

Conciliation in the work of the Quaker United Nations Office



Multilateralism today at the United-Nations

The United Nations (UN) system as it was being set up with in the mid-1940s, was based on the assumption of a common will to prevent the recurrence of the conditions and factors that had brought about horrific suffering and loss of life in the Second World War. Great hope came with its creation.

A noteworthy feature of the UN at the start was that it was conceived as a purely inter-State body. Quakers helped ensure that the idea of civil society was also present, in time, at the UN – a precursor of QUNO’s quiet diplomacy work today.

Thinking of the failings of the either of these institutions in their effort to pursue peace is all too easy – and one tends to forget that it’s not the institutions that fail – but also the state system which continues to dominate them each seeking to have a say in the work of the institutions which make up the UN system. There has also been a proliferation of other bodies, including international institutions, regional organisations, cities, and a whole range of non-state actors including transnational corporations, civil society organisations, and armed groups whose actions make up important dimensions of our highly interconnected world.

Accelerated by the end of the Cold War, the UN continued to explore its own peace function. The then Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s *An Agenda for Peace* is a flagship document in that evolution, that sought to reflect on the requirements necessary for the international system - in an era when most conflict was no longer between states, but within them – and on the need to enhance the responsibilities and capacities of the UN in preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, especially given the challenges in acting under chapter 7 of the UN Charter (which allows for military action), and post-conflict peacebuilding.

Today’s new challenges and opportunities continuously require responses from states and institutions often designed in a different era. These responses are subject to

political tensions that may have little to do with the issues themselves but can quickly sabotage any truly multilateral effort, however necessary it may seem.

Today, this is felt rather starkly, with the challenging environment at present for multilateralism with nations turning in on themselves and pervasive openly-expressed xenophobia. We have also seen an increase in verbal aggression and brinkmanship that puts at risk the diplomatic processes within and between countries and increases the risk of violent conflict because the parties cannot reliably measure each other’s intentions.

The Security Council is at a particularly fractious moment. Some of these developments seem to be the antithesis of the Quaker idea that underpins our work – that patient listening to the views and needs of others, and careful building of understanding, are the long-term basis for a more peaceful and just world.

Up against this backdrop, the combined and joint efforts of the UN supported by civil society, continues in strengthening the institutions and processes for this work. Indeed, there are also things to celebrate including UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres’ steps towards UN reform and his emphasis on the importance of responding to climate change and sustaining peace through prevention of violent conflict. The UN General Assembly has also moved forward some important initiatives, including on migration and refugees.

Meanwhile, we remember the human cost when national and international processes fail. There are now more people on the move due to fear and desperation than at any time since World War II, many of them fleeing appalling conditions of war and injustice. While we cannot “fix” individual instances, our work is focussed on international norms to help protect the victims, and on addressing the causes – human rights abuses, violent conflict and climate change - which in turn often arise from a common root cause, that is, unjust and unsustainable economic and social systems.

Quaker witness in multilateral spaces: being quietly and subversively present

There is a tendency to mystify Quaker multilateral work – partly because of its often off-the-record nature and the policy settings in which it takes place and that shapes it.

It is important to highlight here that our work is, fundamentally, no different from the socially engaged work in which Friends are involved, corporately or individually. It finds its root in the belief that there is that of God in all, and that we must value each individual and seek to reach that spark of good, vision, or willingness to risk, that resides in each person.

This can be found in the diverse ways in which we approach and shape our ‘quiet diplomacy’ activities behind the scenes, building trust, reduce conflict and advance the reconciling of difference by bringing together people from a range of backgrounds including diplomats, UN officials, staff of non-governmental organizations, academics, experts and practitioners.

Spaces for quiet dialogue

By creating space for ‘small circles and quiet processes’ that Rufus Jones put his faith in, in Quaker Houses in New York, Brussels and Geneva we help shape UN and other international priorities, and we bring attention to issues that are not yet on the international agenda. The reputation and atmosphere of our Quaker Houses allows for the emergence of more reflective and inclusive responses to difficult issues; ideas which might not be heard in more formal settings. The scale of international negotiations can feel challenging, but the trusting environment we provide, informed by Quaker methods, remains key to our work.

Presence and long-term persistence

But this also features in our presence and our long-term persistence, in these political public spaces, where we are seen as trusted listeners who operate with integrity and a capacity to engage all sides with little to no institutional axe to grind. Through perseverance, we have helped to change attitudes, create new understandings, and develop new standards.

Themes and impact

The specific themes we decide to work on seek to represent Friends’ concerns - and in turn we seek to be guided by Friends. However, that comes with the limitations of the ‘niche’ we can perceive for QUNO to fill – with the specific capacities, structures we have access to, style of work and experience that we bring to the table, that no one else can.

