

The Past and Potential Role of Civil Society in Nuclear Security

While the operators managing nuclear facilities and materials play the most critical roles in implementing nuclear security day-to-day, civil society has played a very important role in nuclear security over the years, and its role could be strengthened in the future.

Some nuclear organizations react against the very idea of civil society involvement, thinking of only one civil society role –protesting. In fact, however, civil society has played quite a number of critical roles in nuclear security over the years. Some of these roles have included:

- *Highlighting the dangers of nuclear terrorism.* Ever since John McPhee's seminal *The Curve of Binding Energy* in 1973, civil society experts have been central to calling attention to the dangers nuclear security systems are designed to protect against, helping to motivate governments to act.
- *Suggesting actions to be taken.* Here, too, civil society experts have played prominent roles for many years. As the Soviet Union neared collapse, Ashton Carter, then a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School, helped draft the Nunn-Lugar legislation on U.S.-Russian cooperation to secure and dismantle the excess weapons of the Cold War. Later, one of the authors (Bunn) first suggested the four-year effort to secure nuclear material around the world that was the key commitment agreed to at the first Nuclear Security Summit in 2010. Many operators around the world have implemented suggestions from the good practice guides of the World Institute for Nuclear Security (WINS), contributing to nuclear security improvements around the world.
- *Nudging governments to act.* Civil society actors have often gone beyond making suggestions to more active efforts to promote government action. In the early 2000s, for example, the effort to launch a program to remove weapons-usable nuclear material from potentially vulnerable sites included analysis, work to draft legislation, and the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) stepping in and providing the funds needed to get a deal to remove highly enriched uranium (HEU) from what is now Serbia. Those ultimately led to the launch of the Global Threat Reduction Initiative –and today, more than half of the countries that once had separated plutonium or HEU on their soil have gotten rid of it. Just before the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, one of the authors (Bunn) developed a proposal for NTI to give the IAEA a gift to support its physical protection work; after the attacks, that NTI gift and a matching grant from the U.S. government were the founding gifts of what is now the Nuclear Security Fund. Civil society efforts to track whether governments were living up to their commitments from the nuclear security summits have helped hold governments accountable for their pledges.
- *Educating the public and other players.* From universities to think tanks, civil society actors play a particularly important role in education –as reflected by the large number of them participating in the International Nuclear Security Education Network (INSEN). This includes not just educating the general public, but educating legislators and other government officials, and even nuclear security operators as well. Today, the WINS Academy is playing a particularly prominent role, providing education and professional certification for hundreds of nuclear security professionals in dozens of countries.
- *Promoting dialogue and partnerships.* A key civil society role which underlies many of the others is their role in promoting dialogue and encouraging partnerships and cooperation among other actors. While there are countless examples, NTI's Global Dialogue is a particularly prominent one, bringing together government officials, industry experts, and civil society experts to discuss key issues and ideas in a more informal and creative way than would ever be possible in government-to-government negotiations.

In short, civil society has played a key role in nuclear security in the past and is likely to continue to do so in the future. Funding organizations (both government and non-government) should consider ways to support civil society work and expertise focused on nuclear security in additional countries. Rather than simply protesting and opposing, civil society can help lead to more effective nuclear security practices around the world.

State

United States

Gender

Male

Authors: BUNN, Matthew (Harvard University); ROTH, Nickolas (Belfer Center, Harvard University)

Presenter: BUNN, Matthew (Harvard University)

Track Classification: CC: Implementation of national legislative and regulatory frameworks, and international instruments