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Interview with Emma Belcher

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Summary:

In this interview, Emma Belcher describes her journey into the nuclear field, inspired initially by her early exposure to anti-nuclear activism and later drawn to grantmaking through roles at the MacArthur Foundation and Ploughshares Fund. She discusses nuclear weapons as a "necessary evil" but hopes for a future without them, noting that recent conflicts like Ukraine highlight the urgent need for global nuclear awareness to prevent an arms buildup. Belcher reflects on challenges within the field, including reduced funding, limited public engagement, and entrenched norms that hinder collaboration and creativity. She emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, advocating for new perspectives and cross-field partnerships to build a more innovative, impactful approach to nuclear disarmament.This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

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Michal Onderco: Perhaps, that's a good question to start is to ask you how did you become interested in nuclear weapons? And why did you decide to enter the field?

Emma Belcher: Well, I first became aware of nuclear weapons when I was 14 years old, as a student in Australia, the school I went to, well, a former alum of the school was Dr. Helen Caldicott, who was a big anti-nuclear activist in really the ‘80s and ‘90s, and beyond, who was a physician that was concerned about the impact of radiation on the human body, I think, particularly for children. Anyhow, she had gone to the school and she was coming back to the school to give a talk about nuclear weapons. And our social studies teacher thought she should probably teach us about nuclear weapons before we heard that talk. And so I do remember sitting in the classroom, learning for the first time about nuclear weapons, and the kind of macabre logic of Mutually Assured Destruction, which seemed mortifying, about how many times we can, you know, ruin civilization, blow up the world. Yet the kind of logic, that seemed to, kind of make sense in a really [unclear] way. So I was both, kind of, mortified and fascinated at the same time. And so that was really my first memory of thinking about nuclear weapons. And then, you know, throughout high school, the French were testing in Muroroa Atoll in the Pacific. And I remember that was sort of more of an awareness about the impact of nuclear testing. And so, you know, really, from my teens, I was focused on this. And then, just through high school and university, I studied issues to do with particularly Cold War history, and the Soviet Union. And so that was really the frame I sort of brought to this issue. And then, you know, through my work, and studies have sort of been focused on nuclear weapons for quite a while now.

Michal Onderco: Yes. So you had you had a career at the MacArthur Foundation, and now at Ploughshares. Why did you decide to enter the field on the side of being the grant maker? What is it that particularly interests you about this job?

Emma Belcher: Yeah, that's such a good question. Because I really fell into it without knowing what I was getting into. And at the time, when I became aware of the job, I was doing a postdoctoral fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations. So I was looking at trying to turn my dissertation into a book manuscript, I was applying for academic jobs. And I'd never thought of a career in philanthropy. And when the director of the fellowship program, I'd been part of at Harvard, said, “Hey Emma, MacArthur's looking for a program officer.” I thought, oh, that sounds a bit boring. Why do I need a PhD to, you know, be a program officer? How hard can it be to give away money? And then I did my homework. And I spoke to a few people about philanthropy, about what was involved in being a program officer. And I realized that a lot of the skills I studied and acquired during my PhD were relevant. You needed to have a good understanding of the literature and the work, you needed to have a good understanding of project and research design methodology, in order to be able to assess what people were planning to do. And you needed to be able to think strategically, and look at, you know, what is the kind of strategy and the direction we want to go for a program? And how do the individual pieces of research come together to create something that's greater than the sum of its parts? So I became kind of interested in that work. And then I went through the interview process, and then I really wanted the job. So I was really thrilled when I got it. But I did know that that would mean that I would be making that conscious decision not to pursue the academic path. Because, you know, it would be harder to get back into, if not impossible, after, kind of, deviating from the academic route. So, you know, I thought long and hard about that, but really thought that this kind of area and this kind of work was probably something that interested me more, where I could feel that I was maybe closer to the side of impact and working with people in different ways.

Michal Onderco: I want to go deeper into your work at MacArthur in a little while. But before we go there, I ask every interviewee two questions. And I'm going to ask you as well. The first one is: how do you view the role of nuclear weapons in the world today?