For instance, our work on child soldiers led to the topic being put on the UN agenda for the first time. Through our attention to disarmament, landmines and small arms issues, we have underlined the destabilizing impact of the weapons of war. We have helped shape UN priorities for peacebuilding on the ground, upholding the value of reconciliation and dialogue across all societies. Our work on the Sustainable Development Goals led to a global and universal commitment to foster peace, justice and inclusion as a fundamental component of humanitarian and development objectives.



Preparations for an off-the-record dinner at Quaker House Geneva.
(Credit: QUNO)

Illustrative stories from our Representative voices

Quiet diplomacy at the international climate change negotiations

Lindsey Fielder Cook, Representative for Climate Change (2013-present)

There are many times when a concern is so strong, so obvious, but the way to offer even a small contribution of healing seems unrealistic. It was so at the Quaker UN Office in Geneva with the concern over climate change, and an ever-growing recognition that rising global temperatures could destabilize all our work on peace, human rights and refugees.

QUNO began with contributions through existing programmes, including legal protection efforts for refugees or internally displaced persons displaced by the consequences of climate change, and peacebuilding approaches for communities affected by natural resource stress. In sum, to support multilateral approaches for protection of people most vulnerable to the consequences of dangerous climate change.

Yet there was a calling within QUNO staff, and in our governance committee, to become involved in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which oversaw the international climate change negotiations. These negotiations were notorious for anger and division, culminating in a very public meltdown at the annual Conference of Parties (COP) in Copenhagen, in 2009, despite rising global emissions and ever more clear science of the existential dangers. QUNO began exploring engagement as early as 2011, attending several negotiation sessions and talking with the NGO and diplomatic communities. Encouraged on various levels – including a Swedish diplomat calling for Quaker support having witnessed QUNO work at the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, and a seasoned civil society voice to talking of negotiators' grief - QUNO in 2013 tested a version of its oft practiced 'quiet diplomacy'. The approach was simple but not present at the climate negotiations: prioritize 'building communication and understanding between countries' rather than advocate for specific language or 'asks'. As one negotiator said years later to us, "I come because I do not feel a 'deliverable', I feel you do this for us."

The beginning was difficult. Most negotiators were posted in national capitals rather than Geneva or New York; there was little knowledge of, or established trust in, QUNO. Tensions in the plenary room were high and simply talking to one negotiator brought suspicion not only from other negotiating delegations but also from civil society groups. Who were we, what was our intention? We did not join the Climate Action Network (of NGOs) because of the quiet

diplomacy, but this position needed regular explanation with civil society colleagues.

The first dinner in June 2013 was with 'like-minded', progressive countries. The response was – 'interesting, different, needed, but greater diversity would help us'. The next two dinners, in November 2013, were critical for lessons learned. Specifically, a successful dinner began with us asking a very personal, 'feeling' question, and a second, unsuccessful dinner, where the experience of inviting another NGO voice, and including only developing country negotiators, was not to be repeated.

By 2014 we succeeded in having negotiators representing all negotiating 'groups' around the table. By 2015, these included the highest emitters as well as some of the poorest countries. Following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in December 2015, we considered ending the dinners, but negotiators encouraged us to continue. Since 2013 we have held 19 dinners, the last, in June 2019, had 19 countries around the table, including 12 Heads of Delegation.

Our rules were and continue to be simple. We state clearly that we seek 'ambitious, effective and fair' multilateral decisions. We hold the dinners 'beyond Chatham House Rule': no reports are written, and no discussion (even with our governance committee) is made on which specific countries attend and what they say. We talk with negotiators, one on one, in person or virtually, when we plan a dinner, about what they think would be a valued dinner focus, then phrase the dinner question with non-negotiation language to draw out a more genuine discussion. We open the dinner with a very personal introduction question (e.g., 'in one sentence, describe what fears you brought to this session'), then open the main question for the evening and ensure that each has a chance to speak once, but only once, until all have spoken. We then reflect back what we are hearing and open for discussion. We do not claim to control what people 'take' from the dinner. After these six years, negotiators still tell us the dinners are valuable, a 'positive and humane' space to talk more openly, to help diverse groups of negotiators better understand where the other 'is coming from', to help build a personal contact with otherwise 'politically difficult' delegations. It is important that the dinners are funded by a non-political entity – neither a State nor NGO funded by a political region, but a Quaker initiative funded by Quakers.

