



Geneva Reporter

QUNO perspectives on multilateralism and the UN at 75

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(UN Photo/Mark Garten)

UN Secretary General António Guterres

Jonathan Woolley, Director of QUNO Geneva

This year, the United Nations (UN) [marked 75 years](#) since the signing of its Charter. The anniversary fell during the Covid pandemic which has laid bare the fragilities of our interconnected world. Against a background of global mistrust, rising inequalities and an existential crisis about humankind's use of the Earth's resources, it is clear that multilateralism is needed more than ever. At QUNO, we work to support the founding principles of the UN as expressed in the Charter, faithful to the long tradition of Quaker work to help build understanding and cooperation among people and nations.

Multilateralism at the UN has achieved much. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Rio Earth Summit, and the Paris Climate Change Agreement are well-known remarkable moments when nations truly came together beyond national interests. QUNO bears witness, sometimes as a direct participant behind the scenes, to the wide range of other international agreements that underpin the relations between countries, and between people and their governments. One unusual treasure of the UN is as a conversation space where all nations should be equal. Despite the known power imbalances, small and medium size states have influence, not just with equal votes in the General Assembly but often as the trusted champions and patient facilitators that bring other states together.

In what follows, QUNO Representatives and Programme Assistants (PAs) give you their impressions of why the UN at 75 is so important. It has evolved and will continue to do so; we see that Friends will support the UN so long as the evolution serves the common visions we share—peace, justice, equality, stewardship of the Earth.

Laurel Townhead, Representative for Human Rights & Refugees

My belief in the value of the UN, my commitment to human rights and my Quaker faith are entwined. The UN's central purpose of upholding dignity and rights echoes strongly with the Quaker belief of the sacred in all of us. The UN is far from perfect and around the world we see human rights violations and abuses (some of which, tragically, the UN is complicit in). However, the failure to fully uphold dignity and human rights for all lies principally with States and, for me, indicates the continued importance of the UN, not its irrelevance.

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The Global Compact for Migration, for example, was born out of a crisis of compassion and during a period of deepening political divisions. It is the result of a year of consultation and six months of negotiation to listen, learn and help create space for compromise. Against a backdrop of growing walls and hardening anti-migrant rhetoric and national policy, an agreement was reached that lists its first guiding principle as: people centred. It is the product of what one colleague describes as the alchemy of multilateralism and that I would call the spiritual dimension of multilateralism—when States come together by moving beyond pure self-interest and tapping into what is in the common, human interest.

The UN must continue to evolve to address immense challenges facing the world, but those challenges are all better addressed together, and with a focus on those core common purposes at the beginning of the UN Charter: peace, social progress and better standards of life, justice, freedom, human rights.

Najmah Ali, PA for Human Rights & Refugees

Prior to joining QUNO, I had been critical of the UN and the multilateral system because of its uneven global power dynamics, its inaccessibility to affected peoples, and questions around its general effectiveness. Despite the issues that the UN grapples with that may limit its full potential, I now recognize some of the many entry points that can influence change and promote human rights. I feel particularly fortunate to work at QUNO on a programme that emphasizes our privileged access to this system and our responsibility to open up space for those affected by human rights issues. One way we have been pursuing this is through monthly updates to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals, highlighting opportunities and resources within the UN human rights system.

I have also particularly enjoyed collaborating with other NGOs to ensure civil society voices are amplified. This was the case during our recent address to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in which QUNO and four other NGOs collectively called for the Committee to resume State reviews which had been ceased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In its closing session, the Committee agreed to virtual State reviews in 2021, which is important for strengthening human rights standards related to racial discrimination. Ultimately, while the UN multilateral system may be flawed, it has been interesting seeing QUNO work and think creatively about how to use this system to promote and protect the human rights of all.

Florence Foster, Representative for Peace & Disarmament

The UN gives voice to nations and to people who may not otherwise have a say in international affairs or the platforms nationally to address their concerns. It is a space and place to advance “collective measures” for a better future, and every single day, thanks to those agreements, more people live in a world free from fear, want and indignity.

The world we live in today however, is faced with increasingly globalized challenges—such as climate change, cyber security or the threat of nuclear accidents and war. For each of these, the multilateral system has been a step behind. Some explanation can be found in how the UN was established, separating mandates and siloing away parts of a system that each have a contribution to sustaining peace within their purview, but don’t collaborate as much as they could towards that goal.