Emma Belcher: I think we're at a real inflection point right now, where we've seen nuclear weapons be kind of lurking in the background. People haven't thought about them a whole lot, public attention has gone away. But they've always really been there. As weapons that are sort of more, I suppose, deterrence-based or defensive in nature. And what we're seeing now with Putin and his invasion of Ukraine, his attempt to really sort of forefront nuclear weapons, to support his coercive moves. And the threat to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine has really sort of prevented the US and NATO from taking the kind of action it might have otherwise liked to. (Aware) that intervening in a big way, could result in the sort of militaries of two large nuclear powers in engaging in a way that could be quite dangerous and could lead to escalation. So you know, I think, really, we're seeing a little bit of a, you know, we're in a overt shift with implications for where we go now. And sort of my concern is how this war ends will have implications for how people see nuclear weapons and view them and, you know, do countries take the lesson that nuclear weapons are powerful tools, If you're a would-be expansionist dictator, with designs on additional territory? Or are nuclear weapons now seen by other states who don't have them as necessary to prevent invasion by other countries? So I think we're at a point now, where we're seeing there's a real kind of urgency and danger in making sure that the way we are talking about nuclear weapons, the way we're thinking about them, isn't going to lead to some knee jerk reaction and massive proliferation and build-up of arms to levels that we haven't seen since the end of the Cold War. So, you know, for me, if I'm truly honest, I would love to find a way where we can guarantee peace and security, without nuclear weapons, without having to threaten the mass annihilation of millions and billions of people around the globe. There's a lot of work to do to see if we can get to that point. So I'm not naive about that. That's where I would love us to go. And I think in the meantime, it's sort of incumbent upon us to think about how do we reduce the likelihood of something disastrous happening? How do we try to work within the, kind of, system and setup we have, while not making it more difficult to achieve that long-term goal of eventual disarmament? So you know, I view them as evils at the moment that we should try to get rid of, but recognize that we can't just immediately overnight, go to zero nuclear weapons. And there's a lot of work to do between now and then.

Michal Onderco: And if you look at the period since the end of the Cold War, which is a sort of long period of 30 years, what do you see as the biggest failure in the field? What do you see as the thing… sometimes people talk about moments when things could have really gone a different way, and they didn't?

Emma Belcher: I think there are a few different factors here, right? So one thing I think, is at the end of the Cold War, people thought, "Oh, the problem with nuclear weapons have gone away, we've solved it, it's fine," and moved on to address other things. And you know, a lot of other issues became important to people. And I think people just breathed a sigh of relief that we didn't have to worry about that anymore. We took our eye off the ball, because we know, you know, for someone like Vladimir Putin, he never forgot about what happened at the end of the Cold War, and harbored deep resentment about how he perceived the Soviet Union was treated, with what the Soviet Union relinquished and its relationship with the West. And we've seen over time, him sort of be laser-focused on really trying to regain that sort of prestige for Russia. And we have seen over time, the Russian posture on nuclear weapons evolve, become more threatening and concerning. And I think we haven't

adequately and we didn't adequately take those warning signs as seriously as we might have. Now there are several factors here. And when you ask about the nuclear field I think the field of people working on this issue really shrunk since the end of the Cold War. And that was largely the effect that a lot of people kind of moved on to what the next interesting thing was to solve. And the funding disappeared as well, right? And so you've got a situation where, for those people who've been left in the field or have chosen to stay, the funding is pretty abysmal. And so, you know, kind of criticizing the field of people working in this area is tough, because they really have been trying to do a lot for a while with very little. And I would say, though, I think the field has been quite small and siloed and insular. And it's failed to really be open to some more innovative ways of thinking that potentially show what are several possible pathways. What are several possible kinds of futures, we might be in, try to anticipate some of those and have a longer term view? I think, for various reasons, we have focused on the immediate, what's right in front of our noses. And so we've had challenges over the last few decades, you know, where we've had to really focus like the Iran nuclear deal, and what's going on with Iran's program? How do we try to prevent it from getting a nuclear weapon? You know, we needed a new START treaty, to be negotiated and passed so that we would have those guardrails in place between the US and Russia on arms control. And then obviously, we've got, you know, North Korea, you know, raises its head every once in a while with more testing and sort of bellicose words. And so there have been a lot of different crises and points. But I think as a field, we've just focused on those. And we've tried to solve those problems, without really a longer view about how do we make sure some of these agreements and things we're doing a durable? And what kind of a world do we want to be in, in 20, 30, 40 years? And how can we both be working on the urgent and laying the seeds for longer term? And so now I think we see that the cycles repeat themselves, and we have some gains, then they're eroded, then there's a crisis. And maybe that forces us to come together and have some gains. But if we're not trying to serve the bigger picture problem, we're just going to keep repeating those cycles, and we'll only have incremental gains, rather than the kind of transformation we need. So, you know, I think there are some issues there that are really thorny. One other thing I would add is that I think, as a field, you know, of funders and practitioners, we've focused largely on the expert policy advice going to decision-makers. And we've neglected the importance of really raising awareness, building a movement of people who are educated about nuclear weapons and can demand the kind of change of their policymakers that they want to see. Because without both of those working in tandem, policymakers have little incentive to act. So I do think that's been a drastically underfunded and overlooked area. And it's informing the way a number of us are thinking about what we need to do going forward.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned already, that one of the failures was to lose sight of the goal, of the bigger picture. Do you think that there is someone to blame for that? Is there someone to whom you can ascribe blame for that?

