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General Assembly First Committee (Disarmament and International Security)

The [General Assembly First Committee](#) addresses the disarmament of conventional weapons, weapons of mass destruction and related international security questions. The First Committee makes recommendations on the regulation of these weapons as they relate to international peace and security. The First Committee does not consider legal issues surrounding weapons possession nor does it address complex peace and security issues addressed by the Security Council. The First Committee also adheres to the purview guidelines of the [General Assembly](#) as a whole.

Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction

[Bacteriological \(biological\) and toxin weapons](#) are a classification of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that [disseminate disease-causing organisms or toxins to harm or kill plants, animals or humans](#). The consequences of the deliberate release of biological agents or toxins by state or non-state actors can be dramatic. In addition to the tragic loss of life, such events could cause [food shortages, environmental catastrophes, devastating economic loss and widespread illness, fear and mistrust among the public](#). While [early forms of biological warfare](#) ranged from poisoning water wells to throwing clay pots filled with venomous snakes onto enemy ships, modern biological warfare is significantly more dangerous. Biological agents such as [anthrax require little expertise to grow or weaponize](#). Gene-editing techniques such as [CRISPR](#) could make biological weapons more deadly. States could develop novel or modified pathogens that would spread more quickly, infect more people, cause more severe sickness, or resist

TOPICS

[Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological \(Biological\) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction](#)

- [Bibliography](#)
- [United Nations Documents](#)

[Youth, disarmament and non-proliferation](#)

- [Bibliography](#)
- [United Nations Documents](#)

treatment more fully.

Historically, United Nations actions regarding bacteriological (biological) and toxin weapons have centered around the larger goal of global disarmament. Following World War I, the League of Nations hosted the signing of the [1925 Geneva Protocol](#), which prohibits the use of chemical and biological weapons in war. Despite being a landmark treaty, [the protocol had several limitations](#). In particular, it failed to address the production, storage, testing and transfer of the weapons, allowing countries to amass large supplies of biological agents.

In 1975, [the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological \(Biological\) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction](#), or Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), came into force, and was reviewed about every five years thereafter. The Convention aimed for the complete disarmament of biological weapons by preventing States Parties from developing and stockpiling biological weapons and their precursors, by developing and enforcing confidence-building measures, and by promoting and improving peaceful biological activities. In 1986, [the Second Review Conference of the Convention](#) attempted to increase compliance by passing a number of [confidence-building measures](#) (CBMs) that allow States Parties to reduce ambiguities and doubts in their compliance with the Convention through annual reporting. These CBMs would evolve and expand over the following years, currently including six different measures States Parties can report under.

[The Third Review Conference](#) in 1991 saw a focus on verification. The Conference created a group of governmental experts to research potential scientific methods the international community could use when verifying that States Parties were destroying biological weapons stockpiles. A Special Conference in 1994 created an [Ad Hoc Group of States](#) to negotiate and develop a legally-binding verification system in which States Parties could be held accountable for stockpile destruction. In order to address concerns that these measures might stifle scientific growth and economic potential, the General Assembly First Committee and States Parties to the BWC [affirmed their commitment to technological research and economic growth](#). This was accompanied by commitments to prevent proliferation of biological weapons at all research levels. Reporting procedures remained complex, causing difficulties when monitoring compliance. As a result, [the Sixth Review in 2006](#) adopted by consensus a detailed plan for promoting universal adherence and agreed to update and streamline procedures for submission and distribution of CBMs.

The early 2000s were marked by both terrorist threats and the threat of multiple widespread epidemics. These crises redoubled the desire among States Parties to reduce access to biological weapons and the technology that can create them. In response to these growing fears, States Parties approved an [Implementation Support Unit \(ISU\)](#) in 2006, which would provide assistance to States Parties in adhering to the BWC. However, attempts to strengthen the ISU and fully equip it to the recommendations of the Review Conference chairman and secretariat were fundamentally unsuccessful due to, in part, reluctance to further increase the ISU's capability as well as unrealistic monetary and capacity expectations.

The Eighth and Ninth Review Conferences in 2016 and 2022 suffered from an increase in seemingly insurmountable disagreements among the States Parties. While support for the core missions of the BWC remained strong—as evidenced by the General Assembly’s adoption by consensus of a [2017 resolution](#) urging full compliance with the BWC—progress has become increasingly difficult to attain. At issue were the scope and capacity of the ISU, [whether to have legally-binding protocols](#) for verification and compliance, and [unfounded allegations](#) that the United States and Ukraine had been conducting biological weapons activities in violation of the BWC on Ukrainian territory. In the end, the Ninth Review Conference was unable to find consensus for a Final Declaration to be included in its Final Report.

In addition to the unresolved questions from the recent Review Conferences, States Parties are also grappling with updating the BWC to address modern challenges. Proposals to address these include developing standardized procedures for requesting assistance, setting up an assistance database for strengthening preparedness and response to the use of biological or toxin weapons, and establishing nationally-operated rapid-response biomedical teams that could be delegated to a roster maintained by the BWC and deployed in the event of a public health emergency. The BWC has also failed to provide a framework for States Parties to cooperate on biotechnology, leaving gray areas in research. One such significant research in recent years is [gain-of-function \(GoF\)](#) research. GoF research involves manipulating viruses to increase their ability to infect humans or animals or to enhance their transmissibility or pathogenicity. Although the goal of this research is to better understand the mechanisms by which viruses evolve and spread and to develop treatments or vaccines to combat them, GoF research can also risk the creation and release of more dangerous pathogens. While the Observer Research Foundation [has proposed the creation of a scientific expert group as part of the BWC](#), mirroring a similar body in the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, it is unclear if this expansion of the BWC would have the support of States Parties.

