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## *DISARMAMENT, HEALTH AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION: PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST*

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### CONFERENCE REPORT

A joint conference of  
the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue  
the United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs  
the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research

A wide range of actors have in recent years invested a great deal of time and effort to overcome the stubborn lack of progress in the field of disarmament. Too often, however, disarmament efforts become mired in questions of technical detail (does a particular weapon fall under a particular control mechanism?) and political manoeuvring (who has what weapons, and what threats do these weapons pose to national and regional security?) In the process, it becomes easy to forget the most fundamental reason for disarmament: the very real effects of weapons on people.

The third annual seminar entitled, "*Disarmament, Health and Humanitarian Action: Putting People First*," organised by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs (DDA) and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) brought together experts and practitioners from both the traditional disarmament community and the humanitarian, human rights, development and public health communities. During the seminar, speakers and participants consistently highlighted the need to consider disarmament from a human security perspective because of the potentially devastating effects of the misuse of weapons on people, and because a people-first approach offers creative and practical ways to move the disarmament agenda forward.

One of the main themes of the seminar was the need to integrate the concerns of the humanitarian, human rights, development and public health communities with those of the traditional disarmament community. *David Meddings* of the Violence and Injury Prevention Department at the World Health Organisation (WHO) argued that the debate surrounding the 2001 *UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects* perpetuated an artificial divide between those concerned primarily with the supply of weapons and those concerned with their impact. A similar divide in the broader disarmament agenda became evident through the day's discussion on a wide range of other weapons systems, from cluster bombs to biological and chemical weapons. Several participants agreed that if the international political community continues to frame disarmament primarily as a technical issue - neglecting the people who use and are affected by weapons - progress will remain limited. Dr. Meddings remarked that the combination of the words "health" and "disarmament" in the title of the seminar marked an important step towards "a more systematic cross-fertilisation" of ideas about disarmament.

One of the most important roles for the human security community - humanitarian, human rights, development, ecological and public health organisations - in the field of disarmament thus far has been to educate both policy-makers and the general public about the threat to human security posed by various types of weapons. Through an exploration of the availability and use of several types of weapons (including cluster munitions, small arms and light weapons, anti-personnel landmines, poison and disease, and a variety of existing and potential "non-lethal" weapons), participants brought attention to the direct and devastating human cost. Several participants reiterated that compelling evidence of the health effects of weapons was a key source of political momentum (what one participant called "the humanitarian response"), and made a plea to the humanitarian and public health communities in particular to sustain their effort to ensure that discussions of health impacts remain at the heart of disarmament work.

*Rebecca Peters*, Director of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), remarked that the dichotomy between focusing on weapon supply reduction and focusing on making people safer simply does not make sense to most of the NGO's that IANSA represents, those who deal daily with the concrete effects of weapons availability and misuse. As an example of how these two components of the issue are inextricably linked, Ms. Peters noted that when gun laws are effective in reducing the supply of guns, it has been found that "people become less interested in owning guns, people become less prepared to use guns, people are more shocked by guns being misused, because the law has a big effect on people individually and society as a whole." The reduction in supply can, in effect, bring about a reduction in demand. Throughout the day, seminar participants debated the merits and pitfalls of prioritising either weapons-focused projects such as weapons collection or people-focused projects designed to prevent armed violence by transforming the conditions

that lead to the deliberate misuse of weapons. There was widespread support for the integration of both approaches and for fostering synergies wherever practical. It was further agreed that the concept of human security could be a useful political and conceptual tool in this regard.

A principle task for those involved in disarmament from all perspectives is to provide a credible assessment of the challenges faced by practitioners in the field. In addition to highlighting the costly impacts of weapons use, such assessments can also facilitate improvements to training and preparedness strategies for future responses to armed violence. For example, *Anne Capelle's* account of the challenges faced by physiotherapists in conflict environments, including destroyed or damaged medical facilities and equipment, the absence or insecurity of health personnel, and the lack of even the most basic infrastructure demonstrated the difficulties in providing adequate treatment of disabilities and injuries - let alone longer-term health care such as vaccination, regular monitoring, early diagnosis, and the provision of prostheses. Medical personnel must be prepared for new, complicated or "forgotten" pathologies, as in the case of landmine or machete amputations. A comprehensive understanding of the effects of weapons and the contexts in which they are likely to be used makes it possible to reconfigure logistical preparations, redefine priorities and achieve more realistic responses.

