Disarmament and development

Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom

Background

There are many direct and indirect links between military expenditure, the arms trade, violent conflict, and the reduction of available resources for social and economic development. Governments that spend excessive financial, technological, and human resources on their militaries divert resources from economic, social, and environmental programmes. National military-industrial complexes absorb vast amounts of funding that could otherwise be spent on human security, including the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The manufacture and use of weapons also prevents sustainable ecological development and preservation, creating unequal access to resources and further impeding poverty reduction initiatives.

Article 26 of the UN Charter tasks the UN Security Council to create a plan for the regulation of armaments and reducing military expenditure—a task it has not just neglected but vigorously undermined with its permanent member’s excessive military spending, rampant arms trading, and facilitation of conflicts worldwide. The UN General Assembly has tried to grapple with the connections between disarmament and development for the past four decades. The International Conference on the Relationship between Disarmament and Development in 1987 adopted an action plan that included commitments to allocate resources released by disarmament to development and consider reducing military expenditure.1 This followed an in-depth study by the UN in 1982 that set out the negative impacts of a large military sector on long-term economic growth and the structural changes required for economic development.2 A Group of Governmental Experts released a reappraisal of the relationship between disarmament and development in 2004.3

Current context

Total world military expenditure rose to $1739 billion in 2017. China made the largest absolute increase in spending ($12 billion) in 2017, and the US continues to have the world’s largest military budget, spending more than the next seven highest-spending countries combined—and this is set to rise significantly in 2018 to support increases in military personnel and the modernisation of conventional and nuclear weapons.4

Since the adoption of the SDGs there has been an increased interest from the disarmament community in development and how reducing
armed violence and related insecurity can be a catalyst for achieving the goals and their targets. Target 16.4 seeks to reduce “significantly” illicit arms flows, which could be accomplished via robust implement of the UN Programme of Action on small arms and light weapon (UNPoA) or the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). The reporting mechanisms for both instruments and related data could be utilised for measuring the indicator set for Target 16.4. As well, fulfilling obligations relating to women, gender, sexual violence, or gender-based violence that are included in weapons treaties such as the ATT or the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons also moves us closer to achieving SDG 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

The UN General Assembly needs to take more active responsibility on this issue. It could consider commissioning a new study on military spending, following a similar approach to the 1982 study that could provide recommendations for additional work on reducing military expenditure and arms production and development. First Committee could also consider adopting practices or policies related to increasing the participation of developing countries in disarmament forums.

**Recommendations**

**During the First Committee, delegations should:**
- Recognise and reinforce the specific ways in which disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control can advance development, including the SDGs;
- Address the issue of the underrepresentation of lower-income countries and regions in multilateral disarmament forums, and suggest practical measures to correct this; and
- Suggest new ways for the UN General Assembly to effectively engage in this issue.

**Beyond First Committee, states should:**
- Reduce military budgets and redirect funds to social and economic development;
- Support programmes of sponsorship, training, and capacity building;
- Contribute to the wider framing of disarmament and weapons issues to address a broader range of concerns, for example through making links with humanitarian and development agendas, in order to facilitate broader inclusion;
- Raise the visibility of marginalisation by supporting the consistent collection, monitoring, and analysis of participation data, to improve awareness and measure progress;
- Identify how current practices in disarmament and arms control can facilitate progress toward fulfilling certain of the SDGs and build on those practices; and
- Consider how security sector reform resources and initiatives can support the SDGs to achieve mutual objectives.

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