

DISCUSSION PAPER: THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN REDUCING NUCLEAR DANGERS

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In a world where nuclear dangers are rising, there is a general feeling among many organizations and individuals, and academics and youth, of doomsday-type apathy and exhaustion toward achieving nuclear disarmament. This paper takes an optimistic approach by exploring how civil society has reduced nuclear dangers in the past and can continue to do so in the future through mobilization.

Civil Society Impact: What and How?

A civil society movement is made up of groups of non-state actors, including a wide array of self-defined groups of individuals – indigenous groups, charitable organizations, labor unions, and other groups – which, when mobilized, have the power to influence the actions of elected policymakers and businesses.² A civil society movement is generally based on volunteering, self-generation, and self-funding.

In the context of nuclear disarmament and environment, some of the key roles played by civil society movements include:

1. Creating a line of accountability and communication between decision-makers and mobilized individuals who are ultimately the beneficiaries of policy and law created, and those impacted by state actors' use or possession of nuclear weapons;
2. Keeping abreast of political events to ensure mobilization at the right opportunity and when key forums are open for debate. This strategy allows civil society to have an impact by calling for nuclear disarmament commitments during an election, making campaigners answerable to their calls for action before they become the decision-makers.
3. Educating people and policymakers about existential issues through traditional and non-traditional means, and improving access to materials via the use of the internet. Civil society's education efforts are crucial, functioning to fill the gap where entrenched political stances have resulted in poor knowledge about nuclear disarmament issues. Their use of first-hand testimonies in the form of videos, blogs, and online articles appeals particularly to those who are generally disconnected from disarmament discourse.

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² Temocin, Pinar and Kawano, Noriyuki "Peace and Nuclear-free Advocacy Revisited: Lessons from New Zealand and Implications for Japan" International Journal of Nuclear Security, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2022 at p.6.

4. Researching and advocating for the perspectives of youth and diverse populations. Notable work has been undertaken by civil society groups on the link between nuclear weapon use and its environmental impact, an issue particularly of interest to youth and populations where nuclear testing or accidents have occurred in the past. Civil society has also shone light on the injustices of nuclear testing and its disproportionate impacts on the developing world.
5. Creating a global network by liaising with similar civil society groups overseas to produce large pieces of research and policy work. An example is the efforts of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to push for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Civil society movements also use their reach to recruit social media personalities and celebrities, and former and current civil servants, to increase public engagement.

Successful civil society movements utilize numerous different opportunities to drive a desirable outcome. Four factors that create opportunities for action are:

1. Education systems in the region;
2. Experience of geostrategic conflict or peace;
3. Politics, including entrenched identity and the ability of the public to sway political decision-making; and
4. Perspectives towards national security and nuclear disarmament that have formed in response to the first three factors.

A goal-oriented civil society movement that has a clear understanding of the interplay of these four factors can achieve policy results by driving a nuclear disarmament solution that represents the public's general sentiment at that point in time.

The Case of New Zealand

To better understand how civil society can reduce nuclear dangers by utilizing opportunities created by the four factors above, a starting point is analyzing past accomplishments. New Zealand's rich civil society movement is a case in point. It's history, led by students, professionals, and, most notably, young house-wives, has defined the nation's independent anti-nuclear legacy and its larger-than-size involvement in the global nuclear disarmament profile.

The Castle Bravo nuclear test, which was conducted by the United States at the Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands, agitated locals, birthing a widespread national protest involving a diverse cross-section of society.³ This protest resulted in the nationwide nuclear disarmament movement of 1960, led by women from Christchurch.⁴

French Testing in French Polynesia in 1966 served as a further catalyst that propelled the then established civil society sentiment straight into the New Zealand national elections of 1972. The newly elected Norman Kirk-led Labour Government vigorously

³ Kamimura, Naoki, "*Civil Society, Nuclear Disarmament, and the US Alliance: The Cases of Australia, New Zealand and Japan*", Politics and Security Series, East-West Centre Working Paper at p.2.

⁴ *Road to Peace: Timeline* fetched from [Road-to-Peace.pdf \(ccc.govt.nz\)](https://www.ccc.govt.nz/road-to-peace).

pursued activist anti-nuclear policies which reflected its civil society's sentiments, including calling for the negotiation of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).⁵

In the 1980s, continued domestic pressure through petitioning and protesting inspired electoral candidates to base their campaigns on anti-nuclear policy proposals, which saw the David Lange-led Labour Government rise to power in 1984. It implemented stringent anti-nuclear domestic policy, which put a strain on New Zealand's nuclear alliance with the United States. In 1985, the United States suspended its security obligations towards New Zealand in response to the latter's refusal to allow its nuclear submarine to dock at New Zealand ports. Nonetheless, civil society norms had been established, and New Zealand used the crisis as an opportunity to solidify its international identity independent of its alliances with the West.

The protests, new international stance, and domestic policy contributed to the signing of the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act in 1987, which declared New Zealand a nuclear free zone⁶. More recently, New Zealand's strong participation in the New Agenda Coalition, the TPNW negotiations and the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament are a clear signal that the legacy of New Zealand's civil society movement from the 1960s through to the 1990s is deeply ingrained into the politics and identity of New Zealand today. Consistent and bold expression of civil society sentiment about nuclear policy and environmental concerns have developed New Zealand's position as a global leader on anti-nuclear policy.

