



OPENING REMARKS

Opportunities and Challenges for Disarmament Education

By

Ms. Virginia Gamba

Director and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs



Conference on
Promoting Peace Through Education

Sponsored by the Committee on Teaching about the United Nations

United Nations
31 January 2014

Let me say first of all—welcome, all of you, to the United Nations. I share with you the greetings of the High Representative, Ms. Angela Kane, who due to official travel could not be here today. I am very grateful to Ms. Anne-Marie Carlson—who chairs this Committee on Teaching about the United Nations—for inviting me to speak. I also wish to thank each one of you who participate in this Committee for the fine work you are doing in helping members of the public and a new generation to understand the important work of the United Nations and to contribute in achieving its great goals—disarmament being one of them.

Now, much has been said and done about disarmament education—the subject of my remarks today—but ultimately, more has been said than done.

We see too few classes in universities or high schools addressing disarmament-related issues, too few references to relevant publications in course syllabi, too few training programmes for young people seeking careers in this field, too few articles in professional journals, too few Ph.D. dissertations, and too few books by scholars. We have General Assembly resolutions requesting Member States to report on what they are doing to advance disarmament and non-proliferation education, yet each year only very few submit their views.

It is certainly true that there have been many opportunities to improve this record. Any of the following could well have led to an international revival of disarmament efforts worldwide, including disarmament education. Consider the following:

- Fears over the possible existence of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East led to a horrible war in Iraq.
- Other concerns in the region have led to a historic arrangement for the removal and destruction of Syrian chemical weapons; international diplomatic efforts are also underway to ensure that Iran does not seek or acquire nuclear weapons, while Israel's own suspected nuclear-weapon capabilities remain a concern throughout the region.
- Almost 20,000 nuclear weapons remain in this world, despite an unfulfilled legal commitment in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to undertake negotiations in good faith on nuclear disarmament, a treaty that entered into force 44 years ago. Recent studies have documented numerous accidents involving such weapons, along with serious personnel security breakdowns where nuclear missiles are based. And all states possessing nuclear weapons have long-term programmes underway to modernize their nuclear arsenals or their delivery systems. Yet there are no plans to disarm.
- Meanwhile, global military spending continues to soar—now over \$1.7 trillion a year—a statistic that led Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to declare, “the world is

over-armed and peace is underfunded.”¹ He also referred to the many social and economic opportunities lost by such expenditure as “human opportunities lost”.

- Finally, while foundation support and public funds have been widely available for civil society groups to work on such issues as non-proliferation, nuclear security, and terrorism, comparable support has not been available to groups working on disarmament—especially nuclear disarmament, which has survived largely on volunteer work and voluntary donations.

While none of these difficult circumstances has yet given rise to a real turn-around or full renaissance of disarmament efforts worldwide, I do believe that large segments of world opinion are indeed starting to recognize the desirability of progress in eliminating weapons of mass destruction and in limiting conventional arms and military spending.

This is apparent in the appearance of international campaigns led by non-governmental groups, including the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), Global Zero, several initiatives led by religious groups, resolutions from the Inter-Parliamentary Union and individual parliaments, even city government officials have joined the cause, as seen in the membership in Mayors for Peace of representatives of over 5,800 cities worldwide in 158 countries.

In the history of disarmament efforts, grass-roots movements have had tremendously important roles to play. Women’s groups and physicians—publicizing the presence of radioactive materials in babies’ teeth and mothers’ milk from atmospheric nuclear testing in the late 1950s—succeeded in launching a global movement that resulted in the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963. Other civil society initiatives contributed significantly to the conclusion of international treaties against landmines and cluster munitions.

Such campaigns, movements and initiatives do not spring from nowhere. They are inspired and led by individuals who understand the facts, who recognize fully the stakes involved, and who can face up to and not be deterred by the opposition they will encounter. They are undertaken by people who understand that compromise is reasonable on tactics but not on basic principles and final ends.

Here is where education has its greatest “value added” in moving forward the great multilateral goals of eliminating weapons of mass destruction and limiting conventional arms. Education has tremendously important roles to play in these fields.

As former Secretary-General Kofi Annan once put it, universities have three key roles to play: in “discovery”, in teaching, and in advocacy.² Discovery is the function of research and there are many important facts about existing arsenals that remain unknown, especially with respect to nuclear weapons. Even today, there is no official international repository of

¹ Op-ed (numerous newspapers), 30 August 2012, <http://www.un.org/disarmament/update/20120830/>.

² Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Address at John Jay College, New York, NY, 17 November 2000, Press Release SG/SM 7631, 20 November 2000.

data on even the most primitive statistics about nuclear weapons arsenals, despite a standing proposal by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to establish such a repository. Recent research on chronic management problems in the U.S. nuclear arsenal has given rise to legitimate public concerns over the very existence of such weapons. Shedding light on such issues can serve a great public service—as former US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once put it, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman.”³

The second function of academia in disarmament, said Annan, is to advance its goals through teaching “the next generation of leaders, voters and taxpayers.” Where are the future inspectors at international disarmament and non-proliferation verification agencies to receive their education and training? How are future legislators to make wise, informed decisions on weapons issues without ever having studied such issues or received the counsel of those who had? Even leaders of States committed to pursuing disarmament goals would benefit from knowledge about the technical challenges of verification and the political challenges of getting treaties ratified by parliaments. In some universities, role-playing and simulations have proven to be a highly effective learning tool for future decision makers.

