemical weapons would be strengthened by greater buy-in and involvement by scientists, physicians and elements of civil society in view of the diffusion of technology and the superficial attractiveness to certain militaries of so-called non-lethal weapons such as biochemical incapacitating agents. To some extent this is happening.¹⁴

Nevertheless—and quite apart from the formal boundaries in multilateral disarmament settings which constrain NGO engagement—there appear to be a number of features related to the nature and behaviour of NGOs themselves that serve as “self-limiting” factors to more effective engagement by NGOs. Greater NGO willingness to address some of these would, I submit, enhance the contribution of NGOs to making multilateral processes more effective. Here I would like to single out a number of such self-limiting features and suggest some possible ways as to how they might be overcome or reduced. If these could be achieved, the contribution of NGOs to broadening the discourse on arms control and disarmament issues would be enhanced.

In the article from 2002 cited earlier, I made the following observations:

- “While there are NGOs which work across a number of global issue areas or across a range of arms control and disarmament issues, there tends to be a high degree of specialization among NGOs around one [weapon type] or cluster of issues related to a [weapon type] like nuclear weapons. What this means is that NGOs have developed strategies and approaches to those particular areas, but there is little cross-fertilization with NGOs working on other areas.”

- “[A]nother dimension to this ‘clumping’ of NGOs around particular weapons or security issue areas is that NGOs are spread unevenly across these areas in terms of numbers, types and north–south distribution.”
- “Another obvious factor in this world of disarmament NGOs is that they, like NGOs involved in the whole range of global issue concerns, will often differ among themselves not only on strategy in relation to a particular weapons policy direction, but also even on the desirability of a particular direction.”¹⁵

Four years on, these generalizations can be seen largely to still hold. To some extent, particularly in the case of the last one, differences are inevitable and typical of the nature of what we call civil society. Nevertheless, at the risk of further compounding inaccuracies which may be contained in these generalizations, a number of inter-related dimensions can be pointed out which seem to characterize aspects of current NGO behaviour, even among those NGOs which claim to be approaching disarmament from a human security or humanitarian perspective.

- **Limits to learning.** Because NGOs tend to specialize around particular weapons issue areas, they tend either not to be aware of—or not to seek out—what lessons may be accumulating in other areas that could have some applicability in their own area of specialization.
- **Reinventing the wheel.** The failure to adequately examine and learn from the experience in other fields tends to lead to the reinvention of approaches and strategies which could have been developed and adapted from other fields. This has certainly been the case, I would argue, with regard to the evolution of small arms action and others, such as Rosy Cave, have observed this is also the case in civil society work on explosive remnants of war and cluster munitions.¹⁶
- **Failure to collaborate across issue areas.** The focused nature of NGO work may lead to the missing of obvious opportunities for collaboration for joint action with those working in other areas. The most obvious example here concerns the two issue areas with the closest natural set of possible alliances from a humanitarian or human security standpoint—anti-personnel mines and small arms—where the two principal NGO communities, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and the International

Action Network on Small Arms, have spent much of the last eight years, from this observer's perspective, practically going out of their way to avoid exploring chances for collaborative learning and joint action.

- **Missing possible synergies to be exploited by joint action.** There are often issues that touch more than one field of action—for example, approaches to assistance to victims of the use of a range of weapons—which receive sub-optimal attention because separate action on different weapon types fails to exploit possible synergies.
- **Orthodox thinking.** The perceived need to protect standards achieved and to see them fully implemented—for example, the provisions of the Mine Ban Convention—may blind advocates to allied routes for action which, rather than being threats to the standard, may offer ways for greater inclusiveness.

To the extent that these observations have validity, clearly there will be many different causal factors. These deserve greater exploration than I have given them. I put them forward here primarily as illustrations of how, at the multilateral level, NGOs may be limiting their own effectiveness, even within the limited spaces within which they can operate.

