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**“Targeting Deadly Weapons. Issue-Adoption and Campaign Structure in Transnational
Weapon Ban Campaigns”**

Part of the International Relations Series

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) is widely lauded as a symbol of the power of global civil society. Founded in the early 1990s, it culminated in the Mine Ban Treaty, which obliges the 164 states party to it to destroy their stockpiles of anti-personnel mines. Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni outlines what factors contribute to the selection of campaign targets, membership and timing, and the particular challenges faced by the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (CSKR). The focus of her analysis encompasses several key themes – the challenges facing pre-emptive campaigns, the framing of an issue, and the roles of individuals and organisations within campaign structures.

Killer robots are ostensibly being designed for deployment in combat scenarios, and thus fall within the remit of weapon ban campaigns. These robots are promoted as mitigating human error on the battlefield because they are devoid of emotions; furthermore, they are not afraid to die nor do they get fatigued. While activists fear how killer robots may be exploited by repressive regimes and lessen state perceptions of the consequences of war, their primary concern is how using robot soldiers removes accountability for violence. Launched in 2013, the CSKR finds itself in difficult territory, because it seeks to use similar methods to other transnational weapon ban campaigns, but has faced fresh challenges in doing so.

The framing of an issue is integral to the formulation of a campaign, rather than simply whether the issue itself is of interest to the wider public. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni notes that the ICBL had a clear message: ban landmines. This clarity enabled internal organisational focus and was then reflected in the public messaging for the campaign. Many of the problems confronted by the CSKR are rooted in the fact that killer robots do not yet exist, but are being developed. Because it is pre-emptive, campaigners are dealing in hypotheticals rather than in tangible problems. This makes it extremely difficult to project a succinct, clear message, for example because there is not unanimous agreement on whether killer robots should be banned outright – some argue for regulation. Moreover, because they do not exist there are not victims to provoke an emotive response from the public.

Additionally, part of the achievements of the ICBL has been attributed to reframing the issue as a humanitarian one, rather than about arms control. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni argues that the early framing of an issue is essential to how it then becomes defined, because it is the premise on which individuals get involved with the campaign at the outset. There has, for example, been discussion about whether guns are a humanitarian or a development issue; this is significant for what language and ideas are consequently advocated in public debate. Human Rights Watch, who have in part pioneered the CSKR, published a report on the issue entitled ‘Losing Humanity’, subscribing to the ICBL narrative and frame killer robots as a humanitarian problem rather than simply about arms control. However, it is difficult to represent killer robots as a threat to civilians when they

have yet to kill anyone, civilian or soldier. Thus far the campaign's efforts to establish killer robots as a potential threat to humanity itself have proven unsuccessful.

Despite how divergent the CSKR is from previous transnational weapon ban campaigns, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni is keen to stress connecting factors, personal and organisational. Namely, that the same network individuals and organisations have often worked on the same campaigns. She describes "issue-professionals" as individuals with highly developed skills that are not linked to specific organisations but can connect groups and resources across civil society. Their expertise and working relationships take time to establish and thus they are keen to continue working with one another on their specialist issues. There are broader organisational incentives for collaborating on issues, because coalitions bring broader access to information and increased legitimacy.

The enthusiasm for civil society actors to continue working together and define the issue of killer robots may have resulted in a mistimed campaign. The CSKR has managed to gain support from significant public figures, but has yet to make meaningful progress. States continue to postpone substantive conversations on the issue. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni is not hugely optimistic on the likelihood of success in this instance, because the problems with timing are exacerbated by the fact that it is jostling for attention in an already-crowded field dominated by campaigns for nuclear disarmament. She contends that for the CSKR to possibly achieve its goal there must be a focus on the organisations themselves, rather than simply what characteristics or structures have historically brought campaign victory.