



2019 New Shape Forum: Weapons Governance

Summary Report



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PLATFORM



“The greatest threats we face today transcend national boundaries; they therefore need to be addressed jointly by all countries based on an increased realization of our mutual dependence. That is why I believe a new global framework for managing them must be found.”

Laszlo Szombatfalvy, Founder of the Global Challenges Foundation



2019 New Shape Forum: Weapons Governance

The Global Challenges Foundation and the Geneva Disarmament Platform, in partnership with Chatham House and the Observer Research Foundation, hosted the 2019 New Shape Forum: Weapons Governance in Geneva on 30 September and 1 October. The event introduced the concept of weapons governance as means of considering disarmament, arms control, non-proliferation and international humanitarian law in an integrated way, as a subset of global governance, and aimed to bring in tools and approaches from other areas of global governance to examine if and how they might be applied in the sphere of disarmament and international security.

Weapons governance is a key component of global governance and has historically made a significant contribution to strengthening international peace and security, managing global risks, and reducing the harmful consequences of armed conflict. But traditional arms control and disarmament regimes are under stress, agreements and treaties are unravelling, and progress on new agreements is increasingly blocked. Moreover, new risks, many driven by technologies, are emerging.

To tackle these challenges, the forum gathered an eclectic group of participants from a range of fields, including artificial intelligence, public health, astrodynamics, biotechnology, climate change, and finance, as well as disarmament diplomats and civil society representatives working on disarmament issues.





The forum began with a discussion between Gilles Carbonnier (Vice-president, International Committee of the Red Cross), Angela Kane (former UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs) and Eric Borremans (Pictet Asset Management), moderated by Patricia Lewis (Chatham House) and Richard Lennane (Geneva Disarmament Platform). Photo: Antoine Tardy/GCF & GDP

OPENING PLENARY

The forum began with a discussion between Gilles Carbonnier (Vice-president, International Committee of the Red Cross), Angela Kane (former UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs) and Eric Borremans (Pictet Asset Management), moderated by Patricia Lewis (Chatham House) and Richard Lennane (Geneva Disarmament Platform). The panel reviewed the history of weapons governance efforts since 1945, examined current challenges and setbacks, and considered what might be done to address these. On the negative side, the panel noted the unraveling of disarmament treaties and regimes, the growing tendency for leaders and governments to reject multilateralism and ignore international law, impunity for those using illegal weapons, and a general lack of public interest, political support and funding in weapons governance compared to governance of other global threats such as climate change.

On the positive side, the panel recognized the important contributions to international peace and security that disarmament and arms control treaties and international humanitarian law had made since 1945, and identified a number of promising developments and trends, including the emergence of effective coalitions of state and non-state actors, growing moves by the financial sector to divest from controversial weapons (including passive investments by involving market indexes), action by scientists and the information technology industry, and other “bottom-up” approaches to weapons governance.