How might this be reversed? A number of directions suggest themselves:

Develop a common humanitarian vocabulary for action. NGO action on disarmament at the multilateral level is fragmented by clusters of NGOs working on different issues. This mirrors largely the framing established by governments. To some extent this is efficient in that expertise and action can be targeted. However, the overall effectiveness of NGOs would be enhanced if a common vocabulary for action could be developed. If NGOs working on landmines or cluster munitions and those working on biological weapons or nuclear weapons concerns could find unifying language based in international humanitarian law and other human security principles which they all used in similar ways, this could make it easier for natural alliances to develop, ones which might otherwise remain hidden. It would also make it less easy to divide the humanitarian action community.

Build a common humanitarian context from which to work. Developing a common vocabulary is only part of coming to understand how one's own issue space is related to others. There is a need for NGOs to learn to

understand how the collection of weapons-related issues fit together, with each cluster of issue-focused NGOs operating with greater awareness of how their arena of action is linked to others (strategically, politically, ethically and temporally). This is not an argument for everybody to do everything; it *is* an argument, however, for NGO action to be taken self-consciously in relation to that of others working on other issues. What this would do, for example, would be to create a situation in which areas closely related—such as cluster munitions, anti-personnel mines and small arms—had NGO coalitions developing arguments, strategies and tactics for action at the international and other levels which could echo and support each other, rather than dividing them, as is often the case today.

Consciously seek out opportunities where synergies can happen and joint action can be fruitful. The rather artificial divisions which have been created at the multilateral level for tackling arms control and disarmament issues, many of them a legacy of Cold War requirements, also structure the work of NGOs in such ways that points of common concern are overlooked or do not mutually support each other. This is a current reality. To allow this to continue, however, would be irresponsible. Why should approaches, for example, to weapons risk education, stockpile management challenges, post-conflict disarmament approaches or the needs of survivors of the use of weapons—all features presented by the reality of armed conflict in our contemporary global situation—not be tackled as issues in and of themselves rather than being divided by different arms control frameworks? Some governments have begun to build more coherence into their national policy approaches to such questions, even if this coherency has not yet penetrated very far at the multilateral level. Even there, however, there are signs of change, as can be seen in the language of the Outcome Document of the September 2005 World Summit.¹⁷ NGOs have been slow to develop their own coherence of action and contribute jointly to global initiatives which cut across the traditional arms control and disarmament divides. They need to learn to do this better. Their overall influence on the effectiveness of necessary multilateral approaches will be increased to the extent that they are able to do so. But this means learning to listen to each other and reduce defensive or territorial behaviour, which is to some extent present between NGO “clusters” today.¹⁸

Seek to incorporate voices from allied fields. One key to the success of the movement that succeeded in achieving the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention was that a broad coalition of actors from the humanitarian,

human rights, development, children's issues, health and other fields were successfully convinced to actively support such a ban. The multi-faceted nature of the small arms issue is driving a similar approach, although there is still a way to go to achieve substantial buy-in from the range of actors, such as development organizations, which one might expect to have an interest in this issue area.

To date, the weapons of mass destruction arenas have been far less successful in attracting broad coalitions of organizations on a sustained basis. The development of a greater commonly shared humanitarian context for action on disarmament concerns could help to convince those who are so far unconvinced that there is potential relevance to their own field of concern by joining in appropriate ways. One particular negative example which might be used here is the failure so far to sufficiently convince those who are actively concerned with conflict transformation processes of the requirement of action on small arms for the success and sustainability of their initiatives in settings of armed violence. The power of developing wide-ranging coalitions of actors for shifting the content of the discourse and removing constraints to multilateral action can be demonstrated. A more widespread understanding of this could provide powerful impetus to overturning current stalemates in multilateral disarmament diplomacy.

TOWARDS A NEW "COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE" FOR NGOS

Neither "being in the middle by being at the edge" nor the approaches to realizing synergies briefly described above could be considered exhaustive solutions. Indeed, there are many other areas where important contributions of NGOs in helping to reshape or reinvent required multilateral disarmament processes can be seen. These include:

- Independent monitoring of state behaviour in relation to global norms and agreements, such as the functions of the *Landmine Monitor* and the reports of the Bio-Weapons Prevention Project.
- Independent reporting on multilateral disarmament processes like that provided by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's important *Reaching Critical Will* project.¹⁹
- Producing sophisticated studies on dimensions of particular weapons issues and their actual or potential impacts, such as the

work of the Small Arms Survey or the Bradford University Department of Peace Studies project on “non-lethal” weapons.

