

FOREWORD

In late 2004, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) began a research project entitled *Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: Making Multilateral Negotiations Work* (DHA). The project, assisted financially by the Governments of Norway and the Netherlands, examines current difficulties for the international community in tackling disarmament and arms control. Recognizing that a greater humanitarian focus is relevant to the work of multilateral practitioners like diplomats and other policy makers, the project is concerned with developing practical proposals to help them apply this in functional terms.

Until recently, thinking in disarmament and arms control was focused on security concepts dominated by external threats to states, especially from other states. These orthodox approaches have been found wanting in the face of new international security challenges. Indeed, the majority of multilateral processes in the disarmament domain failed to make substantial progress over the last decade, themes discussed in the DHA project's first volume of work, entitled *Alternative Approaches in Multilateral Decision Making: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action*, published in 2005.

It is here that human security and humanitarian approaches to disarmament and arms control could have great effect. Such approaches put greater stress on the individual and their community as reference points for security. This enables problems of armed violence to be framed in new ways and appropriate responses to be identified that may not have been considered before.

The spread and humanitarian effects of small arms, such as assault rifles and handguns, is an example in which human security perspectives make a great deal of sense. Not only do small arms kill many of thousands of civilians each year, their presence can have a chilling effect on trust and cooperation, clouding the socio-economic prospects of millions of people, one household or street at a time. The mosaic of small arms proliferation can be better understood once we start thinking about what drives individual perceptions of insecurity and the resulting social interactions.

At root, disarmament and arms control problems are issues of human security. People are hurt or killed and their communities undermined and destroyed by armed violence. Yet traditional multilateral approaches to security, especially in arms control, have been geared toward counting and deciding what to do with discrete weapons and their components—whether they are bombers, tanks, nuclear warheads or poisonous chemicals—which usually are controlled by governments. However, as we are witnessing, this type of approach can be confounded by the sheer complexity of the task. New security challenges are increasingly defined by the *interdependence* of many variables, rather than the innate strategic properties of specific objects or systems. Infectious disease; refugees and internally displaced people; trafficking in people, guns and narcotics; and environmental damage do not fit into the existing multilateral “box” at all well, and our collective responses are poorer for it.

Another hallmark of humanitarian approaches to disarmament is that they harness the insights offered by many different perspectives to meet practical challenges. This cognitive diversity—from affected communities, humanitarian deminers, medical personnel working in victim assistance and civil society activists for example—has been critical to the success of initiatives like the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. The DHA project’s second volume of research, *Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: From Perspective to Practice*, provided practical insights into the ways in which civil society has augmented the work of states from humanitarian contexts such as international efforts on explosive remnants of war, small arms and anti-personnel mines.

The ways in which disarmament diplomats do business is in need of remedial attention. Despite the catch-phrase often repeated that “one size does not fit all” in finding multilateral solutions, precedent and past practice exert a very strong hold that can constrain innovation and flexibility among state representatives charged with those tasks. Sometimes, the attempted—and often abortive—responses of established multilateral institutions, like the Conference on Disarmament, are responses more striking for their inherited procedural resemblance with one another than for their ability to achieve a meaningful goal successfully. Familiar tools and approaches may be chosen, rather than selecting those most appropriate for the job at hand.

Human security and humanitarian approaches are useful for multilateral disarmament practitioners in understanding the security challenges they

face in their work. Thinking at the human scale can also help them think about the constraints on their own interactions and effectiveness. All of this prompts important questions: is it possible to tailor the international system's responses and methods of dealing with common security problems in order to achieve better outcomes? If so, then how?

The common theme of the contributions to this volume, the DHA project's third, is to look, from different angles, at how multilateral negotiations can be made to work better than they do. They present no easy or magical solutions. But, the volume does offer multilateral practitioners—including disarmament diplomats, their authorities in capitals, and civil society actors involved in the international security domain—practical ways to think outside the box by furnishing them with new tools and perspectives.

The completion of the work presented in this volume would not have been possible without the generous support of the Governments of Norway and the Netherlands. In particular, the DHA project team and I would like to thank Steffen Kongstad, Susan Eckey and Annette Landell of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Norwegian and Dutch Permanent Missions in Geneva. Anita Blétry, Christophe Carle, Rosy Cave, Nicolas Gérard, Eoghan Murphy, Jason Powers, Isabelle Roger, Ashley Thornton and Kerstin Vignard of UNIDIR were unfailingly helpful, as were all of those who commented on or reviewed the volume's contents. We would also like to thank the UN Department of Disarmament Affairs in Geneva, and in particular Tim Caughley, Richard Lennane and Piers Millet, the staff of the Mines-Arms Unit of the International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as the Small Arms Survey, especially Anne-Kathrin Glatz and James Bevan, Patrick McCarthy of the Geneva Forum and David Meddings of the World Health Organization. In addition, the DHA team asked me to mention the particular inspiration they drew from the work of Robert Axelrod, Philip Ball, Robin Dunbar, Paul Ormerod, Paul Seabright, Thomas Schelling and Frans de Waal.

Without doubt, more creativity and flexibility is needed in the current multilateral security environment. Our hope is that those working in multilateral disarmament and arms control, as well as the general reader, will find the perspectives in this volume stimulating, at times provocative, and ultimately useful in helping them to think outside whichever box they are in. Following the DHA project's other work, it is a fitting that this volume

emerges in the twenty-fifth anniversary year of UNIDIR, an institute established to produce ideas for peace and security.

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