

NGO Participation in meetings of global arms control treaties

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This paper is intended to stimulate thought on the interaction between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Second Review Conference of the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and has been prepared for a meeting to discuss the subject in The Hague on 19 November 2007.

There are three global treaties compared herein: the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC), and the CWC. The reasons for comparing these are:

- they are global in nature;
- they each embody controls for one of the so-called ‘weapons of mass destruction’ (WMD); and
- they each deal with the participation of NGOs in a different manner.

Consideration of how NGOs are dealt with in the context of the CWC should be influenced by lessons drawn from the NPT and BWC. The example of the BWC is both more relevant and more productive for the CWC than the example of the NPT. However, the nature of international politics is such that awareness of activities in the NPT context is much higher than those in the BWC context.

This paper is written from the perspective of an individual who has been an NGO participant at the First, Fifth, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Sessions of the CWC Conference of the States Parties; the 2006 BWC Review Conference, as well as five of the six meetings of the 2003-2005 inter-sessional process and the 2007 Meeting of Experts; and the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference (in addition to various NPT PrepCom meetings).

Interactions between NGOs and meetings of global treaties

Representatives of NGOs wish to engage with participants at meetings of member states of international conventions for a variety of reasons. The most obvious is an aspiration to influence decisions. More important than this short-term aim, however, is the longer-term aim to engage and encourage intelligent debate on the complexities of the subject matter and indeed to learn from the perspectives of the governmental participants so that these can inform debate in other arenas.

In some contexts, distinctions may be made between ‘public interest NGOs’ (PINGOs) and ‘business interest NGOs’ (BINGOs). Distinctions can also sometimes be drawn between NGOs focused on research work and NGOs focused on advocacy.

The 1968 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

The politics of the NPT – owing to the existence of nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states – are perhaps the most controversial of all of the ‘WMD’ conventions. This is mirrored by the participation of the NGOs. Most NGOs participating at NPT meetings are focused on advocacy. Many are from the nuclear-weapon states and have a stated objective to advocate a nuclear-weapon-free world. There are also a number of nuclear industry associations that have attended to promote their business interests, especially during the Review and Extension Conference in 1995.

Addressing meetings

In the 1997 Preparatory Committee meeting (the first after the Review and Extension Conference) a precedent was set by which a session of the plenary was set aside at which the NGOs could present statements to the delegates. As there were so many NGOs registered, the format chosen was that nine themed statements were provided – ‘nuclear fuel cycle’, ‘disarmament’, etc – which had been collectively drafted by the NGOs interested in those themes. Arrangements for NGOs to address NPT meetings have been made on all subsequent occasions.

Side events

As the NPT Review Conferences are held on UN premises in New York (and the nearly-annual Preparatory Committee meetings in similar premises in New York, Geneva or Vienna) it is possible for NGOs to book rooms in order to hold lunchtime side events for presentations and discussions on

particular themes without governmental delegates departing the building or having to return through security arrangements.

The 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC)

On one hand the subject of biological weapons is less controversial than that of nuclear weapons as there is no state wanting to lay claim to having a weapon capability in this field; on the other there have been deep and complex divisions over the best way to deal with biological weapons issues. This complexity is reflected in the participation of NGOs which is primarily composed of NGOs at the research end of the advocacy-research spectrum.

Addressing meetings

Starting in 1996, a practice has evolved where the Review Conference formal plenary has been suspended for a short session to allow NGOs to make statements of about 5 to 8 minutes in duration. This practice has carried over into each of the Meetings of Experts/States Parties that have been held since 2003. Roughly six to twelve statements are made at each of these suspended plenaries.

Side Events

The BWC Review Conferences, Meetings of States Parties and Meetings of Experts are all held in the Palais des Nations in Geneva. As with the NPT, this makes it possible for NGOs to book rooms to hold lunchtime side events for presentations and discussions on particular themes without governmental delegates departing the building or having to return through security arrangements. As anyone attending such side events has to gain physical access to the building, only accredited participants of the meeting in question can attend any of the relevant side events.

The side events at recent BWC meetings have been well attended, often with more than 100 governmental participants, and have been seen as a useful format for presentations by other agencies such as Interpol and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs.

The 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention

The subject of chemical weapons, like biological weapons, tends to attract NGOs at the research end of the advocacy-research spectrum. A particular issue for engagement of NGOs in the subject of the CWC is the lack of international security NGOs based in The Hague. This creates what might be described as a partial vacuum for NGOs to operate in.

Addressing meetings

There was no facility for NGOs to address the First Review Conference. Although there was the Open Forum on the CWC held at the Peace Palace at the same time, this was some distance from the WFCC (then called the NCC) and so some delegates did not have time to travel between the locations.

Side Events

As it currently does not seem possible for NGOs to book rooms in the WFCC, any side event has to be held outside the conference centre, with the consequent difficulties of delegates having to pass through security checks again to return to the Review Conference.

Conclusions

Civil society engagement with the CWC and its institutions is a two-way process. The model of the BWC/NGO interaction is possibly the most fruitful of the three and is the most adaptable to the CWC context. The future vitality of the CWC and the ability of the OPCW and national regulators to interact with practitioners of the chemical sciences is reliant on how those practitioners perceive the Convention. NGO analyses, commentaries and other publications are a major component of how such perceptions are formed. It is therefore important to have significant NGO engagement in order to promote informed NGO activity.