

Nuclear disarmament – you're doing it wrong

Six ways you are helping nuclear-armed states keep their weapons

Want a world free of nuclear weapons? Really? Truly? Forgive the scepticism, but many governments and civil society groups that say they are working for nuclear disarmament are actually doing things that hinder progress towards their stated goal. For some, this is deliberate; if this is the case for you, read no further. But for those who genuinely want to rid the world of nuclear weapons, here are six ways you might be going wrong:

1. Focusing on the nuclear-armed states

Yes, we know they have the weapons. Yes, we know they are the ones who will have to do the actual disarming. But making it all about them gives them all the power and control. And – surprise! – they don't seem to be in too much of a hurry to get rid of their weapons. You can't treat drug addiction by leaving it entirely up to the addicts, and you won't eliminate nuclear weapons by putting all the responsibility on the nuclear-armed states. Focusing on the nuclear-armed states hides other obstacles to nuclear disarmament, such as the dependence of weasel states on extended nuclear deterrence, and renders a large majority of the world's states invisible, impotent and irrelevant.

How to fix it: Check your impulse to turn every discussion towards the role of, or implications for, the nuclear-armed states. You will be surprised how reflexive the impulse is. Instead, consciously focus on what *you* can do, and on what states *without nuclear weapons* can do. The humanitarian consequences initiative has clearly demonstrated that nuclear weapons are everyone's responsibility.

2. Justifying nuclear disarmament

In other disarmament efforts – landmines or cluster bombs, for instance – a big part of the campaign involves persuading governments that the weapon in question is disproportionately harmful, insufficiently effective, and generally not worth keeping. But everyone has already agreed (whether they really believe it or not) that nuclear weapons should be eliminated – it is just a question of when and how. So arguing against the value of nuclear deterrence, or talking about how to assure security in a world free of nuclear weapons, is at best an excuse for delaying action on what everyone has already agreed should happen, and at worst risks undermining the existing agreement and taking things backwards.

How to fix it: Just stop. If someone says that nuclear weapons are valuable for X, Y or Z reason, don't be drawn into disputing the reason. Just say, "So why do you want to give them up?" or "Why are you in the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty?"

3. Fixating on the forum

Need to get negotiations started in the Conference on Disarmament? Think the humanitarian consequences issue should be "brought into" the review process of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty? Perhaps you are convinced nuclear disarmament should be pursued within the United Nations, or are determined to take it outside. None of this matters. When *nothing* is happening, it doesn't matter *where* it's not happening. When you are ready to move, you will find – or construct – the appropriate forum.

How to fix it: Stop talking about forums, until you actually need one.

4. Seeking unity and common ground

This is particularly insidious. Everyone likes to think they are working towards a common goal and building solutions based on shared interests. And this is fine when there really are shared interests. But if one group has a goal (“get rid of the weapons”) that is fundamentally at odds with the goal of another group (“keep the weapons indefinitely”), then “seeking common ground” just becomes a way of maintaining the status quo, by shifting the debate away from the differences. The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) is the best example of this, since its inherently asymmetric structure makes it easy to conflate the interests of the nuclear-weapon states with those of the other members. “Common ground” in the NPT generally means consensus to leave things as they are. This is why “bridge building” efforts like the Non-proliferation and Disarmament Initiative are worthless. There is also an interesting parallel with socioeconomic debates, where a wealthy, privileged class argues for “unity” and against “divisive measures” (i.e. we want to keep our money and we want you to be happy about it).

How to fix it: Face the fact that your interests are different from those of the nuclear-armed states – at least in the short term – and be prepared to say so publicly. Don’t be afraid to reject attempts to find “common ground”. Beware of premature compromise, and of “building bridges” that only lead back to the status quo.

5. Being too nice

This is related to no. 4. Yes, in multilateral diplomacy you are expected to be diplomatic. But too often this is taken – by diplomats and civil society alike – as a requirement never to criticize a government directly, never to embarrass a delegation by asking difficult questions or pointing out contradictions, and never to question motives. In too many settings, governments are left to reel out the most egregious hypocrisies and doublespeak unchallenged and unmolested. Since they get away with repeating the nonsense again and again, it comes to be accepted. And so we have such absurdities as the US delegation saying that entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty is “a top priority for the United States”, or India saying that “we cannot accept the logic that a few nations have the right to pursue their security by threatening the survival of mankind”, or the Netherlands leading calls for more transparency on nuclear arsenals while remaining totally opaque about the presence of nuclear weapons on its own territory – while nobody even raises an eyebrow, much less laughs them out of the room.

How to fix it: Always be courteous and correct, but challenge, question, inquire and test. Don’t let governments get away with glib and nonsensical statements: engage them. Ask them to explain and clarify. Explore the implications of what they are saying, and follow their lines of reasoning all the way to their absurd conclusion. Pin them down. Use your right of reply, or raise a point of order. Adapt your statement to respond specifically to points made by others.

6. Waiting for something to happen

The curse of multilateralism, and certainly not restricted to disarmament: governments all waiting for each other to do something (“we would be ready to join the consensus on...”). Or waiting for the next scheduled event (“let’s see what happens at the review conference”). Or waiting for negotiations to start (as if by magic). Sometimes waiting is disguised as “urging”, “calling for” or “supporting” something. It’s the same thing, and it achieves exactly nothing. The number of diplomats who think that things somehow just happen in multilateral settings is astonishing. It is matched only by the number in civil society who think that it is enough to point out what ought to be done, and wait for the governments to do it.

How to fix it: Understand that nothing will happen unless you make it happen. Do something – anything – to make a start. Now.