

## The Conference on Disarmament and Engagement with Civil Society

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The following paragraphs are a brief discussion of engagement with civil society on the part of the Conference on Disarmament, taken from the article “Getting the Conference on Disarmament back to substantive work: food for thought”, *Disarmament Forum*, no. 1, 2009, pp. 15–16.

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Engagement with civil society has long been a divisive issue in the Conference. The rules of procedure contemplate only limited interaction with organizations and bodies of any kind,<sup>1</sup> and warrant updating to bring them more into line with other disarmament forums. In the case of NGOs, a re-examination took place in 2004 but in practical terms gave NGOs little more than was already available to them as members of the public, offering the prospect of addressing one informal plenary meeting per annum once the Conference had adopted a programme of work.<sup>2</sup> Constructing an approach more in line with other multilateral disarmament practice would enable the CD to take into account civil society perspectives and the value that engagement with NGOs tends to bring, which UNIDIR researchers have recently argued elsewhere is potentially considerable.<sup>3</sup>

This issue is perhaps best illustrated by the annual request of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) to address the CD on International Women’s Day by way of reporting on its annual seminar dedicated to the work of the CD (a point that is often overlooked). Unable to agree that WILPF should deliver its own address, the Conference instead witnesses the CD President read it out during a plenary meeting. That the WILPF paper should be read by the chair of the body to which this major disarmament NGO is wishing to report is seen by many as patronizing and demeaning to women and to the Conference itself.

Rather than agreeing to treat the Women’s Day address as a specific case standing on its own merit (i.e., as an outcome of a seminar specifically focused on the CD), the issue has become symbolic of the need for a broad change in policy toward greater civil society participation. It is not inevitable that the two decisions must be linked; yet the Conference has found itself unable to find a way forward either on this specific case or on the broader one of engagement with civil society.

On the issue of interaction with civil society in general, at least two questions warrant attention:

- is the 2004 decision of the CD still tenable given that, five years later, no programme of work has emerged? It is arguable that the situation of enduring deadlock in the CD indicates the need for increased contact

with and outreach to the broader international community rather than continuing insulation from it; and

- what is the rationale for the CD being more exclusive than Meetings of States Parties to the NPT, BTWC and CCW? To overcome the concern of some Members that only “relevant” NGOs should be permitted to have access to the CD, a *modus vivendi* between the CD and civil society could be established quite easily, for example, through the NGO Committee on Disarmament in Geneva.<sup>4</sup>

Settling these matters should not be allowed to dominate the Conference’s activities, and might be carried forward in concert by the P6 or by a “friend” enlisted by them through consultations on elements such as:

- determining the formality of the level of engagement with civil society, that is, via a formal session of the CD “on the record”, or in informal plenaries;
- determining the regularity of opportunities for engagement, for example, once or twice an annual session or once a term (i.e., three times an annual session);
- deciding whether the Women’s Day address is to be treated separately from the practice of broader engagement with NGOs; and
- settling upon a formula for receiving statements (whether in formal or informal plenaries) from NGOs deemed to be “relevant” or from the Geneva NGO Committee on Disarmament as a whole.

## Notes

- 1 See Conference on Disarmament, *Rules of procedure of the Conference on Disarmament*, document CD/8/Rev.9, 19 December 2003, rules 41 and 42.
- 2 See Conference on Disarmament, *Final record of the nine hundred and forty-sixth plenary*, document CD/PV.946, 12 February 2004.
- 3 See John Borrie and Ashley Thornton, 2008, *The Value of Diversity in Multilateral Disarmament Work*, UNIDIR.
- 4 Comprising WILPF, International Peace Bureau, QUNO, GIPRI, IPPNW, World Veterans Federation, Afro-Asian Peace and Solidarity Organization, WMD Project, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Rissho Kosei-kai, and Soka Gakkai.