The fragmentation between them is reproduced throughout the UN. For instance, at the centre of the UN’s charter is the wish to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”—in other words, to prevent violent conflict. But peacebuilding has often been misunderstood as a set of exclusively post-conflict activities. Prevention of destructive conflict as a result has struggled to find a home within the UN system.

These are all challenges that can be overcome and “we the people” are at the heart of that. That is precisely what gives me hope—the people that work tirelessly to try to make the system work better for all—not just the few. I find hope in the energy our engagement and support can provide to individuals and coalitions of the willing—to push the needle just that little bit further towards more integrated, preventive approaches.

Alice Munnely, PA for Peace & Disarmament

A landmark achievement vis-à-vis the UN’s establishment was that it, to a large extent, stopped countries considering one another as enemies. However, the state of the world tells us that there is more still to do for us to truly start thinking of one another as partners. It is my hope that the challenges we face—whether they be Covid or climate change—have made the imperative for collaborative action clearer, and that the urgency it demands will be considered invigorating rather than overwhelming.

My first few months at QUNO have reshaped my view of multilateralism by grounding it in an appreciation for the people who drive multilateralism as a powerful force for good.

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Multilateralism is operationalized by individuals who separately, and collaboratively, take important risks—have the difficult conversations, work the long hours, navigate the unpopularity—in hopeful determination that their contribution will over time be matched and expanded upon by others with similarly good intentions. The last few months have also informed my view on the future of multilateralism. The need for a whole-of-society and inclusive approach to peacebuilding was the foundation for QUNO's Rethinking Security event during Geneva Peace Week, which placed humans and the planet, rather than states and weapons, at the centre of security narratives. There was a distinct shift from threat-laden conceptions to those of cooperation.

Lindsey Fielder Cook, Representative for Climate Change

Over the last decades, and intensively in recent years, the UN has been the gathering point in facing, and transforming, our destructive environmental impact on the Earth. The pace of global effort remains insufficient, yet global efforts are essential as environmental crises have no borders. One country alone cannot heal the challenges we face, be it dangerous rates of rise in global mean surface temperature, ocean acidification, chemical pollution, land degradation or species extinction.

The United Nations is as strong as nations allow it to be; geo-political swings have historically influenced UN effectiveness and vision. We have seen the UN thrive when the most powerful countries support multilateral approaches and, recently, we have watched it survive despite difficult, even aggressive attitudes toward multilateralism. Finance is often a challenge but of late, the mix of humanitarian and pandemic crises alongside withdrawals of funding, has been particularly brutal. Within its own workings, the UN continues to experience an often overly bureaucratic system, frustrating courageous voices within.

I consider it a privilege to work in this space—where the human family can “vision” and do, and where countries can challenge their status quo and seek to build a more fair and healthy society. The UN is a space of compromise too, and efforts are often too slow. Yet through the UN we are creating global frameworks for action. The Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are two examples of recent, and historic, frameworks for vision and action. These frameworks include efforts for more fair and just approaches, recognizing that some countries are more responsible than others for environmental breakdown. We are also witnessing how national efforts on climate change have been increased because of international pressure driven by the Paris Agreement and SDGs.

Beatrice Liese, PA for Climate Change & Sustainability

I joined QUNO in September 2020 amidst the changes wrought by the Covid pandemic. I entered the multilateral space during a moment of great change, and experienced the UN having to adapt its procedures and implement new learnings in real time. At the international climate negotiations, this has meant all meetings moving online, alongside the delay of COP26. How has this impacted my view of multilateralism? I have witnessed a system that is proving itself to be both responsive and capable of taking on new forms to meet the needs of the future.

Needless to say, the effects of climate change are being experienced very differently across the globe. The uncertainty of present and future climate hazards presents a real challenge to the development of global climate governance. Against this background, exchange and collaboration is crucial. Global climate efforts demand a willingness on behalf of all parties to engage meaningfully, to take different voices into account, and to be responsive and ambitious in their actions. In my work at QUNO, I am constantly reminded that transformation only happens through encounters, and that it is these encounters that sit at the heart of the UN system.

Joachim Monkelbaan, Representative for Sustainable & Just Economic Systems

Humanity has witnessed tremendous social and economic change in the last 75 years. There have been significant reductions in poverty and increasing life spans for billions of people, but also disruptions to the environment and growing disparities of wealth that show how radical transformation of our economic systems is long overdue. Global threats such as Covid and climate change are increasingly interconnected and call for deepened international cooperation that is more inclusive and coherent than what we have seen in the past. We see that ways are opening up for redefining collective values and the assumptions that underlie our economic systems. The UN and other global institutions can only be as effective and influential as member governments allow them to be. At the international level, narrow nationalism therefore must give way to global cooperation because global challenges require multilateral responses. A rules-based system should ensure adherence to human rights, peace, and sustainable development.