Emma Belcher: I don't think there's one person, I think it's like…

Michal Onderco: …or a group of people or a type of actor. I've heard similar arguments before. And some people say it was a deliberate ploy by the governments to sort of decrease the pressure on nuclear disarmament to keep the researchers busy with other things. I have talked to other people who told me: this is because the researchers have been chasing the money rather than being interested in the big idea. Do you think that there is someone who can be blamed for this?

Emma Belcher: I don't know about the government. That sounds quite a conspiracy. But I do think that there are maybe people in governments who prefer the status quo, who really believe in pouring more money into nuclear weapons, we see we've got a fairly, very strong military-industrial complex that benefits from production of weapons. They're very influential with members of Congress and all the rest. So there's that aspect. There aren't many incentives within government, I think, to challenge the status quo, and think differently. I think we see it in, kind of, the stranglehold that the Pentagon has in terms of thinking about nuclear policy. And we've seen recent examples where people who try to challenge the status quo very quickly get sidelined. And it's very difficult to make change. And so I think there is a way in which people who control nuclear policy, exclude others from the conversation, and it's very abstract, they talk in technical terms, which for a lot of people is inaccessible. I do think that's a little bit by design, that like, you just don't worry about us, you leave us here. But I would also say, I think, probably, you said people have seen the researchers are just chasing the dollars, and focusing on the, sort of, smaller projects that are immediate. I would probably say, that's a little unfair, not completely unfair. But I do think that philanthropy has had a role here. I do think that the trends in philanthropy that have grown and, you know, obviously evolve, but looking for that really short-term demonstration of impact that is measurable, sometimes means that the type of projects that get funded, are the projects for which you can ask a question and have fairly observable results. They're not always the big picture types of pressing important questions that actually need to be addressed. And I kind of felt sort of, I think, the philanthropic thought and then implementation of that, that just tries to get those wins because it ignores the longer term, more systemic kind of problems, that we need to address for truly transformational change. And I think the focus on project grants that have those very specific deliverables, opposed to more general operating support for organizations that allow them to grow, be healthy, be strong, allow them and their researchers to undertake the type of work they think is most important. Our inability collectively, philanthropically to allow for that, I think that's a failure. I do. So I don't necessarily fault the people who then chase those funds. Because if you're a small organization, you need to try to survive if the only funds are those short-term projects, you're going to go for them. But I would say that we can't completely absolve, sort of, researchers in that way. Because I think it is incumbent upon people to make sure they're not just taking any money from anywhere just to stay alive, right, that they need to think about – and try to find those sorts of sources of support for those longer-term bigger picture questions. So I think it's just a confluence of different factors. And I wouldn't put it down to anyone, but I think there's, you know, there's a certain amount of fault all around.

Michal Onderco: Okay. I want to now move to your time at MacArthur. So when you started working at MacArthur, what was the state of your portfolio? And what were your goals at the time in terms of: what do you want to change?

Emma Belcher: Well, that was 2011. So when I started, I was just a nuclear program officer, so just focused on nuclear – in a broader peace and security program, and also focused on Asia and security in Asia. And some other sort of more general peace and security issues. So at the time, you know, we had very much a sort of a risk reduction framework. So it wasn't about eliminating nuclear weapons, per se. But it was more on the risk reduction kind of frame. And, you know, I think it's a really interesting role, being a program officer. You don't get taught how to do it. You don't go to school and study how to be a program officer. And you can be like a subject matter expert, and then come and be told, "All right now you have oversight over this portfolio of grants," and you learn on the job, how to be a program

