

Lessons from past UN disarmament education efforts

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As education is an important force in bringing about enlightened change, disarmament and non-proliferation education can be such a force to help our world move from militarism to a culture of peace—a goal of the United Nations. Therefore, disarmament activists around the world welcomed the UN General Assembly resolution of 20 November 2000 that established the Group of Governmental Experts on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education.

The group will produce a report with recommendations for governments, NGOs and the United Nations system on disarmament and non-proliferation education. As disarmament education efforts of the United Nations have a long history, it might be useful to cast a backward glance over the previous two decades of campaigns and activities. What lessons are there to be learned? What can this group do differently and with better results?

SSOD I & II

The UN General Assembly's Tenth Special Session (also known as the First Special Session on Disarmament or SSOD I) of 1978 represented the height of envisioning disarmament. Its *Final Document* eloquently registered the absurdity of the arms race and the radioactive security concept driving it, and made a number of references to disarmament information and education.¹

Paragraph 106 of the *Final Document* reads:

With a view to contributing to a greater understanding and awareness of the problems created by the armaments race and of the need for disarmament, Governments and governmental and non-governmental international organizations are urged to take steps to develop programmes of education for disarmament and peace studies at all levels.

This document introduced measures to increase the dissemination of information to mobilize world public opinion, and to encourage governmental and non-governmental information organs and those of the United Nations and its specialized agencies to give priority to the preparation and distribution of disarmament-focused printed and audio-visual materials.²

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The UNESCO World Congress on Disarmament Education was held less than two years later. It is disheartening that its *Final Document* is as insightful and valid today as it was twenty years ago—an ironic indicator of our (lack of) progress on this topic. In particular, its paragraph 4 on the relation of disarmament education to economics and political realities is highly relevant to the conflicts we face today.

Disarmament education cannot, however, confine itself to the dissemination of data and information on disarmament projects and prospects nor even to commenting on the hopes and ideals which inspire them. It should recognize fully the relationship disarmament has with achieving international security and realizing development. To be effective in this regard, disarmament education should be related to the lives and concerns of the learners and to the political realities within which disarmament is sought and should provide insights into the political, economic and social factors on which the security of peoples could be based.³

Our current discussions on human security are not perhaps as novel as we would like to think.

Following SSOD I, four years of study, consultations (including with NGO representatives) and negotiations resulted in the United Nations World Disarmament Campaign. The campaign was launched on 7 June 1982, the opening day of SSOD II. This campaign was a response to persistent calls by NGOs and non-nuclear-weapon states to halt the absurd and dangerous nuclear arms race, and the resulting legitimization of 'lesser' wars waged with conventional weapons. The campaign was also perhaps an attempt to address the inherently undemocratic nature of the national security policies adopted in the Cold War, wherein information about decisions taken in the name of 'we the people' was entirely unavailable to the populations directly affected or implicated.

The campaign had a receptive audience. NGO campaigns for disarmament were thriving at the popular level in all of the world's regions. For example, a signature campaign for nuclear disarmament launched by Japanese peace organizations became a worldwide campaign. It was, at its heart, an education campaign. It informed people on the street about the need for disarmament while soliciting their signatures for a petition addressed to the UN. More than a million signatures were collected and delivered to the UN during SSOD II.

SSOD II itself was popularly launched by a march of more than a million women, men and children from all over the world, starting at UN Headquarters and winding its way to Central Park, demanding 'Disarmament Now!' It took a good year to prepare that march, which in itself was an information and education campaign. It was the largest demonstration ever to be held on this issue. In other words, popular will, the perceived absence of which is so often lamented today, was receptive to the messages and products of the World Disarmament Campaign.

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World Disarmament Campaign 1982–1992

The framework for the World Disarmament Campaign was adopted by the General Assembly in 1982 and got underway in 1983. The campaign was designed 'to inform, educate and to generate public understanding and support for the objectives of the United Nations in the field of arms limitation and disarmament'. It envisaged the co-operation of the United Nations, its Member States and NGOs as major actors in achieving the campaign's objectives.

