Disarmament education
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Background
There is broad international consensus that pursuing disarmament requires an educational dimension. Educational efforts transmit information about the impact of weapons on people to decision-makers and can build political will for disarmament. The Final Document of the UN General Assembly’s (UNGA) 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.”

This animating spirit can also be found in the book Action for Disarmament: 10 Things You Can Do! published by UN Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) in 2014. However, since 1982 disarmament education has mostly swung in a more technocratic direction. The World Disarmament Campaign was renamed the United Nations Disarmament Information Programme in 1992. A 2002 report by the UN Secretary-General on “disarmament and non-proliferation education” similarly focused on best practices and programmatic approaches rather than a political strategy for mobilizing the public. In adding “non-proliferation”, 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. Neither the reports nor the resolutions mention the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) nor the 2015 Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 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 civil society statement to the 71st First Committee Session in October 2016 that 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.”
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 multiple stakeholders in pressing for nuclear disarmament. This framing represents a welcome turn toward a more vigorous approach to disarmament and non-proliferation education. First Committee will likely pass a disarmament education resolution this year, and the TPNW and UNODA’s Occasional Papers offer opportunities to educate governments on their responsibilities to support disarmament education, as well as build political will.

Recommendations

During First Committee, delegations should:

• Support the disarmament and non-proliferation education resolution and seek to strengthen it by reinvigorating efforts to promote peace and disarmament education, and amplifying the voices of survivors;
• 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, 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 education initiatives and call on states, international organisations, civil society, and educational institutions to make submissions to UNODA for the 2020 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; and
• Implement disarmament and non-proliferation education in ways that is sensitive to marginalisation and differential access.

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