officer. You know, there was a book I read and other people at MacArthur were so helpful, like, really, it was having those colleagues and that support. That was great. And so, at the beginning, a lot of it is just getting to know, who are the players in the field? Who's been funded? Why? And reading up on that. And I do remember reasonably early on, you know, you also meet other funding partners. So I met my colleagues at Carnegie Corporation of New York, I met Hewlett Foundation, Skoll Global Threats and Ploughshares colleagues. And we actually got together, I can't remember which year it was, it was maybe 2013, ’14. On the sidelines of the Peace and Security Funders group meeting. And I think some of us had lamented that what we were seeing in the field was the same kinds of reports, the same studies, then there's a report, then there are some briefings and then it gets put on a shelf. And we were just thinking, This doesn't seem like the sort of vibrant creative work that has as much impact as we might like. So we were talking about what could we do, collectively, that might sort of shake things up a bit, inject some new thinking and attract some new people, bring ideas from other areas. So we decided to kind of invest, each of our foundations, to invest some funds in an innovation organization, and that became N Square. So the idea was that each of us could put some funds into this innovative process. And they could be sort of, you know, risky funds in a way. But if we're all putting some risky funds together and things go wrong, then it's not any one of our faults. It's all of ours collectively. So that kind of allowed us to move forward contributing some money explicitly for more of a venture-style kind of operation. That kind of shielded any one of us from, you know, potential risk. So we did that. And I have to say, that, I think was the single most impactful thing that I was involved with at MacArthur, and I think, you know, it's taken a number of years, now we're in 2023, I think we finally got N Square stood up, I think it's eight years old now. But I think it's having a lasting impact on the field. It has brought in people from a variety of backgrounds, it's brought in people with marketing backgrounds, it's brought in people with international law backgrounds, neuroscientists, communicators, and a range of people who are now dedicating their own time and resources to working on this issue, who would otherwise not have been in this field. And it's introducing new ways of thinking that other fields have used for a while, like systems thinking and forecasting, futures work. So when I look at impact, I think that's been one of the most impactful things I've been involved with. And it was a real cooperation. And I really enjoyed it. It was new thinking creative thinking, and working with our funding partners. I, you know, I found that we had a lot in common, and it was fun and interesting.

Michal Onderco: So I interviewed funding officers at almost all the foundations that you mentioned, and without generalizing too much, I think they fall into two schools. And the first school is someone who comes in the job of funding officer with a very strong idea of what they want to fund and what kind of project they want to fund, what kind of new voices they want to bring in, what kind of ideas they want to promote, what kind of ideas they may want to kill in the field. So advocate against, and then they sort of shape the portfolio, bring in new funders cut old funders, they sort of shape the portfolio according to the vision that they have. There are other program officers who think my main advantage is that I have a big chequebook. And so I'll only look at things that are interesting. And I am going to fund whatever interesting and feasible comes over without any sort of bigger field because who am I to judge? What kind of funding officer were you?

Emma Belcher: I would have to say maybe I wouldn't put myself really squarely in one or the other camp, I think what I wanted to do when I first came to the position was to come from a position of some humility, which is, I need to learn how this works first. And I have to say that there were

impressions that I had from the outside that changed when I was in that position and got to know more about the work and the people. And I think we were always mindful of making sure that if we were not going to continue funding somebody, that they had a certain amount of runway, and that they would know, so that you weren't just in a position of suddenly cutting people off. Given that that could be quite damaging to organizations. So I think, you know, you didn't want to be chopping and changing and then just sort of having a more scattershot, or that's interesting here, or that shiny object over here. And you wanted to make sure that you could be open to new ideas. Now, what was challenging, I think, at times is when you come up with a strategy, and that it's a fairly narrow strategy. And then you don't have that leeway, necessarily, to try and fund the project ideas that you think actually are quite interesting that you might not have thought of. And I think it's always important to have that kind of, maybe bucket of money and permission to be able to experiment a little bit. I think that's really, really important. And so I think, at times, I did feel a little kind of hamstrung with a strategy that was maybe quite narrow, but was narrow, because that was what the institution required. So I think that's a real challenge. Now, as I look at my role at Ploughshares, we're really trying to change things up in terms of how the field operates. And trying to be both helping to shape who is involved, bringing more diversity, because we know that with more diversity, you get better discourse, you get better ideas and better solutions that are more likely to last, we know that from other fields, we know that from the private sector, public sector. And so we're kind of trying to apply that hypothesis to the nuclear field. So there's a certain amount of figuring out: alright, we know the types of people we think we want involved, we know the types of methods, we think we'd like people to be investing in more like Systems Thinking, futures work, we know how we would like people to engage with each other in a much more respectful, courteous, friendly way I can get to this in a minute, there are some issues of toxicity in the field, I'm not going to lie, that's right there. And so there's a balance between trying to be a little bit kind of pushing things in that direction, while still not telling people exactly what to do. So I think the distinction that I'm trying to make here is, there is power that Ploughshares has, and that's undeniable, any funder has some power. It’s how you use that power that's important. I don't think it's right for us to use the power to say, “Here is the policy idea we think is best and everyone you've got to get behind this idea or this particular approach.” That breeds resentment. And it's not particularly effective. But where I think we do need to use our power is in helping to select who gets a seat at the table, how the conversations happen, what kinds of frameworks people might be using, to think about their work, and how we want to incentivize collaboration and cooperation. So we don't have 10 organizations all working on the same thing, all with limited funds, but competing with each other, maybe duplicating work, and we got to change it up. So that's where I want to be using our power on that: how do we work together and have more impact, rather than this idea is good, that idea is bad. And you've got to fall in line.