Civil Society Frustrations and the TPNW

In the 2010s, prominent civil society activists in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) had grown tired of the framing of nuclear disarmament progress as an impediment to national security in mainstream discourse. Activists strove to place the campaign for nuclear disarmament in the context of human rights, racial and economic justice, and gender equity. Particularly, they sought to elevate the voices of the victims of nuclear weapons testing/use and its environmental impacts.

Increasingly, among WILPF and the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), there was a belief that the dominance of Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) in the institutions tasked with negotiating nuclear disarmament made dialogue unproductive. IPPNW established ICAN in 2007, which sought to place the disproportionate humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapon use at the centre of disarmament dialogue; and create a new international norm which NWS and their allies would eventually have to acknowledge.⁷ They did so through education initiatives, the use of video testimonies of victims and by advocacy to state leadership.

The outcome document of the Eighth Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2010 formally introduced the concept of catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. A small group of Non-Nuclear Weapon States

⁵ As above n1 at p.5.

⁶ History of New Zealand Legislation, Disarmament and Security Centre fetched from [Disarmament and Security Centre \(disarmsecure.org\)](https://www.disarmsecure.org/).

⁷ Ritchie, Nick and Kmentt, Alexander, "Universalising the TPNW: Challenges and Opportunities, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*", 2021, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 4:1, 70-93, at p73.

(NNWS), New Zealand included, used this opportunity to push for three international conferences to collate scientific evidence about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons.

At this crucial juncture, ICAN successfully began mobilizing support amongst civil society for a nuclear ban treaty. Under the auspices of the United Nations, possible frameworks for a ban treaty were explored in 2013 and 2016. The TPNW was completed by 2017.⁸ ICAN has been credited with generating sufficient public support to counter the opposition from NWS to the TPNW. It was awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its work to reduce nuclear and environmental dangers by bringing the humanitarian and environmental consequences to the forefront of disarmament and abolition discourse by using scientific evidence and rallying for public support⁹. ICAN's success can be attributed to its ability to create opportunity out of the four previously discussed factors to influence engagement.

The 2022 NPT Review Conference

The recent Tenth Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT RevCon) concluded without consensus on an outcome document despite its mild objectives. This failure has come at a time when global tensions and the geostrategic nuclear threat is at its highest since the Cold War.

Despite being excluded from negotiation of the outcome document, civil society's influence on parts of the draft document was evident. For example, the document's preamble addressed the tragic and immoral humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapon use, asserting that this truth must underpin state parties' decision-making around nuclear weapon possession and disarmament. The document also included some TPNW language about working with communities affected by nuclear weapons and modest improvements in language on gender-inclusivity, environmental remediation, and promotion of civil society involvement in the review process.¹⁰

The TPNW's First Meeting of the State Parties ("MSP") took place before the NPT RevCon, and it was hailed by supporters as a just and inclusive process. The references to matters raised during the negotiation and drafting of the TPNW during the NPT RevCon are evidence that civil society's influence on nuclear disarmament progress has infiltrated the NPT discourse.

Looking Forward: A Three-Fold Approach

Since the NPT RevCon failed to achieve consensus on a final outcome document, there is an increased need felt for civil society to step up into action. First, civil society movements must upgrade tools used to mobilize action in NNWS to mobilize NWS and their allies. The four factors playing out in today's geostrategic environment – education systems, experience of geopolitical conflict or peace, political imperatives,

⁸ Davis Gibbons, Rebecca, *"The humanitarian turn in nuclear disarmament and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons"*, 2018, *The Nonproliferation Review*, 25:1-2, 11-36 at p.15.

⁹ *Reflections on collecting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo*. Fetched from: <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3016502/1/Minor%20%26%20Mair%20-%20Reflections%20on%20Collecting%20the%20Nobel%20Peace%20Prize%20in%20Oslo.pdf>

¹⁰ 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Draft Final Document at [37], [124] and [125].

and disarmament perspectives – mean that now, more than ever, opportunities to engage on disarmament and abolition dialogue must be encased in strategic empathy.

What could this look like? A tailored three-fold approach is recommended:

1. Civil society could mobilize to put pressure on the leadership of NNWS, and particularly allies of NWS, to push for policy goals such as the fulfilment of the CTBT. Civil society should also increase education efforts; especially important for a new generation that has not lived long enough to experience nuclear disaster first-hand and thus empathize with the cause.
2. For allies of NWS, civil society must educate about the conflict between the NPT and nuclear deterrence strategies. Allies of NWS have managed to save face by promoting disarmament locally on one hand while being party to nuclear alliances on the other hand. Now, however, there is a declining confidence in the capabilities of NWS to prevent nuclear catastrophe, as evidenced by Russia's nuclear threats made during the conflict in Ukraine. This, exacerbated by the collapse of various nuclear arms control agreements and vague commitments of nuclear deterrence, should serve as a launch pad for a disarmament dialogue between NWS and their allies.
3. Finally, to engage NWS and non-NPT states, there is a need for meaningful collaboration on credible risk reduction measures, while all the time underscoring that even genuine risk reduction is no substitute for complete disarmament. Civil society must come to the table with an understanding that strong stances on nuclear possession can stem from a perceived threat to national security, and it must propose policies that would incentivize against nuclear weapon possession. This type of dialogue would be based on efforts to mitigate the real risk of regional conflict.

The glaring contrasts between the TPNW MSP and the NPT RevCon must serve as a lesson that progress on nuclear disarmament requires the cross-sectional collaboration that civil society movements have shown expertise in generating. This may indeed be the future role of civil society in effecting change that genuinely reduces nuclear dangers.