Disarmament education
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Background
There is broad international consensus that pursuing disarmament requires an educational dimension. But in multilateral discussions some have framed “disarmament education” primarily in technocratic terms, while others wish it to support political progress on disarmament. Early articulations favored a more technical approach. For instance, in 1968 the UN General Assembly called on “national and international scientific institutions and organizations to co-operate” with the UN in “research on disarmament” (A/RES/24/54).

However, frustration with the Cold War arms race and the emergence of the academic field of peace studies contributed to a more comprehensive vision. The Final Document of the UN General Assembly’s 1978 First Special Session on Disarmament conceived of disarmament education as the mobilisation of the public to end the arms race and seek “general and complete disarmament”. Similarly, the 1980 UNESCO World Congress on Disarmament Education declared that “dissemination of data” or even “hopes and ideals” was not enough. Rather, to be “effective” disarmament education must “be related to the lives and concerns of the learners,” analyse “the political realities within which disarmament is sought,” and offer insight into “the political, economic and social factors on which the security of peoples could be based.” This more political approach drove the UN’s World Disarmament Campaign, launched at the 1982 UNGA Second Special Session on Disarmament.

Since then, the pendulum has swung in a more technocratic direction. The World Disarmament Campaign was renamed the United Nations Disarmament Information Programme in 1992 (A/RES/47/53D). A 2002 report by the UN Secretary-General on “disarmament and nonproliferation education” (in response to a 2000 General Assembly resolution (A/RES/55/33E)) similarly focused on best practices and programmatic approaches rather than a political strategy for mobilising the public. In adding “nonproliferation,” it also follows the trend of states prioritising the control of others’ access to weapons, rather than getting rid of their own.

The Secretary-General has reported on implementation of the 2002 report’s recommendations every two years and the General Assembly has passed resolutions calling for ongoing implementation, changing little in substance from year to year. The 2002 resolution added a reference to small arms and light weapons as a focus of concern, which has been included in subsequent resolutions. Since 2006,
the resolutions have welcomed specific UN initiatives, including the UN CyberSchoolBus website and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs’ website, publications, and Disarmament Today podcast. The last three resolutions have acknowledged the importance of sharing the stories of the “hibakusha, the atomic bomb survivors”. The resolutions have passed without opposition for many years.

However, neither the reports nor the resolutions mention the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals nor the groundbreaking 2015 Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security that calls for “quality education for peace”. Lack of attention to political dimensions means disarmament and non-proliferation education receives little attention from states. Few states submit reports to the UN Secretary-General as requested by successive resolutions and there is scant funding available for substantive programming. It was this “anemic vision of disarmament education” that prompted a statement by 12 civil society organizations to the 71st First Committee Session in October 2016. Salcedo affirmed the potential of Disarmament Education to “empower the greater participation of youth, women, survivors of violence and people from the Global South in peace and security policymaking.” But, in order to do so, states, civil society, and academic institutions needed to recognise the impact of “unequal access” to disarmament education “in marginalizing some people from multilateral deliberations.”

Current Context

The successful negotiation of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) has provided new political and legal impetus for disarmament education. The preamble specifically recognises “the importance of peace and disarmament education in all its aspects and of raising awareness of the risks and consequences of nuclear weapons for current and future generations, and committed to the dissemination of the principles and norms” of the TPNW. It also stress the role of UN, “International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, other international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, parliamentarians, academics and the hibakusha” as representatives of the “public conscience” in pressing for nuclear disarmament. This framing represents a welcome turn toward a more vigorous approach to disarmament and nonproliferation education.

First Committee will not pass a disarmament and nonproliferation education resolution this year, but the TPNW and the UNODA Occasional Paper both offer an opportunity to educate governments on their responsibilities to support disarmament education, as well as build political will for more robust and coherent initiatives and resolutions in the future.

Recommendations

During First Committee, delegations should:

- Ensure that a commitment to support disarmament education as integral to treaty universalisation is included in any resolution(s) regarding the TPNW;
- Welcome the Secretary-General’s 2016 report in their interventions and express the ongoing relevance of the 2002 Study, UNSCR 2250, the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly Goal
4 on education and Goal 16 on peace and justice), as well as the contributions of civil society and educational institutions in providing disarmament and non-proliferation education; and

• Report in their interventions on their government’s disarmament and non-proliferation education initiatives and call on states, international organizations, civil society, and educational institutions to make submissions to UNODA for the 2018 report.

Beyond First Committee, states should:

• Provide funding and institutional support to international organisations, civil society, and educational institutions providing disarmament and nonproliferation education;

• Seek synergies between disarmament and non-proliferation education and the implementation of the SDGs and UNSCR 2250;

• Make a submission to UNODA for the 2018 report on their support for disarmament and non-proliferation education;

• Implement disarmament and non-proliferation education in ways that is sensitive to marginalisation and differential access, for example, mainstreaming promotion of gender equality across all programs and building capacity of poorly-represented peoples and groups;

• Avoid using “disarmament and nonproliferation education” as a figleaf for political inaction on pressing disarmament issues; and

• As the General Assembly considers a Fourth Special Session on Disarmament, explore its potential to launch a second World Disarmament Campaign.

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