In addition to these dinners, our ‘quiet diplomacy’ extends to one-on-one discussions with negotiators, publications to support negotiator efforts for urgent climate action back in capitals, and side events with panelists from the negotiator, NGO, science, faith and indigenous communities. Since the Paris Agreement, we have become more openly engaged in advocating rights

language in decisions. We have also become accredited observers of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which advises countries on the latest science. There, we openly advocate for sufficient engagement on lifestyle/behavior/consumption/sustainable economies, in their work, while also communicating their findings to wider communities.

The serendipity of presence: QUNO and the banning of anti-personnel landmines

David Atwood, Representative Peace and Disarmament (1995-2011)

QUNO’s involvement in the work to ban anti-personnel landmines was an unlikely turn of events. During my orientation to go to Geneva in late 1994, I was told that, of all the possible disarmament issues that I might explore, I should probably stay away from landmines as, even at that stage, there were 500 or so organisations around the world that had joined the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL).

hosted a totally off-the-record meeting of representatives of those governments that had indicated their wish for a stronger outcome than the CCW proceedings would produce. At that meeting the government of Canada put on the table the idea of hosting a meeting later in the year in Ottawa to see what might be done further.

And the rest is history.

When I arrived in Geneva in early 1995, there had been no disarmament program at QUNO for nearly two years. One of the necessary components for working effectively in Geneva or New York or in other policy settings is to be credible, to have something to bring to the policy process. This is not automatic. Where to begin?

The new Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction was signed by 122 states in December 1997 and entered into force just over a year later in early 1999. The ICBL and its Coordinator Jody Williams were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. The recognition of QUNO’s part in the achievement of this historic treaty led to my being invited as a member of the ICBL delegation to the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo.

A period of scoping was necessary. This included attending in Vienna the first ever Review Conference of the Convention on Conventional Weapons in the autumn of 1995 where I met key members of the ICBL and, despite advice to the contrary, found myself drawn to this new, dynamic international movement. Several months later, while still looking to re-establish an involvement in disarmament affairs, QUNO joined the e-mail network for the ICBL (a new communication tool in the mid-90s for social movements). The ICBL leadership, at that time, noted that there was a need to test the expressed interest of a number of governments in going beyond the likely outcome of the continuing CCW deliberations¹.

But our involvement did not stop there. Creating the Mine Ban Convention was a significant event, but it would be nothing if not implemented by the states that joined it. We continued to work actively from 1999 to 2004 with a small group of governments and civil society representatives in totally behind-the-scenes activities that led to the strengthening of the mechanisms available to the Convention for helping to ensure that its goals were achieved. Today, the Convention stands as one of the most successful multilateral disarmament treaties. Although membership is still far from universal², the impact of the new norm is strong, with use of the weapon nearly eliminated, stockpiles substantially reduced and mine fields cleared. Most importantly, the annual number of victims has been dramatically reduced. The achievement of the Mine Ban Convention and its impact on other multilateral disarmament processes is historically very important but beyond our scope here.

The call from ICBL was for someone to pull these so-called ‘good guy’ governments together to check their credentials and intentions in relation to an outright ban on anti-personnel landmines. I immediately thought, ‘We can do that. This is exactly the kind of thing QUNO is here to do.’ And so on a damp evening in April 1996, Quaker House

1 An Amended Protocol to the CCW was being negotiated, aimed at strengthening regulations on the use of antipersonnel landmines. Many felt that the outcome was likely to be too weak to make a real difference—the only solution was to ban this weapon.

2 164 States Parties to the Convention as of July 2019

What seems important is to note a number of key lessons from this experience:

QUNO's reputation in multilateral fields in general, and the reputation of Quaker House for off-the-record meetings in particular, enabled QUNO to contribute to an important global process even though we brought no specific expertise at the time of our initial engagement.

Taking sides can be a legitimate strategy for QUNO. In this case, QUNO took sides with victims of the indiscriminate use of anti-personnel mines and joined with like-minded organisations and governments to assist in the development of this new global norm. Supporting the UN does not necessarily mean supporting existing institutions where they are clearly inadequate. In this case, we worked to support the evolution of a new institutional

mechanism aimed at overcoming the weaknesses of the existing one.

Despite the number of organisations working on the landmines problem, QUNO found its niche. And when the processes became robust enough to stand on their own and needed no further substantial contribution from QUNO, we withdrew from active involvement and turned our attention to other issues.

The evolution of effective new global norms takes a long time. But once the right combination of the key factors of effective research, credible and effective organising, government/civil society partnerships and engagement by actors across the spectrum from local to global are in place, results can sometimes come much sooner than expected.

