

The UN: are development and peace empty words?

RAY ACHESON and REBECCA JOHNSON 24 September 2015

As governments adopt the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, their roles in producing and selling weapons that undermine development, peace and security are coming under scrutiny.

Relentless militarism, underpinned by patriarchal capitalist structures and institutions, are at the root of today's major security crises, from nuclear threats to the millions of refugees fleeing armed gangs and Syria's bombed-out cities. As the UN General Assembly convenes in New York this week, governments need to take more responsibility for tackling the weapons, arms trade and conflicts that their policies have created and exacerbated.

High level government leaders are gathering in New York for the [UN Sustainable Development Summit](#) on 25–27 September, where they will adopt the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), which follows on from the largely unrealised [Millennium Development Goals](#) adopted in 2000. The 2030 Agenda commits governments “to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence.” It declares: “There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.” Yet despite this emphasis on peace and freedom from violence, the Agenda only includes one goal related to weapons - to significantly reduce illicit arms flows by 2030 (goal 16.4).

This falls far short of the action necessary to restrict the arms trade and the possession and use of weapons, without which development and peace are just empty words. Legal as well as illegal production and flows of arms blight lives, development and aspirations across the world. People in poorer countries and unstable regions suffer the worst consequences of this trafficking and use, and then have to divert resources to deal with the consequences of weapons-fuelled conflicts.

The [use of explosive weapons in populated areas](#) is a particularly devastating practice that causes immense humanitarian suffering. Between 2011 and 2014, the civil society group [Action on Armed Violence](#) has recorded almost 150,000 deaths and injuries from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. 78% of these were non-combatants. When explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 90% of the resulting casualties were civilians.

Yet as the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) programme [Reaching Critical Will](#) has noted, there have been few outcries about how the deaths, injuries, displacement and destruction caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas relate to the international arms trade. In fact, states parties or signatories of the [2013 Arms Trade Treaty \(ATT\)](#) are all too frequently responsible for the transfers that lead to these deaths and injuries. This critical gap between law and practice is due to the limitations of the ATT, accentuating the continuing power of war profiteers.

Let's take the case of the United Kingdom, which takes proud credit for its role in the ATT negotiations, while remaining the [sixth largest arms exporter](#). While the UK government maintains that the ATT reflects a global determination to stop irresponsible transfers, London has this month been hosting one of

the [world's largest arms fairs](#) organised by Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI). This sales fest of weapons and torture equipment took place at the same venue as the high profile [summit on preventing sexual violence in conflict](#), hosted in 2014 by the former UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague.



Stop the arms fair protest in London September 2015. Photo: [stopthearmsfair.org](#)

While [refusing to acknowledge](#) the link between the refugee crisis and the flow of weapons to the Middle East, Britain [extended formal invitations](#) to the arms fair to many countries with records of egregious human rights violations, including sexual violence.

The UK, which is a state party to the [2008 Cluster Munitions Convention](#)(CMC), [recently refused](#) to condemn the use of US-manufactured cluster munitions by Saudi-led military forces in Yemen, despite [evidence from Human Rights Watch](#) about the humanitarian suffering these prohibited weapons are causing to civilians.

This kind of hypocrisy is endemic where arms profits are concerned. Much UN decision making continues to be dominated by the military industrial interests of the five permanent members of the Security Council – Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States – which not only dominate global arms manufacture and sales, but also possess the largest nuclear arsenals. The connections are inescapable.

On 30 September, the UN will hold a high-level event to commemorate the [International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons](#) designated as 26 September. Developing states in the Non-Aligned Movement initiated this commemorative UN Day to draw attention to the lack of effective progress on nuclear disarmament in over 45 years since the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was concluded. In May this year, the US, UK and Canada formally [blocked the adoption](#) by NPT states of further disarmament actions and for a regional conference to rid the Middle East of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. But all was not lost, as a large group of states signalled their determination to oppose nuclear business as usual by signing up to a [Humanitarian Pledge](#), introduced by Austria, in which they committed themselves to “fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons”. As the UN General Assembly meets in New York, 117 member states have already declared their support for the Humanitarian Pledge. The UN and its First Committee on Disarmament and International Security

will consider a range of resolutions and proposals this year, with different proposals on how to move forward on several important issues. The Pledge builds on humanitarian disarmament initiatives that are increasingly challenging the previously dominant discourse of “national security” and “strategic stability”, which privileges the nuclear-armed states and major weapons manufacturers. Nonetheless, some states and NGOs continue to demand the full participation of all nuclear-armed states in a UN negotiating process for a nuclear weapons convention. Such a convention may be required to codify the total elimination of nuclear weapons in the future, but there are concerns that it has been on the agenda for many years without progress, in large part because of the pre-eminence (and vetoes) such proposals give to the nuclear-armed states.

By contrast, the growing support for the Humanitarian Pledge points towards a next-step [nuclear ban treaty](#) under international humanitarian law. This is the objective advocated by the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons \(ICAN\)](#), which coordinates over 400 organisations from 100 countries. The momentum for this approach derives from a series of intergovernmental conferences hosted by Norway, Mexico and Austria, as well as joint government statements to the [UN General Assembly](#) and [NPT](#) conferences, and [resolutions](#) and [actions plans](#) of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement.

It also derives from the growing empowerment of those without nuclear arsenals to confront the heavily militarised countries and pursue a more just and equitable future. Humanitarian-centred security approaches epitomise and reinforce global pressure to reshape international politics towards equity and justice.

Gender equality is another UN and 2030 Agenda goal. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, adopted in 2000, will come under scrutiny when the Security Council hosts an open debate on 13 October on its [high-level review](#), together with a [global study](#) commissioned by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. This will provide an opportunity to call for more effective action ensuring women’s participation and promoting gender perspectives in conflict prevention, resolution, and disarmament. Not all states or NGOs are yet prepared to recognise the gendered patterns of harm attributable to all weapons and armed conflict. Small arms and light weapons are often used to facilitate acts of sexual violence and domestic abuse, while explosive weapons in populated areas [can have a unique effect on women](#), affecting access to public places and services.

While [weapons are considered to be men’s business](#), men and adolescent boys are the most frequent direct victims of weaponised violence. Viewed through the patriarchal lens, this is rarely presented as evidence of their weakness, as is the case when ‘women and children’ are characterised as victims of violence. The ground-breaking aspect of SCR 1325 was its recognition that men and women experience wars differently and that women are not just victims but agents of change: women’s full and equal participation in all aspects and stages of peace processes is essential to building sustainable peace. The arms trade, the use of explosive weapons, the possession of nuclear weapons, gender perspectives in disarmament, and equitable participation of women are all crucial issues to grapple with in order to effectively deal with the major security challenges we face today. The next two months at the UN provide an opportunity to take up these challenges with renewed resolve.