The third positive function of academia described by Annan related to advocacy: through their opinion pieces, interviews, and use of social media, scholars have an important role in helping to shape public opinion. Consider, for example, the current trend toward examining the humanitarian dimension of disarmament—in particular the catastrophic humanitarian consequences from the use of nuclear weapons. The description of the short and long-term effects of such weapons on humanity and its natural environment offers a powerful means to advance disarmament goals. Scholars can also document the contribution of international law—including international humanitarian law—in the process of disarmament.

If anyone here still doubts the relevance of education in this context, I would encourage you to remember the words of the late Nelson Mandela, who said, “Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.”⁴ What ultimately changed Mandela’s world of apartheid can also change our own nuclear-armed world. Education can make a difference—it is one of the most precious investments we can make in our common future.

This is why the United Nations—through the activities of its Secretaries-General, the Secretariat, and other parts of the UN disarmament machinery—have recognized and supported for so many years the importance of education in advancing disarmament goals.

It explains the publication of our booklet, “Disarmament: A Basic Guide”, which is being distributed at this meeting today, along with our Disarmament Yearbook, our Occasional Papers, the Disarmament Study Series, and 32 Fact Sheets on disarmament issues. It explains why the General Assembly asked the Secretary-General to publish an expert study

³ <http://www.brandeis.edu/legacyfund/bio.html>.

⁴ Address at University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, 16 July 2003.

on disarmament and non-proliferation education in 2002.⁵ I invite you to visit the Office for Disarmament Affairs' booth at the Info Fair in Conference Room C.

Working with the Department for Public Information, the Office for Disarmament Affairs will soon publish a book intended for high-school students entitled, "Action for Disarmament: Ten Things You Can Do". We have issued many publications on the gender perspective on disarmament issues. We have produced "Disarmament Today", a set of podcast interviews with experts in this field. We have launched "Art for Peace" and "Poetry for Peace" contests that have engaged young people throughout the world. And we have several initiatives to promote international dissemination of the heart-rending personal testimonies of the survivors (*hibakusha*) of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. I also invite you to peruse our website to read about these activities and more.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has taken a deep personal interest in advancing disarmament during his tenure. He was the first Secretary-General to visit and speak at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as Kazakhstan's nuclear-test site at Semipalatinsk. In October 2008, he launched the most detailed nuclear disarmament proposal of any Secretary-General, outlining a five-point process for achieving this goal. A year later, he launched his "WMD-WeMustDisarm" campaign to promote disarmament using social media. Also in 2009, the Security Council held its first Summit-level meeting on nuclear disarmament, a proposal first made by Secretary-General Ban in 2008.

The General Assembly has also been quite active in trying to promote disarmament goals, including through its annual adoption of a resolution on disarmament and non-proliferation education. Its first Special Session on disarmament in 1978 recognized the importance of education and research and the UN Disarmament Fellowship programme was established shortly thereafter, which has now trained over 800 officials from governments around the world, especially from developing countries. The Geneva-based UN Institute for Disarmament Research was also established after that first Special Session and it has a long history of distinguished scholarship in this field.

The tools we use at the UN are many in number. We rely heavily upon our publications and public speaking opportunities. We convene workshops and seminars. We manage meetings of States parties to multilateral treaties. We are increasingly exploiting ever-more diverse communications technologies. And we persistently seek to promote media coverage of disarmament issues.

I would say right now the two potential "game changers" in this field relate to the potential impact on disarmament of democracy and the rule of law. Democracy is coming to disarmament in the form of an outpouring of social movements and initiatives from civil society, including but not limited to the ones I mentioned earlier. Yet the rule of law is also coming to disarmament, especially in the form of growing awareness of the implications of international humanitarian law as a barrier to the use of nuclear weapons. As multilateral treaty regimes finally approach universal membership, as a track record of compliance

⁵ "United Nations study on disarmament and non-proliferation education", A/57/124, 30 August 2000.

becomes undeniable, and as new treaties are negotiated in areas where they do not yet exist (including fissile materials, space weapons, missile defence, a nuclear weapons convention, and a treaty to establish a WMD-free zone in the Middle East)—we will then see how advancements in the rule of law will have profound impacts on the future of disarmament.

You here in this room today can contribute to this great cause, through your research and teaching. You have the potential to shift the wind in the sails of public opinion, to re-define disarmament as a vital national security imperative, and to remind the world of disarmament's place in the great panoply of instruments needed to strengthen international peace and security. Disarmament stands alongside many other major instruments of the Charter, which include norms on the peaceful settlement of disputes, the prohibition of the threat or use of force, the advance of social and economic development, and the rule of law. Let us view disarmament as a major pillar of peace education—and view peace education as one of the strongest possible means to strengthen international peace and security.

About a century ago, H.G. Wells once wrote, “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.”⁶ As we look at how the world has changed since 1920, we can see all the more clearly the profound truth of his claim. I wish you all well in your work and hope that you will help us to advance disarmament goals before the accumulation and perfection of weaponry overtakes us all. Let us leave today with a resolution that we are meeting at the dawn of a bright new era, rather than the eve of humanity's last sunset.

⁶ In Outline of History (1920).