The campaign was divided into five major areas: preparation and dissemination of materials; conferences, seminars and training; special events such as Disarmament Week; a publicity programme; and the services of the United Nations Field Offices. Some of these elements are described here.

The *regional disarmament seminars* organized during the campaign brought UN experts and diplomats, regional governmental experts and non-governmental actors together to inform and educate, thereby increasing understanding and commitment to disarmament objectives. National disarmament activists and members of regional institutions as well as international NGO representatives participated as speakers and participants. Reports of the seminars were published by the UN and widely disseminated.

New *publications* and those already published by the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs, such as the *United Nations Disarmament Yearbook*, the Fact Sheet series and the periodic review *Disarmament*, were printed in larger numbers and distributed more widely. UN Radio increased their programmes on disarmament issues, and generally more audio and visual materials were made available for public use.

The *Disarmament Fellowship, Training and Advisory Services* was organized. This service incorporated the United Nations Disarmament Fellowship Programme that was launched in 1978 and which has trained more than 500 officials from over 150 countries. Additionally UN expert staff members responded positively to invitations to disarmament meetings organized by academia and NGOs.

UN resolutions on disarmament, the work of the Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament, the efforts by the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs—in short, all disarmament efforts by the UN and its Member States—were more highly profiled, and NGOs disseminated all available information. The World Disarmament Campaign stimulated a closer working relationship among its ‘major actors’—a significant achievement. However, the campaign slowly faded away and in its 1992 resolution 47/53 D entitled ‘World Disarmament Campaign’ the General Assembly decided that the ‘World Disarmament Campaign shall be known hereafter as the “United Nations Disarmament Information Programme”’. This change would ‘... lay the basis for broader support in the future’ and ‘more accurately describe the work being done.’⁴

Did the World Disarmament Campaign meet its educational objectives?

Opinions are mixed. Certainly the campaign produced useful information that was translated into local languages by the UN and by governments for their people, thereby introducing a wider public to disarmament issues. At the non-governmental level, the campaign no doubt provided a stimulus to work harder for disarmament, organize more seminars, conferences and other public events, issue more materials and disseminate them more widely, and enlarge the disarmament constituency.

Some critics accused the World Disarmament Campaign of being a delivery vehicle for Cold War propaganda. There were reported incidents of ‘booklet burning’ and publications never released because of objections from governments. Other commentators did not lament the loss too much, claiming that many of the booklets were boring and not read regardless.

At the time, many activists asked themselves whether certain governments seriously wanted to promote disarmament education, thereby strengthening popular support for policies that would contribute to world disarmament. This question was posed again each year when the General

Assembly noted that those '... States that have the largest military expenditures have not so far made any financial contribution to the World Disarmament Campaign.' Some governments invested considerably in disarmament information and education in their countries, others paid lip service to the campaign and continued their armament programmes, while still others simply ignored the campaign.

In the end, two major obstacles blocked the World Disarmament Campaign from becoming a truly mobilizing force.

One obstacle was that the campaign had to be carried out in a 'balanced, factual and objective' manner. What this actually meant was that nothing could ever be said or published that could in any way be understood as accusing a government of acting contrary to disarmament obligations and objectives. Anything that even gently criticized a specific country for an act or position that clearly went against the goal of achieving disarmament fell under the axe of 'lack of balance, fact and objectivity'. Clearly, this did not help identify where the obstacles to disarmament lay, enhance the credibility of the campaign, or make the exercise interesting. It is true, of course, that simple, factual information about the armaments race were and still are

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compelling enough to make people want to push for disarmament. But it is nevertheless important that disarmament and what prevents it from happening be clearly and interestingly presented. Clarity and truth are precious ingredients of learning. Objectivity and balance are not violated by asserting facts.

