

Case Study Activist Movement in a Free Country

The Campaign to Ban Landmines

Vision and Motivation

Landmines are one of the deadliest legacies of war. After the cessation of fighting, landmines continue to lie active in the ground for up to 50 years, posing a continual threat to civilians. Landmines are at least ten times more likely to kill or injure civilians after a war than they are to kill combatants during a war.¹ Someone is killed or maimed by a landmine every 20 minutes, and children, who are more likely to pick up strange objects and less likely to read warning signs, are among the worst affected.² The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) has fought to put an end to this problem.



Goals and Objectives

The ICBL was founded in 1992 to stop the production, sale, and stockpiling of antipersonnel landmines and to safely dispose of landmines from past conflicts.³ They believed that this could be accomplished through an international ban on antipersonnel landmines. To achieve this aim, the ICBL gathered support from other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and put pressure on governments to give their support for such a ban. One of their first efforts was to organize a series of meetings of European NGOs in order to raise awareness and coordinate campaigns

against the use of landmines. Before the end of 1992, the European Parliament passed a resolution imposing a five-year moratorium on the trade of antipersonnel landmines.⁴ Through ICBL's work on rallying support from NGOs and lobbying governments to support a ban on landmines, the Mine Ban Treaty was signed by 122 countries in 1997 – just six years after the campaign had begun.⁵

The ICBL's work did not end with the signing of the Mine Ban Treaty. It has continued to raise awareness about the dangers of land mines and work tirelessly to persuade more countries to join the treaty. The number of signatories now stands at 156, leaving 39 countries not party to the treaty, including important mine-producing countries such as the United States, China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Iran.⁶ It has continued to monitor landmine activity in countries that have ratified the treaty in order to ensure that they are fulfilling their obligations; the ICBL's activities include clearing mines that have already been planted and providing humanitarian assistance to victims of landmines.⁷ The ICBL is now also part of the Cluster Munition Coalition, a group seeking to impose a worldwide ban on cluster munitions – an explosive dangerous to both civilians and soldiers in conflict zones – and address their humanitarian impact.⁸

Leadership

Despite the ICBL's lofty ambitions and overarching success, Jody Williams, who founded the ICBL, recalls that its beginnings were humble. "When we began, we were just three people sitting in a room. It was Utopia. None of us thought we would ever ban landmines. I never thought it would happen in just six years," she told the *Boston Globe*.⁹ Williams' leadership, passion and commitment were crucial to the ICBL's success.

Williams was first trained as a teacher of English as a Second Language. While she was working for a temporary employment agency in Washington DC in 1981, a leaflet was handed to her about human rights violations in El Salvador, sparking her interest in global activism.¹⁰ Williams began working on human rights campaigns in Central America, seeking to improve the quality of life of the region's inhabitants. After establishing herself within the human rights community, she was approached by Bobby Muller, president of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, who wanted her to lead a global campaign against antipersonnel landmines.¹¹ Then in 1992 she

founded the ICBL, beginning an 18-year adventure that would include winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997.

Williams attributes much of her success as a leader to her ability to delegate responsibilities through a decentralized management structure. She believes that the ICBL's loose structure of independent NGOs, without a central office, allowed individual NGOs to take responsibility for their campaigns, enabling the ICBL to facilitate a global movement with a greater impact on government institutions around the world.¹²

Williams' courage and determination were crucial to the ICBL's success; without her strong character, she would not have been able to endure a grueling schedule that included meetings with innumerable heads of state, some who supported the Mine Ban Treaty and others who were in staunch opposition. Susannah Sirkin, the Deputy Director of the Physicians for Human Rights, said of Williams, "She has never been reluctant to stand in front of a general or world leader, with a conviction that she was right on this issue, and tell them what needs to be done."¹³

Civic Environment

Liberal civic environments can provide activist movements with many advantages, so it is not surprising that the ICBL focused its earliest efforts on developed countries with open societies. For example, one of Williams' early initiatives was to urge the Australian Parliament to support landmine-clearing initiatives in Cambodia.¹⁴ At the same time, a country's freedom does not guarantee successful activism; the United States, a developed and open society, has proven one of the most resistant states to sign the treaty. Rather than joining the Mine Ban Treaty in 1997, the United States called for countries to support the Convention on Conventional Weapons, a treaty with fewer restrictions that argues that the use of landmines is necessary to protect United States military personnel.¹⁵ In November 2009, the Obama administration announced that it would continue to permit the use of landmines. After strong condemnation by NGOs like the ICBL, the Obama administration indicated that it would review its landmine policy, but the ICBL remained only "guardedly optimistic."¹⁶