- Building alliances for multi-actor engagement towards action appropriate to what is required at the multilateral level, such as the informal government/UN agency/NGO partnerships that characterize aspects of work on anti-personnel mines, cluster munitions, DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration), child soldiers and many others.
- Actively assisting the decay of ineffective multilateral processes while helping to put in place, even at the informal level, new, more appropriate mechanisms. For example, in light of the failure of the 2006 Review Conference on small arms to set clear next steps, one might see a very important role for NGOs in creatively stimulating those small arms areas where there appear to be a sufficient number of governments able to move ahead—such as on transfer controls, brokering and ammunition—in spite of the slow pace of global work that can be agreed as part of the consensus-based Programme of Action process. This is a necessary subversive role, where NGOs can work on the side of change in partnership with those governments who clearly see change as necessary, but are prevented by the present structures of multilateral diplomacy. This subversive role includes the fuller exploitation of the potential of regional processes.

But development of the kinds of directions suggested here, to the extent that they have any validity, will also require NGOs to change. In the first volume of this series, John Borrie introduced the concept of “community of practice” as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of elements shaping multilateral disarmament diplomacy. He used the term “community of practice” to mean “a group of people who over a period of time share in some set of social practices geared toward some common social purpose.”²⁰ In looking at governmental dynamics, this perspective can help us to understand better not only those elements that can be seen to be instrumental in producing successful outcomes, but also those which can be seen to be inhibiting or preventing such outcomes.

The case made here is that there is under-developed potential for NGOs to enhance their presently limited participation in this community of practice and in the reshaping of it. To realize that potential, however, NGOs must come to understand more fully and learn to strengthen those dimensions of

their own “community of practice” which could enhance their role, while seeking to overcome those “self-limiting” factors which only support their relative marginalization.

Notes

- ¹ John Borrie, “Rethinking Multilateral Negotiations: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action” in John Borrie and Vanessa Martin Randin (eds), *Alternative Approaches in Multilateral Decision Making: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action*, UNIDIR, 2005, pp. 7–37.
- ² *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
- ³ David Atwood, “NGOs in Disarmament: Views from the Coalface”, *Disarmament Forum*, vol. 2, no. 1, UNIDIR, 2002, pp. 5–14. In that essay, I called for a more systematic comparative and multi-level analysis of NGOs and disarmament. This is not that analysis. It is, in my opinion, still needed.
- ⁴ Amitai Etzioni, “The Capabilities and Limits of the Global Civil Society”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2004, pp. 341–353.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 349–350.
- ⁷ The political scientist Béatrice Pouligny argues, “Activists generally ask for the strengthening of the state or for its reorganization. ... [D]espite the force NGOs might gain from an erosion of the state, they need it in order to get progress in their agenda.” Béatrice Pouligny, “NGOs as Transnational Forces? Beyond the Myth, Evolving Interactions which Question the Political,” conference paper, *Resilience or Erosion? The State under Attack—From Above and Below*, Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, 15–16 June 2000.
- ⁸ Rosy Cave provides makes an important contribution in her comparison of the civil society roles in the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban process and the Conventional on Conventional Weapons Protocol on ERW process. This article provides substantial insights well beyond the general observation I offer here. See, Rosy Cave, “Disarmament as Humanitarian Action? Comparing Negotiations on Anti-personnel Mines and Explosive Remnants of War,” in John Borrie and Vanessa

