This briefing book, written by activists and experts from a range of non-governmental organisations and coalitions, presents challenges and solutions for a number of issues related to weapons and war. Those of us in “civil society” participating most actively at First Committee have argued consistently that we can and must advance human security and social and economic justice through disarmament and arms control. We call for an approach to disarmament that is driven by the rights of people most affected by armed violence, not by the discretion of those most responsible for it.

This is a key point when it comes to any of the topics that will be debated and discussed in First Committee once again this October. As it stands, the norm is for a certain select group of states to try to control the narrative in this forum. These are by and large the governments profiting from the international arms trade, or investing billions of dollars into the expansion or renewal of their nuclear arsenals, or using explosive weapons in populated areas, or seeking to develop new and innovative ways to kill human beings such as armed drones, fully autonomous weapons, and cyber or space technologies. These governments tend to assert their perspectives and interests as the only rational, credible, and knowledgeable interventions, and belittle or ignore the perspectives of those who disagree or dissent.

In recent years, these delegations have also spent a great deal of time ridiculing—and at times, yelling—at each other in ever-increasingly long right of replies issued at the end of each meeting.

The UN General Assembly was designed as a place for the governments of all member states to have an equal say, and it is this spirit that we urge First Committee delegates to uphold in 2019. The activists, survivors, and others that participate in or look to the UN for progress and change urge all delegates to speak up for humanity. Do not let a handful of heavily militarised governments shut you down. What needs to be shut down are arms factories and arms fairs, not international discourse about disarmament. At a time when the nuclear-armed states are ripping apart arms control treaties, and when they are more interested in the profits of the arms trade instead of the well-being of people, the rest of the international community has a vital role to play in putting forward alternatives for our collective security—security based on the rule of law, disarmament, equity, justice, and peace.

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Photo: Charlotte Hooij, for WILPF