Michal Onderco: I want to get to the toxicity in the field because that was an interesting fault. But before we get there, I have two questions. The first one is if you look at the role of MacArthur in the field, what did you think made MacArthur different from let's say, Carnegie or Skoll or others like the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, or other funders who were in the field? What was the special thing about MacArthur?

Emma Belcher: So I think you know, you look at the funding environment, there's an ecosystem. So I would say that MacArthur was sort of akin to the Carnegie Cooperation, a little bit, the most maybe, right, similar types of foundations and approaches. And our approach I think, was more of the

academic kind of approach, you know, funding academics, but who did policy relevant research and having them then apply that wisdom. Now Ploughshares is much more of funding, sort of, maybe the activist style of approach that draws on that sort of academic research, and can take it and try to sort of make cases for why particular policies or approaches should be right. And so I think, in that kind of ecosystem, everybody had a role. But I would say MacArthur was sort of probably most like Carnegie Corporation. But I do think we were a little more able to invest in some other types of projects as well. So it wasn't just academic studies. I think, at least as our program kind of evolved, I think maybe we had a little bit more flexibility to do different kinds of… I think we started funding a few kind of art-related projects, and other things that I think might have been different from maybe Carnegie was more kind of traditional in that sense.

Michal Onderco: So for example, you already mentioned that Ploughshares is also more active in funding different activists and for example, you are funding ICAN as one of the grantees. So ICAN would not be a grantee in MacArthur.

Emma Belcher: No, no, and I don't believe we did.

Michal Onderco: Is it because ICAN would not fit in the strategy? Or is it because your view of ICAN has changed over time?

Emma Belcher: Oh, it's the strategy. Yes. It was the strategy and the sort of approach and, you know, probably we didn't typically fund the activist kind of organizations like that, because organizations like Ploughshares did. So I think sometimes there was a recognition and I know we'd had conversations about: alright, here are some interesting ideas. What funder could take that on, you know, and then there'd be times where people might come to us and we'd be like, this actually might be good for Ploughshares. And so we would actually say to Ploughshares, "Hey, we heard this idea. Have you heard it? Is it of interest," right? Or Ploughshares, they might have someone come to us and say, "Oh, that sounds more like a MacArthur project." So there was a lot of like kind of referring around, you know, based on strategies, and I do remember that there were times at MacArthur where I think that is a really interesting idea. It's not going to fit within our strategy, but someone should fund it. So that's what it was. So it hasn't been a view of ICAN that's changed, per se. And, you know, when I came to Ploughshares, we were already funding ICAN. What I would say, though, is when ICAN first started its work on the TPNW, there was so much skepticism in DC, "Oh, this isn't gonna work. It's never going to happen." You know, it's also potentially undermining the NPT. And to be honest, I think I kind of bought into that. And, but then, like, you kind of see what it managed to achieve over time. And it's interesting. And the fact that it's now you know, a treaty that's entered into force is remarkable, like, people were writing [unclear], that won't happen. And I almost feel like the kind of visceral response to it is an indicator that it's pushing on something that is getting to people. And I think I might not have always necessarily agreed with the approach because I think it was very much like, we're going to go this way with the countries that want to join. We're not really going to reach out too much to the weapons states to bring them along. There might have been a lost opportunity there. I don't know. But the fact that it exists, I think is important because I think it's pushing discussion. It's pushing dialogue, and we'll see where it goes.

Michal Onderco: Every now and then I asked interviewees whether they think that TPNW is a success, because it's an interesting thing to sort of see how people judge success. And some of my interviewees say it's success because it exists. As you said at the moment, others say It's not a success, because

there has not been a single nuclear weapon dismantled because of the treaty. And where do you fall in that discussion? Is TPNW a success?

