

# The United Nations and the Peace Movement\*

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## Abstract

[The interaction and cooperation between United Nations and the peace movements world over have grown steadily. Much of it is done at the UN arms such as UNESCO, ECOSOC, UNIDA and UNIDIR. United Nations is an organization of sovereign states, while peace movements are part of civil society. Certain problems and challenges in the relationship between the UN and peace movement are necessarily of a permanent nature, producing pressure and tensions. Peace movements can well support the UN and regard it as the most important peace organization, but at the same time their legitimate task is to exert constant pressure. – *Editors.*]

After all major wars the strong will to strengthen peace – “no more wars” – is manifested in the thoughts and actions of both the states and individuals. In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, at the state level the Concert of Europe was established, and at the popular level, especially in the United States, the first peace associations emerged. After the First World War, the League of Nations was created to prevent wars, and at the civil society level, both internationally and nationally, various peace organizations were established. After the Second World War the United Nations was created “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind”, and again, at the popular (“non-governmental”) level new peace organizations were established and many old ones were re-activated. The expectations of peace movement towards the United Nations are illustrated for instance by the new name of the oldest Finnish peace organization (established in 1920); its new name was now Finland’s Peace Union – UN Association – before the war it had had a respective reference to the League.

As the United Nations is a state-level organization, while peace organizations represent civil society, an important question is their mutual relationship: to what degree it is supportive, to what degree there are tensions or even conflicts. The Charter of the United Nations and the rhetoric of its Preamble provide its own flavour for these questions: “*We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save [...], have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims. Accordingly, our respective Governments [...]* have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations”. In other

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words, the United Nations has its mandate from the peoples, and is therefore responsible to the peoples. Although the UN as an organization is based on the state sovereignty of its members, the rhetorical and democratic formulations of the Charter have created a factual basis for the manifold co-operation between the UN system and the civil society, especially the non-governmental organizations.

As the ultimate goal of the whole UN system and of all its activities is to maintain and promote peace, it would make sense to analyze all those points, where the UN system and international civil society level interact, but in this short article I focus only on some examples of such interaction in the frameworks of UNESCO, ECOSOC, and at the "highest level", the General Assembly.

The Constitution of UNESCO (1945) was formulated in similar democratic terms: "The Governments [...] *on behalf of their peoples* declare, "That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". This mandate has provided the basis for all UNESCO's activities for promoting peace. As UNESCO nowadays expresses this: "Peace must be established on the basis of humanity's moral and intellectual solidarity."

In order to accomplish this, UNESCO has from the very beginning built close relationships with civil society and non-governmental organizations in all

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its fields of competence, i.e. education, science and culture, "for consultation and cooperation". At present it has official partnership agreements with close to 400 international NGOs and 24 foundations and similar institutions and, in addition to this, a great number of joint activities with NGOs at international, regional and national levels. IPRA, like many scientific associations, is linked to UNESCO partnership through the International Social Science Council.

There are two categories of official partnership: the consultative partnership, designed to enable UNESCO to establish flexible relationship with any civil society organization at whatever level, and the associate partnership, open to international or regional organizations having maintained a continuous and effective partnership with UNESCO for at least two years. The official partnership agreements may include both bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation, and the latter forms include e.g. the international conference of NGOs, the NGO-UNESCO Liaison Committee, the Executive Board's Committee on Non-Governmental Partners as well as collective consultations on specific subjects.

As is well-known, UNESCO has always had a central role in the promotion of international education, and accordingly it has organized in the past decades a great number of conferences, seminars and consultations on peace education, human rights education, disarmament education, etc., in which the representatives of peace movement, peace educators and peace researchers have had a crucial and visible role. Most obviously this continuous cooperation has been of mutual benefit. A look at the list of official partnerships reveals some interesting observations: peace movement related organizations like Amnesty International, European Peace University, International Association of Educators for Peace, International Institute for Peace, Pax Christi - International Catholic Peace Movement, Russian Peace Foundation, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, World Association for the School as an Instrument of Peace, World Conference of Religions for Peace, and World Peace Council have such an official partnership status, whereas for instance the International Peace Bureau (IPB) has not, and neither

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has our International Peace Research Association directly (another IPRA, the International Public Relations Associations, however, has!). One could argue that all relevant peace movement organizations, peace educator organization, and peace research organizations should have an official relationship with UNESCO, as this would promote effectively their activities and strengthen UNESCO's work in its field. Themes like the culture of peace, peace education and dialogue between civilizations are salient on the agenda of all of them.

The widest – and also the earliest – linkage between the UN system and civil society organizations has been established through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN. Its mandate is, of course, very comprehensive, because it covers the economic, social and cultural activities of the UN, including the human rights. Therefore, it was stipulated already in the UN Charter, Article 71 that the ECOSOC "may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence".

This mandate has enabled the construction of a huge network between the UN and NGOs, and its growth has been remarkable. In 1946 a consultative status was provided for 41 organizations. By the beginning of the 1990s such a consultative status was enjoyed by about 700 organizations and at present the group already consists of 3900 organizations. The NGOs that are in contact with ECOSOC are divided into three groups: the first, with a general consultative status, comprises well-known international organizations usually with a comprehensive agenda; the organizations of the second group (special consultative status) have expert know-how in some specific, narrower field of ECOSOC activities, and the third is a roster, consisting of NGOs

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that the ECOSOC or the Secretary-General consider to be potentially useful for some of its activities. The group of organizations enjoying the general consultative status (147 altogether) includes some peace-movement related organizations like Greepeace International, Médecins sans frontières, Oxfam International, Rotary International, and World Federation of United Nations Associations. The group with a special consultative status

(close to 2800) has among its ranks for instance the Åland Islands Peace Institute (Finland), International Association of Lawyers against Nuclear Arms, International Association of Peace Messenger Cities, Mayors for Peace, Pax Christi International, Paz y Cooperación, Peace Action, Peace Boat, Peace Child International, Peace Education Foundation, Peace Parks Foundation, Peace Worldwide, and Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs.

