



QUNO and Minute 36

some contributions to the work

QUNO Briefing Paper for the Yearly Meeting Gathering 2014

Minute 36 (the Canterbury Commitment) challenges us, as Friends, to seek a sustainable, equitable and peaceful life on Earth. Britain Yearly Meeting is responding to this challenge by focussing on how to become a low-carbon sustainable community. The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) responds to the same challenge at the international level in our work on climate change, natural resource management, trade, investment, and intellectual property rights in agriculture and human rights.

This briefing paper will connect the work of the QUNO to the concerns and the spirit of Minute 36, describing the linkages between local, national and international levels of engagement. QUNO engages with these issues at the international level, seeking systemic change and providing a Quaker voice at the United Nations and related institutions. We believe that the core messages of Minute 36 are embedded in much of our work at QUNO, and that our work relates to the spirit of Minute 36 and the need to act not only individually, but also corporately.

Quaker United Nations Office

The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) seeks to promote multilateral cooperation for a fair and peaceful world. We have held consultative status through our world Quaker body since 1948, and have offices in Geneva, New York, and a meeting space in Bonn. Our areas of work include the Human Impacts of Climate Change, Peacebuilding and the Prevention of Violent Conflict, Food and Sustainability, and Human Rights and Refugees.

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“..personal responsibility and corporate action”¹

Minute 36 and QUNO’s work on the Human Impacts of Climate Change

The Human Impacts of Climate Change (HICC) work at QUNO evolved out of the conviction that climate change is a peace and justice concern. We do not see climate change in itself as the greatest challenge facing humanity; we understand anthropogenic (human caused) climate change to be a symptom of a greater challenge - how to live sustainably and justly on this planet.

Minute 36 reflects the core of our approach to climate change. It asks us to “*take personal responsibility and corporate action*” which, in turn “*will enable us to speak truth to power more confidently*”. At QUNO, we are trying to do this.

Our work focuses on three areas. We offer quiet diplomacy at the international climate change negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), we engage with Quaker initiatives and non-governmental organisations working on this issue, and we explore with QUNO colleagues how climate change interconnects with our QUNO work in peace and natural resources, food and sustainability, and human rights. We also write briefing papers for distribution at both the UNFCCC and to the general public.

At the UNFCCC, we first observed several negotiations to discern how our small office could contribute to such vast and complex negotiations. There are many able non-governmental organisations offering expert technical advice and/or campaigning for change. We decided that our unique contribution could be “quiet diplomacy”. We act as an even-handed presence in creating a “safe space” for a very diverse group of delegates, with a primary aim to help build communication and understanding between delegates working in an environment of deep mistrust. We are upheld by the encouragement of Minute 36 to “*practice speaking truth to power at a local level by establishing relationships with all sections of the local communities, including politicians,*

¹ All subtitles and quotations in italics are taken from Minute 36.

businesses and schools, to encourage positive attitudes to sustainability”.

Delegates have described our quiet diplomacy efforts as enabling “very human”, “sincere and more open” discussion. We do not come with anger or blame, but with a belief in and encouragement of the ability of each delegate to affect change in creating a fair and sufficient outcome to the negotiations. We are very aware that failure to achieve a fair and sufficient agreement may result in catastrophic climate change affecting the future generations of everyone sitting around the table and beyond.

In addition, we support efforts to recognise the impacts of anthropogenic climate change on human rights, including the right to food, water, health and adequate housing.

The call from Minute 36 to take “*personal responsibility to make whatever changes we are called to*” is central to all our HICC work. Catastrophic anthropogenic climate change is not inevitable. We have a choice. We can act now, through love, to ensure we live sustainably and justly on this earth. Or we can close our eyes and ears and heart. Humanity has a choice.

“...to conserve the earth’s resources and to share them more equitably”

Minute 36 and QUNO’s work on Natural Resources, Conflict and Cooperation

Water and land are two of the key natural resources that shape billions of peoples’ livelihoods, food security, wellbeing and identity. Yet, the majority are excluded from the decision making around natural resources which so fundamentally affects their lives. Managing these resources peacefully, equitably and sustainably is an increasingly challenging task as changing climates create greater uncertainty in seasonal temperatures, precipitation, growing seasons and extreme weather events. Some commentators claim that increased resource variability as a result of climate change will lead to violent conflict over these resources. However, research shows that while climate change may act as an exacerbating factor where there are other political, social or economic tensions, it is unlikely to lead to violent conflict as a unique factor. Furthermore, as Quakers we see how when we are guided correctly, human cooperation can arise from situations of stress and lack of resources.

This work sees natural resource management as a peace issue. It takes a peacebuilding approach to environmental challenge, seeking to shift the

conversation around resource competition away from preparing for war and towards a focus on building peace, understanding that:

“...we have long been aware that our behaviour impoverishes the earth and that it is our responsibility both to conserve the earth’s resources and to share them more equitably”.