Emma Belcher: I think it is. I mean, would it be more successful if a nuclear weapons state joined and weapons were dismantled because of it? Yes. I think the fact that it exists, and that it is also, centering the people impacted by nuclear weapons is a huge addition to the type of discourse we need. When we think about what really are the impacts of nuclear weapons? You know, let's break it down from something that's really abstract. And let's think about what's at stake here. And so I do think the fact that it exists, the fact that we can have discourse about it, and that there's, you know, potentially some kind of indication of what nuclear-powered countries are doing and what they're not doing isn't supported by a lot of countries in the world. And I think that's really important to sort of have on the record. And, you know, we see how these things go over time. And, you know, I think we've looked at other treaties in the past as well, you know, the landmines treaty and others that were kind of brought about outside of the traditional negotiating mechanisms, because the negotiating mechanisms, the traditional ones were kind of stuck and broken. And you look at what's happened over time with landmines. Yes, the US hasn't signed up, but it's also acting as though it is a signatory to the treaty. And their norms have developed now, can that happen with nuclear weapons? I don't know. But I do think actually, it's a success, because it exists. And I think they're working on figuring out: alright, how do we implement this? How do we make sure that it's robust? And how do we make sure that the critics can't just say, well, that's a worthless piece of paper? So look, I'm going to say it's a success. And could it be more successful? Yes. So there's, there's this road to go.

Michal Onderco: I don't think I could ever have an interview with a former MacArthur funding officer if I didn't ask her to follow the question about the MacArthur's exit from the field. And so I'm going to ask why. But I also want to ask about the process that led to the decision to stop funding work in the nuclear field, and what were the considerations that you had at the time?

Emma Belcher: What's important to know is that the decision was made after I left. So, you know, there's only a certain amount that I can weigh in on here. I was actually…

Michal Onderco: When you left MacArthur, there was no indication that MacArthur would be leaving the field?

Emma Belcher: We were going through a process of review at that point. So all of the programs went through this process. So the programs were sort of big bets, right? And so the idea was, you know, I'll just sort of step back for a minute, you know, there was a point, I think it was, like 2014, or so where the board recognized that MacArthur was in a lot of areas, it was over 20. And thought we need to reduce those, invest more money in fewer areas for greater impact. And so we were all kind of challenged, really to say, what is one issue in your overall area, that if you could solve it, would make a big difference. And so, for us, you know, at the time, we looked at, you know, Obama was in power, he had a vision for, you know, eliminating nuclear weapons eventually. And he had different kinds of pieces of the puzzle he was he was looking at, and one of them was weapons usable material, and security. And so we kind of looked at that, and we thought, “Alright, well, there's good work that our grantees are already doing on this,” particularly the folks at Princeton and others. And so, you know, if we could make real progress on ending the production and eliminating that material, you know, that could potentially lead to fewer nuclear weapons, reduce risk, potentially elimination. So that was kind of the big bet. We adopted and worked on and then, you know, alongside that the foundation was

wanting to set up a monitoring and evaluation process, so that we could sort of after a certain number of years, we could kind of review and say, you know, are we on track and, you know, how are we doing? Do we need to make adjustments and all the rest? So at the time I left, we were in the process of doing that evaluation. And that was a really, really lengthy, really involved process. I can't tell you how many hours I spent on that, because we had evaluators come in from the outside, who had maybe a little nuclear experience, but not a lot. So a lot of it was about educating and educating about the strategy. And so I do think what had happened in that time is we started in a particular political moment. Then President Trump came in and pretty much started talking about, you know, South Korea and Japan maybe getting nuclear weapons. He was asking, why can't we use nuclear weapons? He was talking about fire and fury with Kim Jong-Un. And like it was just clear that, you know, if we just focusing on this weapons-usable material thing, we're missing the bigger picture about the challenges to the regime that is falling apart, and the crumbling of the regime around us. So we went to the board, and we got sort of permission to have a bit of a strategic detour, which was trying to protect and strengthen the nuclear regime, in addition to still having the end goal of, you know, reducing or eliminating the weapons-usable material, anyhow, that, you know, this is a bit of a long story, I suppose. But to say that, the evaluation was then looking to see whether we could still have an impact with reducing and eliminating the material. And that was kind of challenging because things had changed so much. And so, but that was still the lens through which the evaluation was done. So now, my understanding is that - I left, you know, during the process of evaluation - and my understanding is that the evaluators found that there was really, you know, little chance of achieving the goals of reducing and eliminating the material in a more near term timeframe. And so, therefore, you know, the strategy that we'd developed wasn't viable. And then the board decided, well, strategy is not viable so we'll finish the program. But I don't know particularly more, I would say, I think it's unfortunate that there wasn't… I understand that, okay, that strategy is no longer viable we are in different times, things are wildly different. But in my mind, the issue is so important. That if your strategy is not viable, you change the strategy, maybe change the goals, that was something they chose not to do. And I'm not privy to any of those discussions about why that happened or not. You'd have to ask one of them.

