Generation of change: Engaging youth action for nuclear abolition

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It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak to all of you today.

Before I elaborate on the crucial engagement of civil society, especially youth, in working towards a world free of nuclear weapons, I think it is important to take note of the context in which we are meeting today, as well as some recent trends in the disarmament discourse.

The month of October is an important time for all stakeholders engaged in the issue of nuclear disarmament—the United Nations First Committee, the Committee that addresses all matters related to disarmament and international security, within the scope of the Charter, is holding its annual session for one month in New York.

Moreover, not only are delegates from all United Nations Member States convening for the annual First Committee session, but we are also marking the seventieth anniversary of the United Nations.

Anniversaries serve as important milestones at which time we can reflect honestly on the past and plan realistically for the future. The same is true for nuclear disarmament—an issue that has been at the heart of the goals of the United Nations since its inception seventy years ago.

As you well know, after three decades of sustained progress, global nuclear disarmament is stalling thus challenging progress and heightening frustrations.

The United Nations Disarmament Machinery—the bodies established under United Nations auspices to provide States the fora to take forward nuclear disarmament, which includes the First Committee—are experiencing worrying challenges. The same is true for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—the only multilateral instrument with a legally binding commitment to disarmament, which is binding also on the nuclear-weapon States.

Positions of countries are becoming increasingly divergent with a deeper drawing of lines between nuclear-weapon States and the vast majority of non-nuclear weapon States. There is significant disagreement over the pace and scale of nuclear disarmament and seemingly insurmountable differences in opinion over how to create and maintain a world free of nuclear weapons. Are additional legal instruments required? How will disarmament be verified once it is achieved? These are just some of the challenging questions that lack clear-cut answers.

While there is much to be concerned over, the reinvigorated interest in placing the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons at the center of disarmament discussions has generated an increased sense of urgency. Moreover, the large number of States that have engaged with this movement, including States from diverse regions, is testament to the importance many States attach to achieving universal nuclear disarmament.

Incorporating a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament has also provided impetus to the work of civil society groups that have continuously called for the elimination of nuclear weapons due to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from their use. Underscoring the moral and ethical imperatives of nuclear disarmament is a rallying point
that can bring together all stakeholders engaged in nuclear disarmament—from Governments, international organizations to civil society.

We all know that eliminating nuclear weapons is a complex and demanding undertaking. While the challenges are real, we shouldn’t become disillusioned or intimidated by them.

The younger generation has so much to offer in fresh thinking and creative engagement with resolving complex issues. Youth should spur us on to engage even more deeply in disarmament. To offer but one example, the International Youth Summit for Nuclear Abolition in Hiroshima, held in August, undertook an initiative to start a youth pledge for nuclear abolition. I applaud their initiative and welcome more creative activities that support nuclear disarmament efforts.

I also underscore the importance of education and the tools readily available for disseminating your messages, initiatives and opinions.

Education is the best way to combat not only ignorance, but also apathy. Being apathetic is perhaps more troublesome than ignorance as it implies a conscious choice to disengage. It goes without saying that only those with knowledge can effectively engage and ultimately make a difference.

Educating others on the dangers of nuclear weapons, and the reasons why a world without nuclear weapons would be a better world than one with them, is essential.

It is also a step that all of us can take. By engaging and empowering young people in particular, you are ensuring that the next generation of leaders has both the awareness and expertise to make a real difference.

Young people of today have the tools to spread the word farther than ever before. As I alluded to before, through social media and other equalizing technologies, there is a worldwide audience at your fingertips, to which you can educate and advocate on the issues that are important to you—including the need for a world free of nuclear weapons.

Rest assured that the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) continues to be a strong supporter of youth in these ventures and undertakes to provide resources to assist in your engagement in disarmament education and advocacy.

I will take just a few moments to highlight some of these resources.

Regarding publications, Action for Disarmament: 10 Things You Can Do! offers practical steps for all global citizens, most especially for youth, to mobilize and promote disarmament in their communities and beyond. This publication was recently translated into Japanese by Tokyo University students and is currently available via UNODA’s website. Our Basic guide on Disarmament has been translated into all six UN languages. We have a plethora of other educational materials, such as publications, films, and podcasts, to engage young people on the topic of nuclear weapons available on our website.
We have previously organized contests like Poetry for Peace and Art for Peace to better acquaint children, teens and young adults with nuclear disarmament issues. I should also like to mention that, in the coming months, UNODA will launch another disarmament poster contest, so please stay tuned!

UNODA also looks forward to continuing its work with *Hibakusha Stories*, an NGO that brings the stories of atomic weapon survivors to classrooms in New York City.

Additionally, the latest group of Disarmament Fellows, a training and education programme for young diplomats, has recently arrived for the last leg of its education programme to observe the First Committee. The Disarmament Fellowship Programme is another opportunity to engage the next generation of disarmament leaders as it provides them with the knowledge and expertise required to be effective leaders in their Governments.

That being said, UNODA will continue to do its part to engage young people in nuclear disarmament issues and encourages all Member States and representatives of civil society to use these resources at their disposal.

Allow me to conclude with a few final reflections.

The relevance of nuclear weapons to young people can often seem distant. Twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, why worry about nuclear weapons when there are so many other pressing existential concerns, like climate change and sustainable development? The centrality of nuclear disarmament becomes apparent when we think about its original context.

The United Nations was founded to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. It was meant to accomplish this through establishment of a collective system of international security – based on cooperation rather than on the strength of arms and a balance of terror backed by nuclear weapons.

This is why the elimination of nuclear weapons was the very first objective identified by the General Assembly. Nuclear disarmament continues to stand at the leading edge of all progressive efforts aimed at systematically reducing the role of warfare in international affairs, thereby decreasing international tension, upholding respect for humanitarian principles, preserving human rights and liberating financial and human resources desperately needed to achieve all other of our outstanding priorities.

And the reality is, nuclear weapons did not cease to exist with the end of the Cold War. While overall stockpiles have decreased dramatically, the number of nuclear-armed States has grown and more than half the world’s population live in countries that claim to rely on nuclear weapons for their security.

So the problem of nuclear weapons has yet to be solved, despite the 70 year-old aspirations of the United Nations. And as long as the work of nuclear disarmament remains unfinished, we will face a more difficult, if not impossible challenge, meeting other pressing needs of the day.
On the occasion of the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, the Secretary-General said he had the highest expectations for young people and called for investment in the world’s young peacemakers. I echo this call and fully agree in the potential of young people to enact real change—there is much work to be done.

This work can be done in whichever capacity you find yourself in the future—as a diplomat or civil servant, civil society representative or private business person. We need everyone’s voice to join the call and to work together for a world free of nuclear weapons.

Thank you.