Ways forward on a multi-stakeholder approach
Scene-setting remarks from Allison Pytlak, WILPF

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to provide remarks.

My remarks are a combination of observations and recommendations, based in part from being in the room over the last few days and as well as on the experience of my organization in participating and monitoring diverse UN and multilateral fora, and sometimes in an NGO coordination role, especially for disarmament and arms control-related subjects.

First, an observation: the value of a multi-stakeholder approach has been widely welcomed and its value demonstrated this week. There may be skeptics or those who disagree, but either they aren’t here or they haven’t said as much. High levels of participation on both “sides of the aisle” has probably exceeded the expectations of many, certainly mine. We even managed to have some interaction and exchange, a notoriously elusive thing to do in these conference rooms. This has been a diverse participation, which is always a positive.

It reflects regional, sectoral, thematic diversity—even gender diversity has been quite good—although can always be improved and there are many welcome initiatives underway to facilitate that.

But it might observed that many of us stakeholders are coming from different starting points or points of entry to this subject and would say that this may also be true of government composition in the OEWG. I might observe that fundamentally this possibly comes down to how representatives define and understand “cyber security” and also if we are speaking the language of, or using reference points from, the disarmament and security field, cyber security, internet governance, or development.

This is not necessarily a problem—diversity is necessary and maybe this is how siloes are broken down—but at the same time, it could be something to bear in mind for future as an area where more clarity or some capacity building and understanding among one another is needed. It’s also speaks to something that is in many ways quite fundamental to role and eventual outputs of the OEWG.

Onto recommendations: there isn’t really space to provide an overview of different multilateral fora and how they account for stakeholder participation, but can offer a few thoughts and recommendations of good practice:

- Formats like these, in which non-governmental stakeholders can easily input into the discussion in real time, and when relevant to the agenda item, are very good. Sometimes we see UN conferences and meeting where there is one time slot allocated for NGOs to speak on all topics and sub-topics, in which case the moment has passed for the input to be relevant, the time tends to be short, and delegates are not always in the room.
- Enabling space for side events or even really focused panel discussions within the context of the formal meeting. This can often be useful for working out particularly technical or thorny issues, and when it is of benefit for all member states to hear input on that together, at one time, in the room, to establish a collective baseline understanding or knowledge from which to work. A caution though is that the selection and composition
of panels should be carefully thought through so it doesn’t preference the views of one stakeholder group over another.

- Enabling the possibility of contributing working papers, or make available to states existing relevant reports, white papers, etc. is also encouraged.
- What the UNODA and the chairs have done to encourage video statements to go on the conference site, and to post our remarks, have been great and are often unusual. This will make it easier for states to go back and revisit points that were made here; or for us all to stay in touch, follow-up on things, etc. The formal conference report could have an annex of all practical suggestions made organized by thematic area, for example, and I would encourage everyone to also look at unofficial reporting from this meeting such as ours and from other organizations.

But to do all this, one must be able to be physically present. Following an international or UN meeting process is resource intensive in many ways. This means that sometimes the representation of non-governmental stakeholders is skewed to those who can afford to be there and may not be as diverse or representative as it could be. Opportunities for remote participation, remote input, or sponsorship to attend should be encouraged. This is a meeting process about modern telecommunications—surely we can find ways to leverage the knowledge in this room to make remote participation possible.

At the same time, participation in a meeting is only one part of multi-stakeholdership, and governmental positions are shaped and informed at home. Norms will also be implemented at home, and largely by individuals and entities who are non-governmental as has been well illustrated over the last few days. A “stakeholder” is someone or something with an interest in, or will be impacted by, a decision or an action. Who then is going to be impacted, positively and negatively, by the decisions made here? Are states doing all they can to have national dialogues on these topics? Conversely, how are the interests of those affected being represented in multilateral spaces?

Finally, another point I want to speak to is the one that is the elephant in the room, by which I refer to the blocking of all non-ECOSOC organizations from attending the formal OEWG session in September. I don’t mention it to create an end-of-day controversy but we can’t pretend it did not happen, and it is a challenge to a multi-stakeholder approach in this process. And if the reasons for denying access were out of a fear of critical discussion, that is problematic. Critical discussion is healthy and shutting it out does a disservice to both the concept of multi-stakeholderism and the spirit of multilateralism and equality that the United Nations is meant to embody. The same concerns that civil society may raise should also be the concerns of the entire international community, including governments, because they threaten our collective peace and security, and undermine the rules-based international order. Participation limitations like these damage the credibility of this process – and its effectiveness, when you consider the wealth of information that was shared this week and would have been if many of these stakeholders cannot contribute in future.

I will end there but genuinely hope that this is the start of a new and more inclusive process that will build on both the constructive energy of the September OEWG session and the last few days.