We have arrived at a critical juncture when it comes to re-energizing multilateralism and global cooperation. We are called to ensure that multilateralism is a tool of practical importance for safeguarding the well-being of all in an interdependent world.

Human Rights & Refugees

On Human Rights Day (10th December), together with other Quaker organizations, we launched A Quaker Statement on Migration. This statement recognizes that our work on the human rights of migrants is rooted in our Quaker beliefs of the sacred in everyone and highlights our commitment in working for a world where dignity and rights are upheld regardless of migration status and not on the basis of citizenship or perceived deservedness. We hope that Quakers around the world can share their commitment to this by signing the statement.

QUNO has also been closely following the first round of regional reviews of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. As part of this, in November Laurel Townhead moderated a roundtable in the Europe and North America review, focussing on the inclusion and protection necessary for all migrants. Laurel highlighted that “inclusion is not just an objective enshrined in the Global Compact for Migration, it is a means to delivering on the Objectives.” We have developed and updated [our briefing paper](#) on using the regional reviews to support migrants, NGOs and other stakeholders to engage with the review process. We are looking forward to subsequent reviews in other regions.

Human Impacts of Climate Change

Despite physical challenges of remote working during the Covid pandemic, we have discovered new dimensions to our work on the human impacts of climate change. For one, the democratization of engagement, experienced in two webinars we held, [an inter-faith effort on COP26 ambition](#), and a Geneva Peace Week event focusing on climate change and peacebuilding in Latin America. These webinars included panelists and audience members based around the world, able to contribute without barriers of travel, cost, or visas. We have observed a wide range of digitally held UN meetings, and increased our quiet diplomacy with climate change negotiators, many of whom are concerned that Covid lockdowns are compromising momentum and transparency.

We have also completed two new publications to inspire people's environmental efforts at home. The People's Climate Empowerment Series is a helpful resource for anyone looking to become more engaged with climate action. [Physical copies can be requested](#) on our website. How to be a Hero For Our Children is a guide to personal and political action. Intended for everyone, but especially for those living in unsustainable societies, it features recent scientific findings relayed to our governments, suggestions for personal action, and questions to help engage with decision makers.

Sustainable & Just Economic Systems

QUNO has been working with several World Trade Organization (WTO) members—the Friends of Advancing Sustainable Trade (FAST Group)—on how the WTO can foster trade policies that enable sustainable development. Based on this work, a group of WTO members is rallying around a [Communication on Trade and Environmental Sustainability](#). One idea in the Statement is to establish a WTO informal working group on environmental sustainability that could function in a more inclusive, transparent and innovative manner. The working group would uniquely be open to civil society—which would be a first for the WTO. QUNO was asked to coordinate civil society participation for this initiative.

Peace & Disarmament

As part of our continued efforts to bridge silos across the UN's work, in November QUNO hosted several interactive discussions during Geneva Peace Week. In conjunction with the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, one of these was on the topic of “Rethinking Security,” which drew upon visions of security received from individuals and organizations around the world.

We also co-hosted a discussion on [“Prevention and sustaining peace: human rights in action,”](#) which featured opening remarks from the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights and the Swiss Ambassador to the UN in Geneva. Most recently, [QUNO co-hosted an online discussion](#) on the UN Working Group on Business & Human Rights' latest report focused on conflict-affected areas. Discussion focused on the practical measures that States and business enterprises should take to prevent and address business-related human rights abuse in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

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Quaker United Nations Virtual Summer School



5–16 July 2021

Monday-Fridays from 2:30pm – 6pm CEST



Are you 20-26 years old with a keen interest in the United Nations and would like to learn more on peace, disarmament, human rights, migration, sustainable and just economic systems, and climate change?

Join other young people in finding out about Quaker work at the international level and develop knowledge and competencies relevant to the work of the United Nations. Spend 10 days together on a virtual programme that will equip you with the skills to think constructively about the value of the multilateral system and international politics.

Application forms and more info are available at:
quno.org/quaker-un-summer-school-2021

or by emailing:
quns@quno.ch

Deadline for applications:
⌚ **15 February 2021**

Apply Now!