GOVERNANCE STORIES

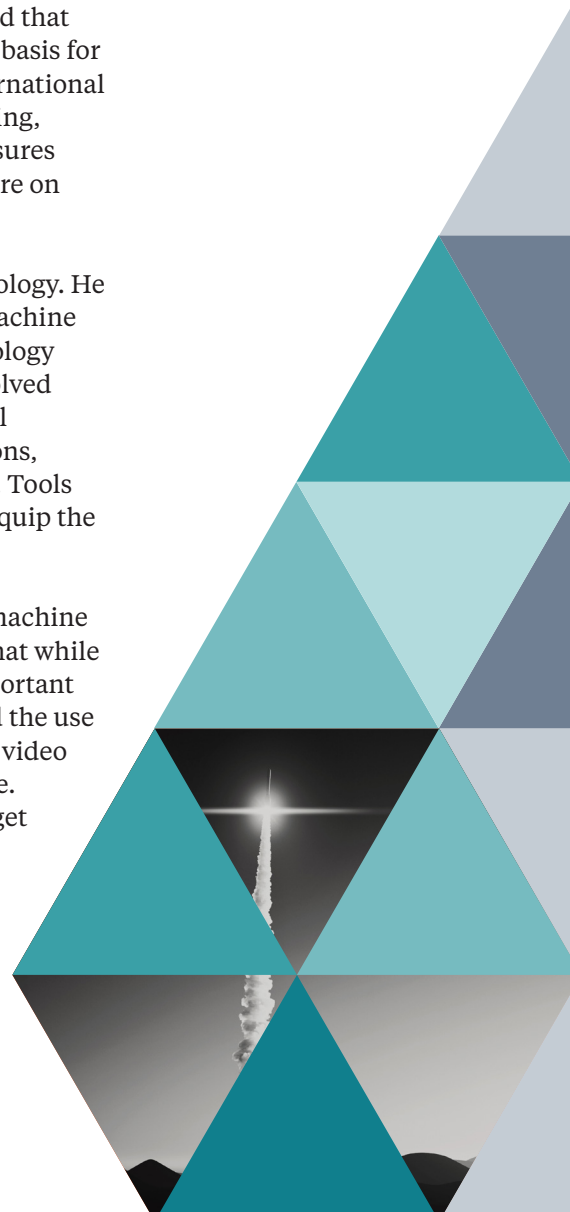
With the opening panel having set the scene and outlined the challenges, the forum moved to a series of seven “governance stories”: short presentations from people with experience with particular governance tools and approaches used in other fields.

Harjeet Singh (ActionAid International) spoke about civic and private sector stakeholders’ roles at various levels in climate governance. He drew links between the challenges of climate change, militarism and weapons, noting that militaries were a major – and often overlooked – emissions contributor, and that even governments that were resisting climate change action nevertheless recognized the international security implications of global warming. He outlined three key elements that had proved successful in climate action: encouraging divestment from fossil fuels; leadership and pressure from countries impacted by climate change (as opposed to the countries with the largest emissions); and wide adoption and agreement on a clearly-defined and easily-communicated goal (the 1.5 degree target).

Sulzhan Bali (health security consultant) examined lessons from global health governance for health security. She highlighted the links between public health and weapons governance, noting the transboundary nature of both, and that armed conflict often fueled epidemics and vice versa. She outlined the basis for global health governance, including legal instruments such as the International Health Regulations (IHR) and political and soft-law elements. Monitoring, accountability and compliance remained challenges; cooperative measures such as Joint External Evaluations (JEE) helped, but bottom-up pressure on governments, along with regional approaches were also necessary.

Niek Savelkoul (iGEM) discussed safeguarding the future of biotechnology. He presented the approach of the International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM) competition to ensuring safety and security of the synthetic biology technologies developed and used by the student contestants. This involved awareness of and adherence to institutional, national and international regulations, assessment of technical and human practices considerations, and promoting innovation to actively address risks and vulnerabilities. Tools developed were made freely available to others, and a key goal was to equip the students to be effective communicators on risks, safety and security.

Bob Trafford (Forensic Architecture) presented the applications of machine learning in monitoring, verification and identification. He explained that while open-source monitoring could be very effective and had played an important role, its labour-intensive nature imposed limitations. He demonstrated the use of AI tools that could be taught to examine large quantities of archived video footage to identify, for example, a particular model of armoured vehicle. The training process could also be automated, with images of rarer target objects automatically generated in various settings.



Photos: Antoine Tardy/GCF & GDP



Daniel Faggella (Emerj Artificial Intelligence Research)



Moriba Jah (University of Texas)



Alejandra Quevedo (Financial Action Task Force of Latin America)

Moriba Jah (University of Texas) introduced techniques for developing space situational awareness for both forensic and predictive purposes. Noting that space was a contested resource, he explained that identifying and tracking objects in orbit was a significant technical challenge; to do it reliably required collecting, synthesizing and analyzing multiple data sources of varying degrees of compatibility. But the potential for open-source monitoring was huge.

