



QUNO

Quaker United Nations Office

Changing the world from the top down: reflections from QUNO New York

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In the midst of the global crises of 2020, the events of 1945 seem long ago and far away. Yet, that year, 75 years ago, saw the final cataclysmic actions in the most destructive conflict the world has known, including the liberation of the concentration camps in Europe and the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And in June, 1945, world leaders, driven by the urgency of 'never again,' came together in San Francisco to sign the Charter of the United Nations (UN), stating as their purpose "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind." Friends around the world were deeply involved in humanitarian work and advocacy during the war and in its immediate aftermath. Two years later, in 1947, Friends were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and the Quaker offices at the United Nations (UN) were established in New York and Geneva.

Global challenges (and global opportunities) require global collaboration, and that is as true now, at a time of Coronavirus, climate change and rampant inequality, as it was then, with humanity desperate to rebuild from the ashes of the Second World War. No country, however powerful, can go it alone. And, for the most vulnerable around the world, the norms and practices of international cooperation, from the fundamental principles of human rights to the sustainable development commitment to leave no-one behind, provide a unique safeguard.

The United Nations remains a critical focus for Quaker work on issues of international peace and justice. The UN is a focal point for major debates about the nature, priorities and effectiveness of peacemaking and peacebuilding, and is the place where global standards and practices are set. And the UN, as an institution, plays a significant direct and coordinating role in many of the regions and countries that are impacted by violence, injustice and exclusion.

The crises of 2020 are making all too clear the fragility and vulnerability of societies that are narrowly structured to provide prosperity and safety to only a few. For Friends, to address the most pressing challenges that face humanity and the planet, we must rededicate ourselves to action on an international stage, to be, as George Fox wrote in 1656, "examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one."

Seventy-five years ago, the United Nations was founded out of the clear and present need for international collaboration to address global challenges. Now, in the face of pandemic, environmental destruction and climate crisis, rapid technological change, increasing displacement, growing inequality and rising violence, it seems again essential that we find a way to work together, despite our differences, for a world where "mercy and truth are met together."

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