

Journal Letter Feb 2005

Well, another three months has gone by and here I am again, tapping away furiously at the keyboard once more! David and I are very busy at the moment organising two events for the end of February. They are both related to the 'demand' for small arms agenda that QUNO has been pursuing over the last few years and promise to be very interesting meetings. The first, on the 16th February, is a general 'demand' consultation which will bring together a number of 'keen' governments and some key NGO's in order to look strategically at what we want to see emerge from the UN Programme of Action on SALW (small arms and light weapons) in relation to demand. The second one on the 21st February is a more specific look at the relation between disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes for ex-combatants and the demand for small arms. Can an effective DDR programme have a positive effect on lessening demand? Again, we are hoping to be able to draw up a concrete set of recommendations that can be given to governments who will then be involved in the official discussions at the Biennial Meeting of States (BMS) this Summer and the Review Conference next year. It has become very clear to me during my time at QUNO that this kind of strategic thinking is absolutely vital within the UN setting. There is a whole wealth of organisations engaged in the international political process. Fantastic research organisations, people with a great deal of experience in implementing programmes at the field level and groups that do a brilliant job at raising public awareness of an issue through their advocacy work. But unless you can relate all of this expertise to a knowledge of how policy-making (and policy makers) work, it can stand for very little in the UN setting. Collaboration among all of these different organisations is absolutely fundamental in order to form a full picture of an issue and then to hopefully guide policy in the right direction.

Having said that I am also quickly coming to realise that working strategically within the UN system like QUNO does takes a special kind of (extremely patient!) person! Issues within the UN are split up rather differently to 'reality'. By this I mean that for a Sudanese refugee living on the poverty line in a camp in neighbouring Chad, it is very difficult to separate the fact that an armed group forced them from their home from the fact that they now have to rely on humanitarian aid agencies to feed their family. Armed violence is inextricably linked to issues of poverty reduction (amongst many other issues) yet within the UN system these questions are dealt with in entirely different processes. Not only that but each issue is then split again into numerous separate issues. So we have the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PoA), the Convention on Conventional Weapons, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Biological Toxin Weapons Convention, to name just a few. It goes even further when within the UN PoA separate initiatives are set up to deal with even more specific issues, for example, marking and tracing, brokering, civilian possession of arms etc. I can't help wondering whether this seemingly arbitrary separation of matters is simply a convenient way for states to be able to hide behind the standard line 'that's not within our mandate' and so avoid having to make any substantive progress... It certainly does seem to have the effect of reducing governments' ability to deal with more than one issue at once, as the SALW process is proving at the moment. States are insisting that there can be no discussion on the issue of brokering until the current negotiations on marking and tracing are complete. Perhaps one of the NGO roles within this whole system is to act as the outside perspective on these questions; to remind states that the real reasons they are sitting at the negotiating table is not just to protect their national piggy banks but to save innocent lives. It is easy to get lost in the detail and to forget the bigger reasoning behind our actions, especially while sitting in the stunning lakeside setting of Geneva.

Oh dear, I've only been here 6 months and already I've become a cynical old woman! I think maybe it is precisely because I have been here for so short a time that I sometimes find things so frustrating. I expect results where other, more experienced, people have come to expect very little progress. The Conference on Disarmament (CD) is a negotiating forum, which holds responsibility for many disarmament issues. This body is currently in session here in Geneva but it is notoriously 'stalled' at the starting blocks, unable to agree even a programme of work. Most of the discussions are closed to NGO's but every Thursday morning there is a plenary session in which NGO's are allowed to observe. As I mentioned earlier, David and I have been very busy in recent weeks and so taking the time last Thursday to cycle over to the Palais des Nations in order to observe this plenary session was a reasonable time commitment. Imagine my horror then when, after starting 25 minutes late, the Chairman promptly announced that he had no speakers on his list for the plenary session and would everyone kindly break for 5 minutes before re-convening for the informal session (closed to NGO's)!! Then governments comment on the lack of NGO attention to the CD process, concluding that we can't be interested in the issues they are discussing! I was flabbergasted and really quite annoyed at what I saw as a lack of respect for NGO involvement. Do you just have to get used to this level of inertia? Do I want to get used to it?! I guess someone has to but I'm not so sure if I want it to be me!

Of course, underlying all of my frustration is a very real understanding that the imperfect system we have at the moment is better than not having a system at all. We desperately need this platform for international collaboration and discussion and while I find it infuriating at times, I can understand why it is so extremely difficult to achieve progress on issues. Think about how hard it can be to work collaboratively with people in your everyday life, simply due to personality clashes or differences of opinion. Now multiply these difficulties by 191 different cultural approaches and national agendas and you can start to understand the difficulties the UN faces! Of course we'd all love diplomats to be able to put aside their national interests and historical/political/cultural differences but that's not going to happen in the near (or far!) future so we simply have to work with the system that we have. Occasionally it works. We had a fantastic meeting of the Geneva Process just a few weeks ago where the energy and enthusiasm in the room was so high as to be tangible. States were coming up with really radical ideas as to how the Biennial Meeting of States this July could be structured to achieve the most progress. The will is there amongst some states and on some issues; the challenge is to harness it effectively. You can't do that by shouting criticism at a closed door and hoping you're heard, which only leaves us with one choice, to work for reform from inside the room.

Winter in Geneva has been very pretty so far. There's been lots of snow and more is falling outside the window as I'm typing. I've been able to get into the mountains to do some skiing (if my version of sliding haphazardly down a slope can be called that!) and there will hopefully be more to come. I've got lots of trips coming up including a ski week in Tignes (France), a lakeside cycle trip, a long weekend in Amsterdam just to mention a few! So all in all, life is treating me very well. I hope the same can be said for you and I look forward to being in touch with you all in another three months.

Love and light,
Rachel