Alejandra Quevedo (Financial Action Task Force of Latin America) spoke about the anti-money laundering counter-terrorist financing standards and how peer reviews build capacity, enhance accountability and distribute compliance-monitoring. She introduced the FATF and its regional counterparts, and outlined the system by which standards are developed and approved by the FATF, applied by the FATF member governments, and monitored by peer reviews. This collaborative system, which is not based on a legally-binding treaty, has steadily improved rates of compliance in Latin America.

Daniel Faggella (Emerj Artificial Intelligence Research) examined critical dual-use applications and trends of artificial intelligence. He gave three examples of current AI technology with dual use applications: computer vision, where behavior detection techniques could be applied to both shoplifters and enemy troops; natural language processing, where automatic translation, summarizing and content extraction has obvious applications for espionage; and programmatically generated content (e.g. “deepfakes”, simulations). As more and more everyday work moves into the virtual realm, maintaining control of these technologies will be a key governance challenge.



GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Armed with these accounts, participants split into working groups to discuss how these ideas and approaches – and others – might be combined with the existing mechanisms to improve weapons governance. Each of the five groups discussed a different aspect.

Group 1: Delegation, distribution and coordination

The group discussed subsidiarity and linkages between different governance levels (international, national, sub-national) and between different global issues (weapons, public health, environment). A key obstacle was found to be the existence of two “grammars” or “languages” for talking about security: one saw national security as a zero-sum game; the other viewed security and disarmament as a global public good or commons, to be collectively pursued. The disconnect between these languages made building links with other areas of global governance more difficult.

The group considered that the notion of risk, and efforts to pursue risk management or risk reduction, might be a useful approach to bridging this divide. This could be done through research on techniques to deal with risks; through “track two” dialogues among nuclear-armed states on practical steps to reduce nuclear risks; and through regional initiatives. Regional approaches in particular – getting regional organizations more involved in weapons governance – had the potential to help build better links at the global level.

The group also discussed finance, including the idea of using not just capital flows (e.g. divestment) but also loans to influence behavior, and the importance of education in bringing weapons governance issues to a global audience currently more concerned with other issues.

Group 2: Inclusion and agency of non-state actors

The group reviewed the role of non-state actors in weapons governance to date, looking at what approaches had and had not worked. Key lessons were: not to tackle difficult issues head on, but to find innovative framings and entry points; to identify and build coalitions with “champion” states; that single-issue campaigns were often more focused, inclusive and effective; the importance of decentralizing and delegating authority and organization to local groups; the effectiveness of a humanitarian-focused approach; and not to wait for universal support or consensus before moving ahead (“just do it”).

Despite the significant contribution of civil society and academia to disarmament and arms control, particularly in the area of research and data, and the dependence of governments on this, civil society remained largely excluded from the global decision-making structures dealing with weapons governance, which were still dominated by states. The group therefore developed a proposal for a “declaration on collaborative weapons governance”. This would have three components: a “fair time pledge” guaranteeing sufficient time at weapons governance forums for relevant civil society organizations to contribute effectively to the discussions; a call on governments to include civil society, private sector and academic representatives on their official delegations; and an outline of a new model for collaborative weapons governance, where forums and organizations would be requested to include a seat at the table for non-state actors. Individual campaigns could be launched to pursue this at different organizations.





Group 3: Data and monitoring

The group started by recognizing that data was an essential part of governance. There was a need to map the data required for weapons governance: to identify what was there and what was not, and why. Currently, on conventional weapons, there was some data available on trade, but less on acquisition, possession and use. More disaggregated data on military spending would be useful. There was a much broader need for data relating to emerging technologies and weapons of mass destruction: data on defence research funding, personnel, facilities, oversight mechanisms, research trends, publications, investment flows, and patents would be useful. The availability of qualitative data in the biotechnology field on research trends, etc, provided a good example.