Questions to Consider

- How can the BWC be strengthened to further encourage compliance from Member States? What steps can be taken to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of confidence-building measures?
- How can the United Nations increase cooperation amongst Member States following the Ninth Review Conference? Are there better ways for Member States to share biological research with each other?
- How can the goals of the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) be actualized? What potential obstacles does the United Nations need to address in order to make the ISU functional?

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[Top ↑](#)

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Youth, disarmament and non-proliferation

Today's [youth](#) are part of the largest generation in history, consisting of [1.8 billion people, 90 percent of whom live in developing countries](#). Youth can play an important role in both resolving conflict and ensuring long lasting peace, specifically in regards to nuclear disarmament. Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized in his [Agenda for Disarmament: Securing Our Common Future](#) the importance of youth and their involvement in disarmament talks because they are more likely to reject the xenophobic and racist policies that drive militarization. At the same time, [armed conflict primarily victimizes youth](#), resulting in youth being orphaned, kidnapped or killed. Despite this, traditional processes towards disarmament and non-proliferation often exclude youth, both due to their inherent lack of credentials like education and the current trend of focusing on internal resources, rather than soliciting external input. [Youth continuously find new, innovative and bolder solutions](#) to disarmament and non-proliferation that could pave the way for strengthening collective security and peace.

The United Nations first recognized youth as a collective group in 1965 when Member States passed the [Declaration on Promotion among Youth on the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples](#). The declaration included six principles that focused on educating youth to make them more engaged global citizens, with the first principle encouraging young people to be brought up in the spirit of peace, justice, freedom, mutual respect, and understanding to promote disarmament and international peace. In 1979, the United Nations designated 1985 as International Youth Year and implemented the [Programme of Measures and Activities in connection with International Youth Year](#) with the goal of increasing overall welfare of youth, but also including youth in discussions on disarmament. In 1983, the Secretary-General reported the progress of Member States in identifying distinct problems youth face in the areas of housing, unemployment and education. At the same time, following the Programme, there was increased awareness that [educating youth on peace and mutual understanding is significant for creating positive attitudes on disarmament](#).

In 1995, [the World Programme of Action for Youth \(WPAY\)](#) was adopted, strengthening the United Nations commitment to young people. The Programme initially included 10 priority areas to improve the livelihood of youth; five more priority areas were added in 2007. WPAY recognized that [youth were simultaneously agents, beneficiaries and victims of major societal change](#) and that they were in a paradoxical position of trying to integrate into the global order while at the same time trying to transform it. The Programme also emphasized how crucial it is to have youth involved in the designing and building of the future due to their intellectual capacity and unique perspective.

By 2015, the Security Council adopted [Resolution 2250](#), further recognizing that including youth, especially those in armed conflict, can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and should be part of a comprehensive strategy to resolve conflict. The United Nations launched [Youth2030](#), an umbrella framework to guide the United Nations as it steps up its work with young people in peace and security, human rights and sustainable development. The strategy seeks to create the conditions that allow youth to progress and play an active role in achieving peace by strengthening knowledge production, accelerating resource mobilization, and more effectively and meaningfully engaging with young people. The United Nations adopted its first resolution entitled “[Youth, disarmament and non-proliferation](#)” in 2019, where it encouraged Member States to promote the inclusive participation of youth in discussions over disarmament and non-proliferation through mentoring, internships and fellowships. In order to further promote the empowerment and participation of youth, the United Nations established [Youth4Disarmament](#), a digital outreach initiative that provides a way for youth to learn about current international security challenges, but also how to actively participate in the work and discussions of the United Nations.

Youth can play a vital role in discussions over disarmament and non-proliferation due to their position as victims of conflict, but also as beneficiaries of future actions made by the United Nations. Despite progress being made in terms of access to information for youth on disarmament and non-proliferation, there is not a clear pathway for youth to actively participate in discussions. Youth-led initiatives like [Youth for TPNW](#) are leading the charge and finding solutions and creating spaces for youth to be involved in discussions about disarmament and non-proliferation. In 2022, Youth for TPNW hosted the first annual Youth MSP, a conference that takes place concurrently with the Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Another aspect to consider is incorporating the recommendations coming from youth. [Youth Fusion](#), a world-wide networking platform endorsed the [Nuclear Taboo: From Norm to Law A Declaration of Public Conscience](#), a call to action which encourages Member States to adopt a no-first use policy and enshrine it in international law.

Questions to consider from your country’s perspective:

- How can the United Nations better integrate programs such as Youth2030 and Youth4Disarmament to increase engagement of youth on topics relating to disarmament and non-proliferation?
- What barriers still exist for youth that dissuade them from engaging with the United Nations and other international organizations in discussions over disarmament and non-proliferation?
- Can the United Nations better support youth-led initiatives and create opportunities for them at all levels in the field of disarmament?

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