It is equally important to discuss the social and economic effects of the proliferation and misuse of weapons on the affected individuals and their societies. As Ms. Capelle pointed out, lack of access to proper healthcare, jobs, and social stigma can limit the capacities of those injured in conflicts, in turn increasing the likelihood of violence. She gave an example of a demonstration she observed of disabled victims of the long-running civil war in Luanda, Angola, which ultimately became violent. The reason for the demonstration: the men lacked access to employment. Viewed from another angle, it is known that when there is a lack of human security, people will not leave their homes to access services and employment that may be available to them. It is clear that the cycle of violence and poverty can only be broken by addressing the tools of violence and the underlying sources of violence simultaneously.

Another key theme that ran through the day's discussions was a sense that rapid changes in the technology of weapons and the contexts in which they are used continue to outstrip the capacity of the disarmament community to adapt. This fact underlines the value of considering first and foremost the effects of weapons on people in thinking strategically about the future of disarmament and arms control instruments.

For example, a host of biological and "non-lethal" weapons are emerging, some of which promise to change the rules and conduct of warfare in ways not foreseen in

today's portfolio of disarmament mechanisms. Biological, chemical and directed energy (acoustic, laser, electric, microwave) technologies, for instance, are being used to develop so-called "non-lethal" weapons which produce "bio-regulating" or incapacitating effects. The problem with these weapons, as recognised widely by participants, is that there is a widespread belief (among military and law enforcement circles in particular) that such weapons are not bound by the same rules as "lethal" weapons. *Steve Wright* of the Omega Foundation argued that even if these weapons may themselves produce a non-lethal effect, their use in certain contexts may have devastating and potentially unintended results. "Tuned" to an inappropriate level, or used in combination with lethal weapons, these weapons may: (a) have horrific impacts on individual victims, and even increase the lethality of other weapons; and (b) undermine the rules of conduct designed to minimise human suffering in conflict wherever possible. Only by thinking through the effects of weapons as used in all of their potential contexts and combinations can we begin to answer some of the most fundamental questions about the risks, rules and responsibilities that must inform the communities working towards comprehensive disarmament.

Several participants pointed out that an analysis of past, current and future weapons design, and of how these weapons have or have not been incorporated into disarmament mechanisms, can reveal important lessons in this regard. *Eric Prokosch*, for instance, pointed out that during the period from 1960 to 1980, the development of both cluster munitions and assault rifles had serious consequences not addressed by disarmament regimes. Despite the high probability of indiscriminate and excessive effects, these technological changes have not been met with the kind of humanitarian response that led to the stigmatisation of napalm and antipersonnel landmines. Neither has been adequately treated by disarmament or arms control mechanisms. The failure to link the effects of such weapons to the regimes that could control their use means that their impacts continue to be felt.

As further evidence of the quickly changing weapons landscape, *Robin Coupland* pointed out the need to broaden our very definition of the word "weapon" to include poison and the deliberate spread of disease. Dr. Coupland emphasised the point that, as pertains to the use of poisons and diseases as weapons, "effect should be at the centre of our considerations." He then went on to outline how measures designed to prevent the impacts of weapons use must address as comprehensively as possible five factors: the use, transfer, production, design and development of the weapon in question and vulnerability of the people to the weapons usage.

Two ideas emerged as particularly significant for a critical reflection on the nature of international disarmament efforts to date. First, the development of a culture of prevention is essential. The human costs of waiting for violent conflict to break out and then for *ad hoc* response are simply too high, particularly considering that the international community has often not been able to react effectively to either specific

incidents of armed conflict or to rapid changes in the technology and use of weaponry. Second, given the constantly changing weapons technologies and varying contexts of use, effective disarmament action must be as multi-faceted as the problem it seeks to address, and must include as its ultimate goal the safety of people rather than the sole pursuit of national security.

People-first approaches such as human security offer both a catalysing spark for the political community and a useful entry point into the complex debates about the development, use/misuse, control and reduction of weapons. Far from muddying the waters, putting people first can be harnessed to guide objective- and priority-setting, and to provide a new locus for cooperation between the diverse range of actors invested in socio-economic development, humanitarian relief, public health, human rights, security and disarmament.

***For more information on:***

Small arms and light weapons, visit the International Action Network on Small Arms website at [www.iansa.org](http://www.iansa.org)

Biological weapons, visit the Verification, Research, Training and Information Centre website at [www.vertic.org](http://www.vertic.org)

Nuclear weapons, visit the Reaching Critical Will Project website at [www.reachingcriticalwill.org](http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org)

Conventional weapons, visit the Federation of American Scientists website at [www.fas.org](http://www.fas.org)

Non-lethal weapons, visit the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, UK website at [www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/nlw/](http://www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/nlw/)