The group identified four complementary sources of this data: intergovernmental organizations, governments, civil society, and private sector corporations. Data had different functions, and varying degrees of credibility and authority. Functions of data included informing governments, informing investors, holding governments to account, and identifying new risks.

An additional idea was for the private sector to assume greater responsibility for data and monitoring for weapons governance. Corporations could provide more data, adopt codes of conduct involving government or other review of new technologies, and develop processes to assess the implications of such technology. These processes could be linked to existing corporate efforts related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Group 4: Soft law, standards and codes

The group discussed the nature and role of soft law, and whether it was an alternative to hard law or complementary to it. It was noted that some states preferred hard law (i.e. treaties) and even saw soft law as a distraction. Others saw soft law as a first step on the path to developing hard law, or as a means of helping to build consensus. Soft law could operate simultaneously with hard law, in a complementary manner.

On the scope of soft law, the group considered its application among states as well as to non-state actors including the private sector and the scientific community. There was a question of accountability: while states clearly enjoyed legitimacy as international actors, how could the legitimacy of disparate non-state actors be gauged? Soft law should certainly involve and engage the private sector, and the experience with the tobacco industry may be relevant here, as well as the example of self-regulation of gene synthesis companies. The role of financial institutions and insurance companies could also be considered. Codes of conduct and ethics could play an important role as an educational tool on weapons governance. Soft law could also perhaps offer a means of dealing with the complexity of governance of emerging technologies: while once the defence industry was clearly demarcated, the military applications of new technologies may not be immediately apparent.

The group considered the means by which the private sector could be engaged on soft law and standards issues, including through reputational considerations, shareholder pressure and other incentives, as well as the broader question of building public awareness and interest in weapons governance.

Group 5: Forecasting and adaptation

The group considered three aspects of forecasting and adaptation: its pursuit and application within existing regimes; prospects for strengthening the forecasting and adaptation capacity of the international system as a whole; and the overall aims and objectives of pursuing forecasting and adaptation capacity. Key challenges identified included the difficulty of obtaining reliable information and data, and the need to find incentives for and means of developing partnerships with the private sector corporations which constitute the domain for many of the future risks associated with emerging technologies.

To address these challenges, the group proposed the creation of a new body, the International Panel on Weapons Governance (IPWG), loosely modelled on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This IPWG, which would involve a wide range of stakeholders, would perform the role of a global and impartial holder of knowledge and scientific expertise, would bring all the technical aspects of the weapons governance conversation together in a single forum, and would also undertake public advocacy and awareness-raising.





KEYNOTE

Leymah Gbowee (President, Gbowee Peace Foundation and 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate) gave the keynote address, titled Driving change through inclusion and collaboration: a peacebuilder's perspective on weapons governance. She spoke of her work on peacebuilding in Liberia and her efforts to get government and military leaders to include and collaborate with ordinary citizens affected by the conflict, and particularly women. She emphasized the crucial importance of giving weapons governance a "human face" by keeping it connected with the experience, needs and security of ordinary people, rather than letting it remain an abstract political game for governments, analysts and generals.

FINAL PLENARY

The final plenary discussion, moderated by Patricia Lewis (Chatham House) and Rakesh Sood (Observer Research Foundation) heard brief reports from each discussion group, and attempted to draw out and discuss the most promising areas for further development. These included developing "citizen science" data collection and analysis capacities to support compliance monitoring and verification efforts, developing networks for collaborative governance (involving states, sub-state actors, the private sector and civil society), pursuing initiatives to engage regional organizations on weapons governance, and perhaps most notably, establishing an "International Panel on Weapons Governance" to provide independent global data, analysis and assessment on weapons governance issues. (A more detailed compilation of ideas for further discussion is available as a separate document.)

NEXT STEPS

Video of the main sessions is available on Youtube. The Geneva Disarmament Platform and the Global Challenges Foundation will be organizing follow-up consultations and activities to further develop the ideas shared at the New Shape Forum. If you would like to be involved, please email sofia@globalchallenges.org.

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