Poor funding was the second obstacle to the campaign's success. Education is an investment in the future, and the case of education for disarmament is no exception. It is an investment in ensuring the future of humanity. For the most part, the World Disarmament Campaign was funded by voluntary contributions. Few governments contributed in a meaningful and ongoing way, and some made their contributions in non-convertible currencies so that the money had to be spent in the country of the contributing government or in blocs of countries where the currency was accepted.

Despite the fact that the annual General Assembly resolutions on the World Disarmament Campaign urged governments to contribute but not earmark funds, some countries reserved their contributions for particular conferences and events. The Department for Disarmament Affairs, the secretariat responsible for the campaign, was thereby deprived of the ability to allocate the already meagre resources where they were most needed.

Avoiding past mistakes

Based on these experiences, the recently established Group of Governmental Experts will almost certainly not recommend one overarching campaign effort, or endorse just one set of tools and techniques.

Instead, the process leading to the report to the General Assembly in 2002 should unearth, or point to the availability of, a range of learning modules and tools that could be used by educators, parliamentarians, municipal leaders, military officers and government officials. Rather than vague recommendations, all of the constituencies served by the resolution would benefit more from practical materials or basic elements that can be tailored to their particular needs. The panel can avoid being seen to endorse one model if it can stimulate the appearance of a wide range of disarmament education materials.

Rather than beginning something new, it would be both more likely and useful for the Expert Group to recommend the strengthening of existing initiatives. A lot more of what is already being done could make an enormous difference. For example, the United Nations CyberSchoolbus, the interactive, educational part of the UN's web site for children, needs more materials on disarmament. The United Nations Department of Public Information should be given more capacity to produce and disseminate disarmament-related materials, basic information, signs and posters in post-conflict zones, advertisements, videos and public relations events. The Department for Disarmament Affairs and UNIDIR should be encouraged and financially enabled to produce more occasional papers, studies and reports in collaboration with disarmament educators and NGOs. The Expert Group should acknowledge the work that has been done on disarmament by educators, such as Helena Kekkonen and others who have worked with UNESCO, in both formal and informal peace education.

Despite the recent push about the essential role of civil society and NGOs as partners of the UN, the capacity of NGOs in conceiving, producing, promoting, funding and especially disseminating UN publications on this matter has been severely underutilized. In order to reach new audiences and to more actively communicate with those already sympathetic to the issue, the United Nations should actively co-operate on more joint projects with NGOs.

UN Messengers for Peace and other celebrities could more consistently promote the issue of disarmament, which is often caught up in a technical and legalistic discourse. The current diplomatic exchange in Conference Room IV in New York or the *Salle des conseils* where the Conference on Disarmament meets in Geneva is not sufficiently interesting to sustain people who are less than obsessed about this issue. In order to engage the younger generation, the culture of peace needs to qualify as 'cool' and celebrities can help this issue acquire some 'grooviness' by association. The Group of Governmental Experts should engage this kind of star power assistance in launching their report and activities thereafter.

A great deal of confidence is felt both in the governmental and non-governmental communities in the openness and integrity of the Group's Chairman, Miguel Marín Bosch, and his colleagues. The ten experts, chosen by their respective governments, held their first meeting in New York in April 2001 and are preparing for the second meeting. The tone and outcome of the first meeting bodes very well for a creative, innovative and productive process leading to a renewed focus on disarmament and non-proliferation education.

Notes

- 1 *Final Document of the Tenth Special Session of the General Assembly*, UN document A/S-10/4.
- 2 *Ibid.*, paras. 99, 100.
- 3 *Final Document of the World Congress on Disarmament Education*, Paris, 9–13 June 1980, report number SS-80, CONF. 401 REV/COL.51. See also United Nations, Department for Disarmament Affairs, 1981, *Disarmament Yearbook*, vol. 5: 1980, p. 411.
- 4 United Nations, Department for Disarmament Affairs, 1992, *Disarmament Yearbook*, vol. 17: 1992, p. 285.