Michal Onderco: I mean, we have only 10 minutes left, I want to I want to come back to this point about the toxicity in the field. Because you're the first person who mentioned this. So, how do you think the field should change? Or why do you think that the field should change?

Emma Belcher: Well I would recommend a report about this called "Greater Than".[1] And I can actually send you a link to it if you'd like. It was done by N Square, the innovation fund that I was telling you about. And one of the staff members there conducted, I think, over 70 interviews with people in the field, ranging from early career right through to senior people, and was asking questions about, you know, what it's like to work in this field. And, you know, I had a sense that, because of the subject matter, it's traditionally all older, white men who've had the positions who've studied this, and who had kind of been the leaders in this space for a long time. And it is hard, I think, for younger people with different backgrounds and experiences and new ideas, to feel as though they can voice their ideas, and that they're not going to be immediately criticized or sort of shut down. And that's because that's happened in the past. And I, you know, was aware of it, and, but when the report came out, I was stunned and really saddened by it. And I remember a group of funders N Square funders, when we

[1] Editorial note: see the report here: https://nsquare.org/2019/12/20/greater-than/

got a briefing, there was just stunned silence. The stories are about how, you know, particularly younger women are treated. And people of color and the kind of toxic environment that people don't necessarily want to work in, and we're losing people.

Michal Onderco: Sorry, does that refer particularly to the US or for the broader global field?

Emma Belcher: That's a really interesting question, because it's important to recognize this [report] was largely DC based. I think it was completely DC based in terms of the interviews. When we have done just other surveys about the field and gotten feedback, it does seem to predominantly be a DC thing. We don't seem to get as much from people outside of DC or in other parts of the world saying that this is a problem. We do get though, one survey we did, we found that some of the, you know, heads of organizations outside of the US felt as though they weren't taken seriously inside the United States, particularly if they come from more of a disarmament kind of focus. So, you know, this is an issue that is, I think, preventing people in the field from forming those trusting relationships that help when it comes to collaboration, that help when it comes to impact. So actually we're trying to make a big focus on helping to improve the dynamics in the field, invest in people in the field, so that we've got a healthier field. And a lot of that comes down to general operating support, support for younger people in their careers. Supporting more junior people becoming Principal Investigators, having their own projects, because often, the other thing that happens is you give a grant to an organization, the most senior person is the principal investigator and the most junior person does all the work, that work is not recognized, and more junior people can't then take those next steps of becoming Principal Investigator anyhow, there's a lot there. And it's kind of the thing that some people don't want to talk about. But we can't avoid it. Otherwise, we will, we won't be able to flourish and function and be an impactful field.

Michal Onderco: Given that we have only eight minutes left, I want to move on to the two last questions that I want to ask. The first one is, where do you see the field going in the next 15 to 50 years? And some people find this really difficult question. So I can also change it slightly to ask whether you think that there will be nuclear weapons around in 50 years?

Emma Belcher: See, I find that second question harder.

Michal Onderco: Okay, then go with the first one.

Emma Belcher: I'll tell you what, I do think there will be weapons around in 50 years, I hope I'm wrong. I would hope in 50 years, that we're far reduced and we have a plan about how to sort of get rid of them. But on the other one, I think the future for the field, we're at a critical point, right? So we've got really reduced funds because MacArthur left. And we're at this point where there are nuclear crises all around us, and how we move forward, what the lesson is from Putin threats of nuclear use, is critically important. And there are people in the United States calling for more spending on more nuclear weapons that's going to really spark an arms race with Russia and China. So right now, it's critical that we kind of stem the bleeding, as well as put in place, the intellectual framework for what's the future of arms control. What's the future of nuclear weapons? And I would like to think that in 15 years, we've been successful in attracting more funding, that we have a more vibrant, larger field, we have people bringing their external ideas into the field and helping really create a much more dynamic set of actors who are focused on this problem. I think we can do it, and that's what I'm trying to do, right? So

I think we need significantly more people, we need significantly more resources. But if we can pull that off, in 15 years, we'll have a really healthy community and in 50 years, the 50 years is the hard part.

Michal Onderco: I spoke to one of the people who were funding officers of one of the big foundations. And this person told me, If the nuclear field had as much money as the climate change field, we wouldn't have nuclear weapons around anymore. Do you think that the perceived lack of success or lack of impact in this field comes down to the fact that the field is poorly funded?

