

ILPI



# The humanitarian initiative

A brief introduction to the humanitarian initiative on nuclear weapons

---

# Background

- The language of Realpolitik long dominated the field of nuclear weapons policy
- Since 2010 **the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons** have received increased attention
- The term '**humanitarian initiative**' is now used to describe the reframing of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation agenda, and the group pushing for such a change in perspective
- The humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons are now debated in both formal and informal forums

# Humanitarian consequences

- Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain the only nuclear weapons attacks to date
- Discussions about the military utility of nuclear weapons and the merit of nuclear deterrence theory are based on hypotheticals
- Humanitarian efforts typically focused on preventing the use of weapons and methods which cannot be directed at a specific target, or cause **unnecessary suffering** or **superfluous injury**
- Subscribers to the humanitarian perspective highlight the multifaceted consequences of the use of nuclear weapons
- The historical record show that the probability of accidental detonation is **higher than previously assumed**

# 2010 NPT Review Conference

- The outlines of the current focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons first became clear in the 2010 NPT Review Conference
- The Final Document refers to the ‘**catastrophic humanitarian consequences**’ that would result from the use of nuclear weapons’
- ‘Humanitarian initiative’ refers both to the lens of analysis focusing on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, as well as the coalition of states and civil society working for the strengthening of this approach
- Three conferences held on the humanitarian initiative so far, in Norway, Mexico and Austria

# Historical origins

- Since Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the **devastating results** of nuclear weapons have been apparent for all states
- Concern raised in the United Nations: UN Resolution 1653 (1961) + the UN Secretary-General's consultative group on the Effects of the Possible Use of Nuclear Weapons (1976)
- ICRC adopted in 2011 an **historic resolution** calling for a binding legal instrument banning nuclear weapons
- International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) and other civil society organisations have long advocated for addressing the consequences of nuclear war
- The humanitarian initiative remarkable - has earned an unprecedented level of UN member state and civil society support

# Parallel campaigns

- The humanitarian initiative follows in the wake of other successful **humanitarian disarmament efforts** – the Mine Ban Treaty (1997) and the Convention on Cluster Munitions (2008)
- These campaigns were characterised by grand coalitions of states and civil society that proceeded through various channels, emphasising the humanitarian consequences of the weapons' use
- Nuclear weapons different from conventional weapons in their technical characteristics, their yield and consequences, role in military doctrines and political and strategic implications
- Nuclear weapons are by many – whether true or not – still considered **the 'ultimate deterrent'**

# The future of the initiative

- The humanitarian initiative continues to gain traction in established channels, such as the NPT Preparatory Committee and review conferences
- *ad hoc* arrangements, such as the Oslo, Mexico and Vienna conferences demonstrate a **growing momentum in favour of nuclear disarmament**
- A major success of the humanitarian initiative thus far has been **to reframe a debate** that has long been closed to all but security policy experts
- Has forced a broad range of stakeholders to consider how the continued existence of nuclear weapons affects their work, whether through health, environmental, economic or security consequences