Making people comfortable enough to have uncomfortable conversations: QUNO work on displacement and migration

Laurel Townhead Representative Human Rights and Refugees (2014-Present)

I see fostering communication rather than facilitating conciliation as the heart of the Human Rights and Refugees Programme's Quiet Diplomacy work, but I believe there are elements of this approach that translate to and draw from conciliation work. Sometimes this is communication and dialogue amongst like-minded States with similar positions and no identifiable conflict. However, sometimes this is amongst States with diverging positions, positions that may be in direct conflict. The approach to setting up and facilitating a Quiet Diplomacy conversation will depend on the intention. Are we trying to:

- inform States on an issue of concern about which we feel there is too little done?
- test an idea about an issue of concern?
- consolidate and strengthen the position of States that are already broadly aligned?
- create dialogue between those with opposing positions?

Or perhaps a combination of these aims or something else. These are the principal purposes I have used quiet diplomacy for, but I am sure that there are other aims for which it would also work well. Being clear about what our purpose is for holding the space is useful not just for planning who should attend and how to frame

the discussion but also to articulate with integrity what our agenda is. It is rare that we do not have an agenda, or a position, on a given issue but it is important that we do not have a hidden agenda. In the examples above, Lindsey's agenda is seeking 'ambitious, effective and fair' multilateral decisions, David's was to reduce the use of a particular weapon. Both are stories of seeking to raise the level of ambition and of giving people who represent government positions safe spaces to test out the possibility of being more ambitious and responding to something more unifying than national-level State self-interest.

My experience of quiet diplomacy is similar. I first experienced QUNO's quiet diplomacy approach as a Programme Assistant (2006-2007) at a time when informal off the record lunches on refugee protection were frequent. The Programme was aiming to foster dialogue to support the development of policy through the Conclusions States adopted at the Executive Committee of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. This was done through a combination of approaches used in a specific sequence. Lunches were held with different clusters of States that were more closely aligned with each other and drew on the technical expertise of other NGOs before combining these groups in bigger dialogues of less traditionally aligned parties. This approach allowed the individuals participating to get comfortable with Quaker House and the format for the lunches and to work through their own questions about the subjects before then speaking across the aisles to States with whom they usually had less open dialogue.

Providing a meal, using a house rather than a meeting room, clarity about the informal and off the record nature of the discussions are all intended to help put those joining us at ease and create a space that feels safe and open for them. Allowing people time to acclimatize to this approach and to have the chance to ask questions without losing face also helps to foster that comfort ahead of the more difficult conversations. I see our role as to make people comfortable enough to have uncomfortable conversations.

In my first few years as a Representative at QUNO much of my quiet diplomacy work fell into the areas of informing States on an issue and testing ideas. However, the work we undertook in regard to the development of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was of a different character as States went through the process to adopt global standards on a highly divisive issue with mounting political tensions. I was glad to be able to draw on those early experiences of quiet diplomacy and of ways to work more across the aisles. QUNO's agenda for this, about which we were always clear, was to support the adoption of an ambitious, effective and human rights based Global Compact. Our quiet diplomacy work ran on two tracks in parallel: seeking to inform and support consolidation of positions in line with that agenda and seeking to bring together those from States with positions at odds with each other.

For the discussions across the aisles the intention was to find and explore the common ground not to recreate the entrenchment of the negotiating room. Drawing on Lindsey's experience and approach we used a personal question to open in our first dinner. This was so effective in ensuring that everyone spoke and was heard and in finding common threads that it was specifically requested in the second dinner when I tried to open without it. I was able to respond to that request (responsivity to the needs of the group is important) and needless to say I planned it into subsequent events.

The Global Compact was adopted at the end of 2018 and is a landmark agreement on migration governance that, whilst flawed, is more ambitious and human rights based than we had thought possible at the beginning of the

process. It is an example of the alchemy of multilateralism, as one person described it at a dinner, where dialogue and debate and discussion of shared challenges brings States to an agreement that responds to something beyond national positioning.

I believe some of the transferrable elements of what makes this approach effective are:

- context and congruence – QUNO exists in part to foster dialogue, as invitees come to understand this better they trust the space more
- transparency of our agenda and position on the topics under discussion
- clarity of intention
- integrity in our own positions coupled with a willingness to hear positions of others
- clarity of focus for discussion (coupled with an openness to be flexible if something emerges that the group needs to work through even it was not in your initial plan)
- transparency about who will be in the room
- use of an opening question to which all respond, creating an equality between participants and encouraging candidness but allowing people to choose how personal they feel comfortable to be in that space
- use of spaces that are physically different from more formal meeting rooms
- sharing a meal – this is not an irrelevance or a coincidence, the symbolism of sharing food is strong in many cultures
- encouragement in advance to those that are familiar with the format to model the openness of dialogue



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