Message and Audience

In order to achieve an international treaty banning the use of antipersonnel landmines, the ICBL needed to persuade many countries to support an international ban. The ICBL's original members were few, but they knew that only a large and diverse community of activists could achieve the goal of an international ban on landmines. In addition to talking to governments directly, the ICBL reached out to NGOs with overlapping interests, expanding their coalition to encompass over 1,300 organizations in 95 countries.¹⁷ These NGOs in turn raised awareness of the dangers of landmines in their own countries, putting pressure on their governments to support the eradication of landmines.

Outreach Activities

Williams believes that the way the ICBL internal communications strategies had a significant impact on its success. In its early stages, the ICBL was, in Williams' words, "not much more than a handful of disparate NGOs" with diverse interests. Williams thought that members needed to feel actively involved in the landmine campaign for it to gather momentum.¹⁸ Therefore, the ICBL sent regular updates to campaign members, including them in each stage of the campaign's strategy and progress.

They also relied heavily on phone calls, fax communications, and eventually email, rather than traditional mail, to contact potential supporters. They found that mail did not evoke a sense of urgency, whereas the fax machine, at the time a new and exciting technology, was considered harder to ignore.¹⁹ The ICBL also tried to set up as many face-to-face meetings as possible in order to foster close personal relationships with global leaders. Williams credits the personal relationships between the ICBL and governments for the success of the Mine Ban Treaty.²⁰

The journey of the ICBL illustrates that with determination, careful strategy and strategic allies, an activist movement can accomplish great things. "It's breathtaking what you can do when you set a goal and put all your energy into it," Williams told the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1997. "I think you have to believe you're right. You say, 'This is what we're going to achieve, and this is how we're going to do it.' And if people get upset about it, tough."²¹

Learn More

News and Analysis

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² [Ibid.; "Landmines: A Deadly Inheritance." UNICEF. 10 Sept. 2000.](#)

³ ["Jody Williams: 1997 Nobel Peace Prize." Peacejam. 2008.](#)

⁴ [Text from the Congressional Record. C-SPAN. 1993.](#)

⁵ [Williams, Jody. "The International Campaign to Ban Landmines – A Model for Disarmament Initiatives?" NobelPrize.org. 3 Sept. 1999.](#)

⁶ ["Home page." International Campaign to Ban Landmines. May 2009.](#)

⁷ ["Laying Landmines to Rest?" Integrated Regional Information Networks. 23 Jan. 2010.](#)

⁸ ["Home page." International Campaign to Ban Landmines. May 2009.](#)

⁹ ["It Started with Just Three People Sitting in a Room." GlobalPact. 27 Feb. 2008.](#)

¹⁰ ["Jody Williams: 1997 Nobel Peace Prize." Peacejam. 2008.](#)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² [Williams, Jody. "The International Campaign to Ban Landmines – A Model for Disarmament Initiatives?" NobelPrize.org. 3 Sept. 1999.](#)

¹³ [Goldberg, Carey. "Peace Prize Goes to Land-Mine Opponents." The New York Times. 11 Oct. 1997.](#)

¹⁴ ["Chronology." International Campaign to Ban Landmines. May 2004.](#)

¹⁵ ["Laying Landmines to Rest?" Integrated Regional Information Networks. 23 Jan. 2010.; "Ninth Meeting of State Parties Eyes Mine Ban Treaty Deadline." NewsAhead. 24 Nov. 2008.](#)

¹⁶ ["US Reacts to Civil Society Outcry on Landmine Treaty Policy." International Campaign to Ban Landmines. 2 Dec. 2009.](#)

¹⁷ ["Jody Williams, Nobel Laureate for Peace \(1997\)." International Campaign to Ban Landmines. May 2009.](#)

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¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ [Baldauf, Scott. "Nobel Laureate's Long Trip from Vermont Farm to Fame." Christian Science Monitor. 14 Oct. 1997.](#)