A consultative status provides for the organizations not only an access to ECOSOC itself, but also to its multitude of activities like the human rights mechanisms, the process aimed at prohibiting small arms and light weapons, the conferences and events organized by the President of the General Assembly, etc. etc.

Interaction between ECOSOC and NGOs is at least in principle beneficial to both sides. Organizations are requested to submit reports of their relevant activities to ECOSOC, which submits its reports to the General Assembly. On one hand the NGOs receive information from the UN system agencies, and on the other hand they have the opportunity to convey their views and their special know-how, either orally and literally, to ECOSOC, through it to the whole UN and thereby to the representatives of the member states.

In addition to the NGO network of ECOSOC, the UN information department (DPI) has a unit of its own to maintain contacts with the NGO community of about 1300 NGOs. These organizations do not enjoy a similar access to UN events as those with an ECOSOC status, but also this DPI/NGO supports the UN-related work of NGOs by providing information about all UN activities.

Chronologically the last – and politically the most difficult and sensitive – phase was to organize the opportunity for civil society organizations to participate in the UN activities in the most basic issues dealing with peace and security, i.e. in those under the General Assembly and the Security Council mandates. In this regard the opening took place in the context of the first special session on disarmament in 1978.<sup>i</sup> It was organized in a way as a two-level conference: on one hand as a traditional meeting of diplomatic state representatives, but on the other hand so that also a number of accredited representatives of peace research institutes and organizations – including IPRA – and peace movement organizations had the opportunity to introduce their views to the conference. There was a continuous and intense information sharing relationship between the two levels, the member states and the NGOs. The UN secretariat conveyed all communication from the research institutes and NGOs – research documentation and statements – to the diplomats and these had the opportunity to attend the meetings of the NGOs and research institutes. This same pattern was in use also in the second and third special sessions on disarmament.

This practise was indeed a breakthrough in the interaction and dialogue between the UN and peace movement organizations. But even in the first encounter – as always later - very much of the potential fruitfulness depended on the interest of individual diplomats and their respective states to maintain contact with the peace movement representatives, to get acquainted with their materials and statements and in fact, to be prepared for the dialogue.

The first special session on disarmament succeeded in adopting an important final document, and although there was no progress in real disarmament in the following years (in fact the missile arms race and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought a new cold war which lasted until the mid-eighties), the basic model or pattern of interaction was created between the state-level UN system and peace movements in disarmament issues. It functioned also very well in the 1987 UN conference on the relationship between disarmament and development, which was attended – in addition to the member states, by close to two hundred international peace movement organizations. Their input and that of peace research institutes in the preparatory phase and in the conference itself was of decisive importance in the construction of the conference documents and for the success of the conference.<sup>ii</sup>

Nowadays among the most important links between the official UN system and the peace movement in issues regarding disarmament and human security are the UN Disarmament Department (UNODA) and the UN Disarmament Institute (UNIDIR). They produce and disseminate research reports and information packages on disarmament to the use of the whole UN system, member states and civil society organizations. UNODA has also played an important role in organizing and supporting NGO level disarmament campaigns.

To sum up: quite much has been achieved in the organization of interaction between the UN system and peace movement. The potential benefits of this interaction are evident to both sides. Civil society organizations have channels to influence the ongoing processes in the UN directly and not only through the governments in their respective countries, and on the other hand, the organizations benefit from the information and support that they receive from the UN system.

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It is clear that civil society, the NGOs and peace movement are often the motor of change, the driving force that encourages and pushes governments and thereby the whole international society to work for disarmament. Without such a constant pressure very little would have been achieved in the past. Disarmament cannot be left to depend on the diplomats and politicians.

Certain problems and challenges in the relationship between the UN and peace movement are necessarily of a permanent nature, producing pressure and tensions. One source of tension is due to the fact that while the UN is an organization established to maintain peace and security, its Charter does not exclude the use of force to achieve that objective, and this is something that at least some pacifist organizations find difficult to approve. When the Security Council or even occasionally the General Assembly have given a mandate to the use of force, peace movement organizations have not always readily supported that course. One can therefore conclude that the support of peace movements to the UN is not unconditional and without reservations. Another dilemma worth recognizing is that even the concept of civil society is not known everywhere in the world, and where it is just in the making, its organizational forms may be very thin, and present often only in regions close to the capital and major cities. Furthermore, in authoritarian states, organizations of formally non-governmental character can in reality be semi-governmental or even strictly under government control. The networks of genuine NGOs are strongest in the West. From the UN perspective, however, the interaction, co-operation and dialogue with civil society and its organizations should be universal and equal. Therefore the UN is

encouraging and supporting the organization of civil society in societies where it has not taken place earlier, and for instance the UN disarmament campaigns have been part of this approach.

At the end of the day the most basic and also fruitful tension between the UN and peace movement stems, however, from the fact that in spite of the rhetoric of the Charter the United Nations is an organization of sovereign states, while peace movements are part of civil society. Peace movements can well support the UN and regard it as the most important peace organization, but at the same time their legitimate task is to exert constant pressure on the UN and its member states so that they would more effectively pursue the goals for which "we the peoples of the United Nations" have it established.

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i For a detailed analysis, see Unto Vesa, *The Special Session on Disarmament: A Turning Point? Current Research on Peace and Violence*, Vol. VIII, 1, 1978, pp. 1-12.  
ii For a detailed analysis, see Unto Vesa, *How governments filter research. The case of the relationship between disarmament and development, Current Research on Peace and Violence*, Vol. XI, 4, 1988, pp. 169-175.