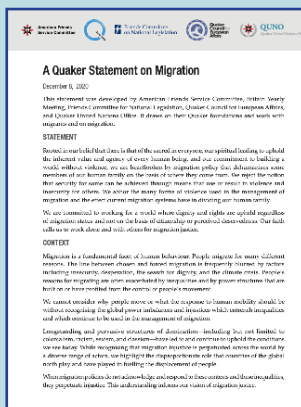
Recent publications



People's Climate Empowerment Series

A resource to connect people with international efforts that can strengthen climate action at all levels
Detmer Kremer (December 2020)

How to be a hero for our children: A People's Climate Toolkit—A little guide to personal and political action
Prepared by Lindsey Fielder Cook (December 2020)



A Quaker Statement on Migration

A statement drawing on Quaker foundations and work with migrants and on migration
AFSC, BYM, FCNL, QCEA, QUNO (December 2020)

Not Forgotten: Human Rights of Migrants at the 45th Session of the Human Rights Council
Najmah Ali and Laurel Townhead (October 2020)



All publications are available at: quno.org/recent-publications.

QUNO Q & A with Annie Pickering



Annie Pickering

In QUNO Q&A, we feature interviews with alumni. For this issue, we spoke with Annie Pickering, a 2014 Quaker United Nations Summer School (QUNSS) participant. She completed her undergraduate studies in international relations and French at the University of Sussex in 2016. Since graduating, she has worked for climate and environmental organizations, including as a field organizer for the Green Party and currently as a regional campaign organizer for [Friends of the Earth](#). We spoke with Annie about her career and experience as a QUNSS participant.

How did you first learn about summer school and what led you to apply?

I heard about it from my grandparents who are Quakers. When I was younger, I really wanted to work abroad, doing something related to the environment and people, and perhaps even work for the UN. By the time I was in university, I was less interested in working in the UN, but was still keen on working abroad and in the field of climate action. I decided to apply to QUNSS because I thought it would be a good opportunity to understand how international advocacy works, meet some great people, and learn more about politics in a practical way.

What do you remember most about your experience in summer school?

It was lovely weather when I went, so we had lots of lovely evenings on Lake Geneva, paddle boating and swimming too! One of the most memorable things about the weeks, was the chance to meet so many other great people, to find out why they were here, what their interests were and their stories. Even though it was a short time together, I felt like we had so many in-depth conversations together about the best ways to combat so many problems of today.

I also vividly remember the mock-quiet diplomacy lunch and learning about how they talk to representatives and delegates on key issues, by providing space for quiet dialogue. The importance of getting people to really talk and listen to each other, and see each other as another human being has stuck with me, from QUNO and other places, and I use it in conflict management and negotiations throughout my work and personal life.

Do you feel that your experience at QUNSS influenced your future work?

The summer school gave a real feel, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, of what international affairs work is like. I would highly recommend it for that reason, and for the chance to meet some amazing people. QUNSS gave me great respect for the incredible work places like the Red Cross, the UN and others do in times of war and natural disasters in providing emergency relief. It also showed me the UN's limitations—how it continues to reflect historical power imbalances that can restrain its effectiveness and ability to respond to global challenges, like climate change.

Around that time, I really realized the importance of local community action

in bringing about change and became convinced I wanted to work more locally, rather than internationally for change, as so much international change happens as the result of starting locally.

Can you tell us a bit about your career and the work you are doing now?

Since graduating, I was an Elected Student Sabbatical Officer for one year, then I worked at People & Planet on their student-led campaign, [Sweatshop Free](#), on workers rights in electronic supply chains. I now work at Friends of the Earth, supporting local groups to campaign on local climate issues. I am currently working as a regional campaigns organizer, and there is a big focus on supporting local groups to lobby and work with their local councils to adopt ambitious climate action plans. I think that there is real power in collective local action, so I am excited to what difference groups can make.

I understand you are also involved in coordinating youth participation in the international climate negotiations?

Yes, outside of work I am part of a group of young people in the UK and around the world who are organizing the [16th conference of youth](#) that will happen just before the next climate conference, COP26, in Scotland. This is the biggest international youth conference that is organized by [YOUNGO](#), as a space for young people to build collective power and have their say in the international climate negotiations. This is a huge project, scary and exciting. I think it also shows that although I prefer to work at a local level for climate justice, I do also see a huge role for young people globally to be heard. I think my summer school experience added to my confidence to understand the UN and COP world and to be part of this with young people in some way.