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The Paris Climate Change Agreement:

The most critical work begins now

Over the last three years, QUNO has engaged in quiet diplomacy at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). When we began this work, the negotiation room at times felt like a lion's den, so tense was the atmosphere. This is because the UNFCCC negotiations are often more about economic competition than about climate change, in a room filled with past and present experiences of exploitation. The negotiations were haunted by the failure of negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009, and crippled by mistrust and an inability to find a 'fair way forward'. Yet the stakes for humanity were increasingly clear. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions due to human activities continue to rise, setting us on course for an unprecedented rate of global mean surface temperature rise of +4C before the end of this century. This rate temperature rise would threaten eco-system collapse and human civilization as we know it.

QUNO began to offer something different, something seen as 'human' in an almost inhuman process. The QUNO off-the-record dinners, of which we have held 11 so far, gained a reputation as a space where negotiators were encouraged to speak personally - about their hopes, their fears and the assurances their delegations needed to move forward. A space to hear 'the other' speak more sincerely, to better understand the reasons for mistrust, in turn to help build understanding. We often met one on one with negotiators, to encourage them in their efforts and listen to their views of progress in the negotiations, and also to suggest alternatives to strategies that we saw as fuelling division. Representatives from some 40 diverse countries attended our dinners; we are told by many of them that our work contributed to a building of trust. Because our work is funded by Quakers, we were seen as unusual, somehow beyond the 'political', and speaking genuinely for humanity.

Coming from these experiences, we can say that the Paris Agreement adopted at the Conference of Parties (COP) 21 last December was much stronger than expected. But the Agreement is also imperfect, and the voice of citizens everywhere is essential if we are ensure the most vulnerable communities now, and all future generations, do not experience catastrophic climate change.

The Paris Agreement is best described as a 'framework for global action'. It can coordinate if not give momentum to a global effort to decrease anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (known as mitigation), while supporting less developed countries with finance, capacity building and technology transfer to help mitigate and adapt. It is a 'universal' climate change agreement, different from past climate change agreements because it is applicable to all countries. On the

evening of acceptance, country after country described the Agreement as ‘balanced’, reflecting the extraordinary and intense efforts of many, including the French hosts and the UNFCCC Secretariat, to see national interests as global interests, in seeking a ‘higher purpose’.

The Agreement also has stronger than expected compliance measures (transparency), including five rather than ten year cycles for Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), with each new NDC required to be more ambitious than the last, and to be submitted to a public registry maintained by the Secretariat. The Agreement requires a ‘global stock take’, and includes a more ambitious long term temperature ‘goal’ of 1.5C - deeply significant since even a 2°C increase in global mean surface temperature would have drastic consequences for many. It is fair to say that, even days before end of the COP, none of the above points were assumed as ‘a given’ for the final draft.

Yet the global stock take is not until 2023, and humanity has less than 10 years to maintain a global mean surface temperature rise of 1.5C (above pre-industrial levels), meaning that we will quickly miss this chance without urgent action now. Language on human rights and indigenous rights, as well as ‘ensuring the integrity of all eco-systems’, was written in the preamble but not in the main text, potentially weakening their status. There is no mention of the specific role of fossil fuels, deforestation and/or intensive agriculture driving higher GHG emission rates.

The NDCs are ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’, where the words ‘nationally’ and ‘contributions’ reflect the lack of internationally set legally binding mitigation and financial support targets. Our governments set what they consider a ‘fair and sufficient’ NDC, rather than being told what is necessary through an enforcement mechanism; current NDC pledges are not strong enough to meet 1.5C let along a 2C target, but could result in average temperature increases over 3C. In the upcoming negotiations, countries must find fair and sufficient ways to implement what has been agreed. Our governments can at any time increase their mitigation and adaptation targets. But without strong calls from their citizens for urgent action, priority will to easily be given to what most drives anthropogenic GHG emissions – fossil fuel dependent economies seeking unlimited material growth on a planet with limited natural resources.

For this reason the role of citizens, both in our personal witness and in our voice for urgent action, is critical if humanity is to avoid catastrophic climate change due to our own behaviour. The challenge is as much a spiritual call as a material one, to live more sustainably and fairly on this earth, and to act not in fear, but with hope and love.

Following the Conference of Parties (COP 21) in Paris in December 2015, many negotiators who had participated in QUNO’s quiet diplomacy dinners credited this three year effort as playing a significant role in promoting an atmosphere of “higher purpose” in what had been notoriously difficult negotiations.

These negotiators have encouraged QUNO to continue our efforts, in support of effective, ambitious and fair implementation of the new Paris Agreement. To maintain this work, we seek financial support from individuals and organisations. To contribute, please visit <http://www.quno.org/donate> or contact our Representative for Climate Change, Lindsey Fielder Cook at lfcook@quno.ch for more information.