Emma Belcher: Yes, I think I mean, that's a really bold statement that they made. I would like that to be true. [If we had the billions that climate had compared to our roughly tens of millions, I would hope we would have a better chance for change, but I don't think we can put it down to funding completely]. Because these are really hard problems. These are political problems, I do think we'd have a much greater chance if we were funded at much higher levels. And if we could really invest in civil society and movement building globally. Because I think right now, a lot of effort has been on the US. But is a global problem.

Michal Onderco: One of the criticisms that people often raise, for example, is: ICAN is focused on Western countries, it's active in, especially Western Europe, to a somewhat lesser degree in the US, but like, it's hard to find an ICAN representative in China or Russia or, you know, sort of, and when I speak to ICAN people, they say, "Well, have you ever tried to organize anything in China and Russia," and they'll end up in jail? And so my question is, do you think that it is feasible to actually do more in other parts of the world outside of the Western world?

Emma Belcher: I mean, ICAN have been doing some work in the Global South. I think it's not just sort of Western Europe and the US. Definitely Russia and China are big challenges, you know, and that, I don't think we shouldn't give up and say that, then that that's too hard. I think we need to make sure we keep dialogue open and mechanism for that kind of interaction. Now, that's really hard these days, right? When you've got Putin doing what he's doing, and that isolation of Russia, you know, by the West, I mean, they're not completely isolated. And interaction with people in China, it's very difficult to so, you know, I think we have to just be trying to keep the door open and find those opportunities. And I don't think that just because we're in this position now means that it's not kind of something that we can never try to solve. And I think we've got to be trying to figure out how to solve this problem. Because it's so consequential, the sort of implications of things happening, and, you know, we would be really doing ourselves a disservice if we, if we simply gave up.

Michal Onderco: My very last question to you is, imagine there is a world without nuclear weapons. So a disarmed world, how does such a world look? And especially how is security in such a world provided, in your view?

Emma Belcher: Yes, I mean, that is the key question, right? Because, you know, you can't just get rid of nuclear weapons without some kind of alternative security structure in place. And if I had the answer to that, if I could answer this question, then we might not be here, right? But I think what we do know, is that there is a really interesting project called Horizon 2045 that's trying to look at, you know, what might a world look like in 2045, that is free of nuclear weapons? And I think the process for trying to tackle this problem is: how could we look out into the future and imagine what are multiple possible futures in 2045? And what do they look like? How is security guaranteed? And then is there a way to try to work backwards and figure out what are the steps we need to be taking and things we put in

place? That requires imagination. And that's why it's really important to bring in people who imagine for a living and bring them together with people who understand nuclear weapons, who understand the political systems, who understand the economics and cultural issues, and actually bring people together to try to imagine what does this look like and work towards it?

Michal Onderco: Can I push you on this? People are very different when I asked him this question, but there are two big schools where people sort of fall. And there are, of course, people who are sort of in the middle. But if you think in ideal types, there is one ideal type that says, nuclear weapon world is just like the world today. And just that there are no nuclear weapons, because today, nuclear weapons have very little day-to-day impact on the world. And so the world is going to be just like that. There are others who say, the world needs to fundamentally change. So maybe we need to get rid of the idea of a state completely. And we need to completely get rid of the idea of deterrence, we have to move to a world where deterrence makes no sense. And there are, of course, people in the middle of thing deterrence will be provided by other means there will be sort of, you know, prompt global strikes and cyber-attacks and whatever else, roughly in this in these areas, where would you fall in, in thinking about how the world without nuclear weapons look like?

Emma Belcher: I think I'm, sorry to do this, I'm probably somewhere in the middle. But skewing to the world has to look fundamentally different. In that I don't think we're going to have the same world just without nuclear weapons. I just don't think that's kind of feasible, I think we need new governance structures, to be honest. And this, I think, is an opportune moment to be starting to think, “What do these governance structures look like?” And this really comes down to reckoning with, you know, history, and countries and states and colonialism and power and who gets a seat and a voice at the table. And I think, if we were to look at, say, the United Nations now, I don't think the way it's set up is reflective of the type of sort of global governance structure that might get us toward a place where we don't need nuclear weapons. I think that's kind of in thinking about all the challenges we're facing, how do we work together to solve these collective problems? That's where we need to be focusing on and that might mean that things look quite different. That's where I'd be putting my money. And that's where we're going to see the change.

Michal Onderco: Well, thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate that you found the time for me and answered my questions.

Emma Belcher: I really enjoyed the conversation. So thank you.

Michal Onderco: Thank you. And I learned a lot and I'm sorry for pushing you in a number of questions.

Emma Belcher: Completely fine. I, you know, wouldn't have expected anything less. So happy to do it.

Michal Onderco: Yes, thank you very much.