- Martin Randin (eds), *Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: From Perspective to Practice*, UNIDIR, 2006, pp. 51–78.
- ⁹ See David Atwood, “NGOs in Disarmament: Views from the Coalface”, *Disarmament Forum*, vol. 2, no. 1, UNIDIR, 2002, p. 9. See also Simon Carroll, “NGO Access to Multilateral Fora: Does Disarmament Lag Behind?”, *Disarmament Forum*, vol. 2, no. 1, UNIDIR, 2002, pp. 18–23.
- ¹⁰ See for example the very useful review essay by Richard Price, “Transnational Civil Society and Advocacy in World Politics”, *World Politics*, vol. 55, no. 4, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, pp. 579–606. In this essay Price examines key volumes in this literature which have appeared in the English language in recent years. See also, Jackie Smith and Dawn Wiest, “The Uneven Geography of Global Civil Society: National and Global Influences on Transnational Association”, *Social Forces*, vol. 84, no. 2, The University of North Carolina Press, 2005, pp. 621–652. Two less than flattering views of NGOs in the field of disarmament affairs can be found in J. Marschal Beier, “Emailed Applications are Preferred: Ethical Practices in Mine Action and the Idea of Global Civil Society”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 5, Routledge, 2003, pp. 795–808; and Gerald Steinberg, *First Do No Harm: A Critique of the Human Security Approach to Arms Control*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Jerusalem Viewpoints no. 539, 2006.
- ¹¹ Sue Williams and Steve Williams, *Being in the Middle by Being at the Edge: Quaker Experience in Non-official Political Mediation*, Quaker Peace and Service, 1994.
- ¹² Diana Francis, *People, Peace and Power: Conflict Transformation in Action*, Pluto Press, 2002, p. 31.
- ¹³ In Volume II of this DHA project, John Borrie provides a useful analysis of the work of the Geneva Forum. He argues importantly that “[I]nterest in informal processes, such as the Geneva Forum, in which humanitarian and other approaches can be introduced, should not obscure the reason that they are necessary in the first place—because of the limits on substantive dialogue, interaction and trust-building in official processes. The constraints are both procedural and political. Consequently, the Geneva Forum’s activities supplement the limited dialogue and input of transnational civil society into international decision-making on small arms issues, but are not a substitute.” See John Borrie, “Small Arms and the Geneva Forum: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action?” in John Borrie and Vanessa Martin Randin

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- (eds), *Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: From Perspective to Practice*, UNIDIR, 2006, p. 156.
- ¹⁴ The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (not an NGO but certainly an important transnational actor in its role as an international humanitarian organization) is especially important in this regard. See, for example, their initiative on “Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity”, at <www.scienceforhumanity.org>.
- ¹⁵ David Atwood, “NGOs in Disarmament: Views from the Coalface”, *Disarmament Forum*, vol. 2, no. 1, UNIDIR, 2002, pp. 7–8.
- ¹⁶ See Rosy Cave, “Disarmament as Humanitarian Action? Comparing Negotiations on Anti-personnel Mines and Explosive Remnants of War,” in John Borrie and Vanessa Martin Randin, eds., *Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: from Perspective to Practice*, Geneva: UNIDIR, 2006, pp. 51–78.
- ¹⁷ UN General Assembly, *2005 World Summit Outcome*, document A/RES/60/1, 24 October 2005.
- ¹⁸ See Don Hubert, *The Landmine Ban: A Case Study in Humanitarian Advocacy*, Watson Institute for International Studies, Occasional Paper No. 42, 2000. This work remains a classic in its examination of exogenous and endogenous factors leading to the success or failure of humanitarian advocacy across a number of issue areas. In 2002, Hubert, the Quaker UN Office, and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue brought leaders from the International Action Network on Small Arms, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the campaign for the International Criminal Court, and the Kimberley Process together for a three-day gathering of what, on the surface at least, appeared to be natural allies who, by coming together, might discover possible common approaches and directions. While several successful initiatives apparently did emerge from this exercise, parochialism and defensiveness characterized the “dialogue” at the gathering to a surprising degree.
- ¹⁹ See <www.reachingcriticalwill.org>.
- ²⁰ Here Borrie is quoting Ron Scollon, *Mediated Discourse in Social Interaction: A Study of News Discourse*, Addison Wesley, 1998, pp. 12–13. For a fuller description of his application of this idea to multilateral disarmament diplomacy realities, see John Borrie, “Rethinking Multilateral Negotiations: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action” in John Borrie and Vanessa Martin Randin (eds), *Alternative*

Approaches in Multilateral Decision Making: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action, UNIDIR, 2005, pp. 15–17.