Our work on Natural Resources, Conflict and Cooperation is cross-cutting and draws on various strands of QUNO’s work on peace, human rights, food and sustainability, and climate change.

As part of our cross-cutting approach we are currently focused on international legal frameworks that support inclusive decision making and equitable access to natural resources. We are also highlighting best practices from the local level to the international policy level. Within this work, we highlight the need to empower local communities, including vulnerable groups, to participate meaningfully in decision making around natural resources, focusing particularly on water, land and food.

There is no inevitability about destructive conflict around natural resources, such as water, land and the food derived from them. QUNO’s work seeks to illustrate – to States and to NGOs working at the local level - the peacebuilding approaches and legal empowerment methods that can help to prevent destructive conflict. It is important to include all stakeholders in decisions around natural resources that are important for their lives, empowering marginalised groups to constructively engage and, when necessary, challenge authorities and investors. We feel the need, as Quakers, to support and encourage responses to environmental conflict that uphold peaceful and just relationships and the dignity of everyone involved.

This work reflects the same sense of concern as the Britain Yearly Meeting commitment to Minute 36, recognising that “*our long-standing commitment to peace and justice arises in part from our understanding of the detrimental effect of war and conflicts, in damaging communities and squandering the earth’s resources*”. At QUNO, we are addressing this by highlighting that whilst climate change may lead to scarce natural resources, and has the potential to exacerbate to tensions that can lead to violence, there are concrete, tangible steps that we can take to ensure equitable decision making around natural resources, helping humanity to step forwards to create peace, rather than to prepare for war.

“...the environmental crisis is enmeshed with global economic injustice”

Minute 36 and QUNO's work on Food & Sustainability

QUNO's work on Food & Sustainability aims to ensure that international rules governing trade and investment in agriculture, and intellectual property (IP) rights, promote the transition to more just, equitable and sustainable food systems.

Minute 36 served to remind Friends that “*the environmental crisis is enmeshed with global economic injustice*”. The Food & Sustainability work further focusses this concern, recognising that much of the global total of carbon emissions today are contributed by the agricultural and food processing sectors and by loss and waste of food already produced.

QUNO aims to bring together government delegates and farmers' groups (amongst others) to catalyse dialogue and encourage the establishment of relationships, between often isolated groups. We use our institutional reputation for being a safe space where truth is spoken, to bring representatives from these groups together. We have witnessed how this interaction can help further understanding of the concerns of “others” and allow truth to prosper.

QUNO is aware that trade and investment rules and intellectual property standards established by States at the multilateral level have great influence on our ability to create sustainable food systems and live within our planetary boundaries. We are working with others to create tools that will help States make decisions that support a diversity of farming practices, including those of small scale farmers who produce around half of the world's food, and who maintain the agro biodiversity of our natural resource base.

Similarly to the call within Minute 36, for Friends to “*consider the effect of their lives on the world's limited resources*”, we encourage States to consider the purpose, structure and direction of rules governing IP, trade and investment in agriculture. We aim to increase understanding of the effect of these driving forces on sustainable food systems and on people's ability to enjoy their human right to food.

We consider that States have the power to make far reaching decisions which impact sustainable food systems and the right to food, yet are often not equipped with the right tools or information to navigate the complex architecture of multilateral rules which influence trade, investment and intellectual property. The direct link between decisions taken

at this level and the impact on agriculture and food security is not always clear because it is one of many variables at play.

The tools we will produce aim to support States to make decisions about IP, trade and investment and support a transition to sustainable and equitable food systems. These tools should also support civil society organisations in their engagement with these issues nationally and internationally.

“...a concern for the earth and all who dwell in it”

Minute 36 and QUNO's work on Human Rights and Refugees

QUNO's first engagement with the human impacts of climate change was from a human rights and refugees protection perspective. Each year, millions of people are forcibly displaced by floods, wind-storms, droughts, earthquakes and other natural hazards. Current international protection measures do not sufficiently protect those displaced across international borders by natural disasters in the context of climate change. The Nansen Initiative is a State-led process that is guiding local and regional consultations across the world to build consensus between States, non-governmental organisations, think tanks and other key actors to address this gap in protection. We continue to support the Nansen Initiative, as we see its work as central in addressing the new global challenges that we face.

In addition, we continue to follow the developments as the UN Human Rights Council discusses the human rights implications of climate change, in seeking durable and sustainable agreements on this new and evolving issue.

Epilogue

This paper has described various aspects of QUNO's work, as they relate to the spirit of Minute 36. By providing a Quaker voice at the UN, QUNO seeks to encourage international political action to bring about the necessary systemic changes that we need to see in order to bring about a low-carbon, sustainable global community.

By making links between the work that we all, as Quakers, do at local, national and international levels – both corporately and individually – we can begin to understand our shared approach to bringing about an overall change in the world as well as within our own lives.