

Emphasizing the human connections to peace and security in outer space

Project Ploughshares

Project Ploughshares is the peace research institute of the Canadian Council of Churches, which has consultative status at the United Nations. Our work is focused on disarmament and international security, including specific work on outer space governance. We have actively followed and participated in the current Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) process to make recommendations on possible norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours relating to threats by States to space systems.

Project Ploughshares commends participants at the OEWG for their constructive contributions to discussions and efforts at consensus-building on a topic that requires navigating various thematic and procedural priorities. As part of an ongoing international discussion to clarify States' responsibilities in outer space, the OEWG stands as an encouraging milestone in international efforts to maintain outer space as a peaceful, accessible, and secure global environment – now and in the future.

While the Working Group focuses on threats by States to space systems and the development of norms of responsible State behaviour, we believe that there is scope to identify more precisely the human values and security concerns connected to outer space. These values and concerns have animated core themes during the discussion. They also underpin shared international commitments, including the Outer Space Treaty, which recognizes space as the province of humankind and endorses the peaceful exploration and use of outer space for the benefit of all; the UN mandate on the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS); and conflict prevention broadly.

We believe that the following points, which are based on our close observations of the discussion, provide a way to reflect these human values and concerns.

1. Participation

Inclusive and open participation is at the core of the OEWG mandate, which reflects a deep appreciation of the value of outer space for all States and all peoples. While there is a continuing need to broaden participation in space governance, the openness of the Working Group and the regional and gender diversity of participation achieved should be emphasized and welcomed.

The openness of the OEWG process to non-state representatives – including those from commercial, international, and civil society organizations – adds to its value. Civil society, in particular, is recognized as a critical medium through which diverse voices and perspectives, including those of women, can be heard. Participation thus far has taken the form of expert presentations, written contributions, and informal exchanges – all of which have added value through additional expertise, knowledge, and the wisdom of experience. Because we believe that the OEWG has benefited from such participation, we ask that the value of this participation be acknowledged in the final report.

We are disappointed with the decision to conduct closed-door informal negotiations during the final sessions, thereby excluding the participation and expert input of civil society. We firmly hope that this one event is not the beginning of a trend to less open and inclusive discussions in the future. While we understand the need for interactive discussion and negotiation, we are concerned about the resulting reduced transparency. Maximum transparency is – and must remain – a fundamental principle applicable to both outer space activities and discussions about them. Transparency not only enhances

the quality of deliberations but fosters trust and accountability – pivotal elements in our collective journey to responsible behaviours and secure practices in outer space.

2. Human considerations

It is difficult to overstate the value of space systems for humanity. While any future armed violence in outer space is unlikely to involve human combatants or civilian populations directly, it will have reverberating impacts on human security on Earth. Thus, the human impacts caused by instability in outer space should be emphasized when developing norms of responsible behaviour by States.

The security focus of the OEWG has been on threats to space systems, which, for the purpose of the discussion, have included space segments, ground segments, and data linkages between the two. But such systems are inevitably connected to people and are critical to daily civilian life on Earth.

During the discussion, States have frequently drawn attention to the devastating human consequences of armed conflict in space. States have also recognized the potential that instability and insecurity during times of peace would cause similar harms. Actions that would produce such an environment include those that a) jeopardize the sustainability of the space environment on which space systems depend, such as the production of space debris; b) disrupt, degrade, or destroy space systems that provide essential civilian services and enable humanitarian operations; and c) contribute to the escalation of violent conflict on Earth.

Additionally, several States have noted the disproportionate impact of such threats on groups of people defined by social indicators such as gender, race, sexuality, geography, and socioeconomic status. What follows, according to some States, is that space-related threats may be perceived and experienced differently by States according to their particular social and economic qualities, infrastructure capacity, security, and resilience.

Recognition of the different and disproportionate implications for people around the world of insecurity in outer space should be reflected in the final report, alongside acknowledgement of the responsibility to consider the human and/or civilian consequences of space activities.

3. Looking ahead

The development of norms of behaviour is a long-term process. Going forward, a focus on the human implications of conflict, insecurity, and instability in outer space can help to inform additional norms of behaviour and to link them to other governance processes.

Looking ahead, the OEWG should acknowledge views that favour greater diversity and more inclusive participation in space governance, including by civil society. Such expansion is also emphasized in the UN Secretary-General's policy brief for outer space within *Our Common Agenda*.

It should also be noted that States have identified a need for additional knowledge about the specific human and civilian linkages to space systems, as well as how linkages are influenced by social indicators such as gender.

Finally, as we have seen in other disarmament forums, a human-centred focus that includes consideration of diverse human experiences including based on gender benefits both the development of norms of behaviour and the negotiation of future legally binding instruments on PAROS, a long-held

objective of the international community and the focus of the upcoming Group of Governmental Experts process.