

# Article36

## “Framing issues”

Comments by Richard Moyes, Managing Director, Article 36

at

### **Making multilateral diplomacy work – Strategic thinking, partnerships, innovation, and fearlessness as factors for success.**

*A seminar, followed by a reception, on the occasion of Ambassador Steffen Kongstad's retirement  
from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

Oslo 10 May 2022

Henri Dunant Conference Hall, Norwegian Red Cross, Hausmannsgate 7, Oslo

Good afternoon everybody,

It is customary to say that it is a pleasure to be asked to speak at a meeting or a seminar. But this time it is also true.

The combination of social warmth and intellectual engagement that are brought together in the people here are a testament to the community, or culture, that Steffen has created. And it is important that we can hold together the sort of positive vision that Beatrice Fihn set out earlier – of norm building in the face of so many violations - alongside the very sharp and critical comments of Branislav Kapetonovic - that more needs to be done. The combination of positivity coupled with sharp critique is important to making this culture work.

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I am going to comment on ‘framing’ or reframing issues. This is a theme that has come up already a lot in the discussion today. And I am thinking first of all about how we describe ‘problems’ – the intellectual and moral language by which we describe the harms we are seeking to address.

When I was young... I’m looking at John Borrie because I am thinking that I also still think I am young. I think it is because I can’t grow a proper moustache.

When I was very young. I used to think that organisations and NGOs worked to solve problems. But as I have got older I realise I spend much of my time creating problems. Not creating the harms themselves I hope – but trying to pin down how we describe those harms.

Because ‘problems’ don’t just exist automatically – they are part of how we make sense of the world, how we divide it up and try to gain traction on it.

And how we choose to describe problems conditions and sets the terms for how we can work towards solutions.

Framing problems is about power. How we frame a problem shapes whose voices will count in the debate that follows, and what sort of arguments will count.

It is tied up with issues of language and classification – and of course it is not breaking new intellectual ground to recognise that the structures of power are embedded in these issues.

And if we are a community that is concerned with language against violence – and, we are the goodies, right!?! – then it is important that we pay attention to the framing of problems if we want to win the contestations that follow.

So, we have to be careful in the framing that we choose.

If we choose to frame an issue in legal terms then we can expect to hear from a lot of lawyers and to hear a lot of legal arguments.

But if we frame an issue in humanitarian terms then .... well, actually we can still expect to hear from a lot of lawyers. Lawyers find it difficult to recognise that the law is not the only way to frame a problem – they find it difficult to let go. But we can help them to see that the law is really just a social structure that has been created to achieve purposes outside the law itself...

The reframing of nuclear weapons provides a clear example – the humanitarian initiative reframed a conversation. Away from the narrow security concerns of a few states – and onto a wider footing, engaging a wider group: considering the effects on people, on society, on the economy and the environment. Focusing on these issues forced people to question – is this right?

I am working now on the issue of autonomous weapons – thinking about whether we should allow machines to make decisions about who should be killed. And here too we need to find a way to move away from a narrow legal and security framing to think about the moral implications, and the humanitarian implications and wider societal concerns, about what it means to live in a society where machines can make such decisions. Our lives are more and more shaped by algorithms – how will we control that if we cannot draw a line against machines deciding to kill people?

And this also makes me think that the diversity of different framings and intellectual orientations is empowering to us.

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I have been talking here about an intellectual architecture. And I think this intellectual architecture frames a political architecture also.

Having a moral and intellectual framing, with certain fixed points, means that lines must be drawn – and that some things cannot be negotiated away. It also allows us to suggest that an outcome is inevitable.

People approach negotiations differently if they believe that an outcome is going to be agreed regardless of their objections, and if they can see that there are limits to the compromises that will be made. So, framing can be political as well as intellectual.

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It is good to be sharing and learning these lessons here. And for people to be thinking into other areas – like pandemics and climate change. But it is not inevitable that the lessons we have learned are retained even within our own community.

On the issue of autonomous weapons that I mentioned earlier, Norway for example has a political mandate to take the action on the issue. But we haven't seen any action yet. Unless waiting to see what Germany does counts as an action – I suppose it does, but I was hoping for more...

I should note, for those interested in civil society 'practice', that by including this direct advocacy point in my comments I can charge the costs of participation here against a grant!

But my point is that these lessons and theories remain theoretical unless we have the will to act – to actually pick up and use the political power that is on the table.

And I was reminded in the discussion earlier about the early process of thinking about cluster munitions. And looking back then towards the work in the early 1970s, when a group of states proposed a ban on cluster bombs.

Thirty years later we could look back to that, and the very same weapons that they were concerned about were still killing people 30 years later: literally the same weapons, the same cluster bombs that they were watching being dropped in Lao and Cambodia and Vietnam were still killing people. And that 30-year period allowed a different framing of the problem – as something that was recognised 30 years earlier but where there had been a failure since then, a failure over time, to take the action that was necessary.

And I imagined that the people who worked on that proposal at the time felt that they had failed in that work. But 30 years later it was helpful to have that marker on the landscape and it helped to frame the problem in a different way.

And this makes me think that if we are confident in our framings then we should not be too afraid of failure.

So, lets continue to make plans, and to keep this community going for the future.

Thank you.