

Conference takes global view of disarmament

Scottish activists share their stories with scholars from around the world

COMMENT
BY CHARLIE PEEVERS
AND KAREN ENGLE

DURING a moment characterised by an escalating arms race, what might we learn by turning our attention to historical and contemporary disarmament efforts, especially those by activists and Global South states?

In Glasgow last week, long-time disarmament activists from across Scotland met with international law and politics scholars from around the world to take seriously the lessons of Disarmament From The Margins.

The conference, held at the University of Glasgow and Glasgow Caledonian University, was organised by law professors Charlie Peevers and Anna Hood (University of Auckland). It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

The conference opened with an exhibition of more than a century of Scottish peace activism, including from the Western Isles, Skye, Glasgow, Ullapool, and Orkney. It closed with a visit to Faslane, site of the British government's nuclear weapons systems and a long-time focal point of anti-nuclear protests.

The event was punctuated by Scottish activists discussing their work on nuclear disarmament over the past few decades. These activities from across Scotland framed the conference and provided important points of reference for scholars coming to Glasgow from around the globe.

Several scholars spoke about disarmament activism by a range of communities and transnational solidarity networks – campaigns against nuclear testing in Algeria, the Pacific Islands, and indigenous territories in the US and Australia; women's peace camps and citizen diplomacy during the Cold War; and aid flotillas seeking to break the blockade of Gaza.

Presentations by activists and scholars alike highlighted the uneven distribution of economic, environmental, social and political costs in a militarised world.

Other scholars used the concept of margins to consider not only the role of social movements in disarmament but the role of states that have long been marginalised, whether through histories of empire or, in the case of nuclear weapons, their non-nuclear status. They discussed moments



ranging from the Bandung Conference in 1955 to the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2021.

Throughout the conference, activists and academics discussed the promises but also pitfalls of relying on international law alone to achieve transformative change. International law can be used as a tool of resistance but it can also be dominating, exclusionary and marginalising.

LAWS that are used to proscribe, delegitimise, or criminalise protest – including against suffragettes, peace camps, Trident Ploughshares actions, boycott and divestment movements – are often justified in the language of sovereignty and the national interest.

The keynote lectures all built in some way on sites of protest. Engle charted the anti-nuclear activism (against both nuclear weapons and energy) of women's peace and development movements in the late 1980s, tracing much of their collective work to the 1985 Nairobi Peace Tent.

Borrowing, as several speakers did, from the thought and aspirations of penal abolitionists, she emphasised that these peace and development activists saw militarism in much the way abolitionists see prisons: both as a symptom of

the gross maldistribution of resources and power and as an obstacle to change.

Vasuki Nesiah identified the commons as a place for dissident political imagination that challenges the politics of enclosure, distributive injustice, and militarisation.

The commons is not only about agitating for a share of the resources, she argued, but also for the processes through which collective governance of those shared resources is exercised and community is constituted.

Hood highlighted the emotions

and creativity needed to constitute such community, through work that can be joyful but also messy and fraught with challenges, dissents and disagreement.

We would be deluding ourselves, she insisted, if we imagine the work of constituting peace to be otherwise.

Without over-romanticising the many local and global struggles discussed or represented at the conference, we hope that revisiting them and their anti-militarist and anti-imperial commitments – as well as their coalition building – will provide sources for those who oppose today's arms race to draw upon.

We are inspired by penal abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore's observation that we need not start from scratch: "What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments. Abolition is building the future from the present in all the ways we can."

● The exhibition *Disarmament From The Margins: Local Actions, Global Stories From Across Scotland* is curated by Charlie Peevers in collaboration with designer Rose Parfitt and GCU archivist Heather Panayiotaki. It is free and open to the public at the Sir Alex Ferguson Library, GCU until October 24

● Charlie Peevers is professor of international law, University of Glasgow. Karen Engle is chair in law and co-director, Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice, University of Texas School of Law



Karen Engle (above) and Charlie Peevers

First Nature30 sites revealed

FOUR areas in Scotland have been named the first of 30 designated nature sites in a bid to reverse habitat loss.

As part of NatureScot's Nature30 project, four areas – Knapdale in Argyll, Loch Wood in Lanark, Loch Arkaig Pine Forest in Lochaber and Findhorn Hinterland in Moray – have been named as places that will be safeguarded.

NatureScot, which ranks Scotland as one of the world's most nature-depleted countries, previously pledged to

safeguard at least 30% of the country by 2030.

Despite there being about 2000 protected areas in Scotland, covering 18% of land and freshwater, NatureScot says almost one million more hectares (3861 square miles) must be protected in order to reach the 30% mark.

Researchers say doing so will not only preserve those areas, but will increase flood protection, reduce fire risk, protect soils, provide clean water and air, and capture and store carbon.

With more sites due to be

recognised, NatureScot's head of protection, Ben Ross, said: "These Nature30 sites are an important first step in the mass movement we need to reverse nature loss, and to help us all to become more resilient to climate change."

"They can deliver high-quality nature, but also food, materials, energy and many other benefits to society, so we need to recognise, celebrate and reward them. Achieving the 30 by 30 target is hugely ambitious, but collectively Scotland can do it."