

WATCHING BRIEF 20-8: 2020 - THE UNITED NATIONS AT 75

The Future We Want; the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

September 2020

This brief outlines the range of activities undertaken by the United Nations at its 75th anniversary and the involvement and support provided to the UN within Australia and globally.

Speaking at a UN70 event in Beijing in July 2015, Andrew Tomlinson from the Quaker United Nations New York office referred to the current agenda of concerns before the United Nations and said the following:

“...when it comes to the issue of the UN’s role in maintaining international order, the sweet spot and perhaps the area of the UN’s greatest comparative advantage, is in taking the lead on coordinating efforts to prevent violent conflict and foster the growth of peaceful, resilient and inclusive societies supported by a just and effective system of global governance. And that this perspective requires us to think well beyond security-based approaches and to address root causes.”

The 75th anniversary of the United Nations is an appropriate occasion to reflect on the UN and the work it has done and continues to do. The UN is often criticized and challenged as not being effective and yet we often are not aware of, or forget, the range of activities that the UN is engaged with.

Currently the UN is:

- Leading the global response to COVID-19
- Providing food and assistance to 86.7 million people in 83 countries
- Supplying vaccines to 50% of the world's children, helping to save 3 million lives a year
- Assisting and protecting 82.5 million people fleeing war, famine and persecution
- Working with 196 countries to keep the global temperature rise below 2°C
- Keeping peace with 95,000 peacekeepers in 13 operations around the world
- Tackling the global water crisis affecting over 2.2 billion people
- Protecting and promoting human rights globally and through 80 treaties/declarations
- Coordinating USD\$28.8 billion appeal for the humanitarian needs of 108.8 million people
- Using diplomacy to prevent conflict and assist some 50 countries a year with their elections
- Helping over 2 million women a month overcome pregnancy and childbirth complications

Quakers and the UN:

- Friends' testimonies aim to remove the reasons which are so often the underlying reasons for conflict. The Preamble to the Constitution of the UN Educational, Scientific and Organisation (UNESCO) states that 'since wars begin in the minds of people, it is in the minds of people that the defences of peace must be constructed' (pronouns updated). Much of what the UN does helps to remove the causes of conflict and build the foundations for sustainable peace.
- 'Friends' interest in, and engagement with, what a former director QUNO in Geneva, Duncan Wood, called 'building the institutions of peace' is at the root of current Quaker work at the UN' (Atwood, 2012:11).
- For nearly 50 years, the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) has been maintaining houses in both Geneva and New York.
- QPLC Watching Brief on QUNO (19-3, May 2019) is available on the Quaker Australia website at <https://www.quakersaustralia.info/QPLC>
- QUNO's areas of work include: peacebuilding and prevention of violent conflict, peace and disarmament, human impacts of climate change, human rights and refugees and sustainable and just economic systems.

Australian Friends and the UN:

- David Atwood delivered the 2012 James Backhouse Lecture 'From the inside out: Observations on Quaker work at the United Nations'
- Several Friends have worked with QUNO, including through the young professional Programme Assistant positions <https://quno.org/opportunities>

Action to join the global conversation:

- UN75 in 2020 is a year of dialogue within and across borders, sectors and generations.
- To hear from as many people as possible, the UN75 website includes a one minute survey, toolkits for dialogue, issue briefs, the UN Future Possibilities Report and up-to-date news and events: <https://www.un.org/en/un75>
- UN Youth Australia is a national youth-led organization that aims to educate and empower young Australians on global issues <https://unyouth.org.au/>. The 2021 Australian Youth Representative to the UN, Lucy Stronach (University of WA), was announced in September 2020. The topic of Ms Stronach's listening tour is 'What would Australia look like if young people were the key drivers of decision making'. More information on Lucy and the 2021 Listening Tour can be found here: unyouth.org.au/ausyouthrep.
- Model UN programs take place in many high schools and universities in Australia. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6hufLEx_ml

- The United Nations Association of Australia works to inform, inspire and engage Australians on the work, goals, and values of the UN to create a safer, fairer more sustainable world. The organization runs over 150 events a year, in particular focusing on promoting the Sustainable Development Goals, climate change, the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, gender equality and refugees. <https://www.unaa.org.au/>

Resources

- <http://sdg.iisd.org/events/commemoration-of-the-75th-anniversary-of-the-un/>
- <https://www.un.org/en/essential-un/>
- David Atwood Backhouse Lecture, 2012 <https://www.quakersaustralia.info/sites/aym-members/files/pages/files/2012%20Lecture.pdf>
- 'Practicing the Gospel of Hope in the Nuclear Age', Dan Seeger
- 'Experiences at QUNO in Geneva' interview with Aletia Dundas, David Swain, The Australian Friend, 04 September 2015. <https://australianfriend.org/experiences-at-quno-in-geneva/>
- Carolina Larriera, former UN diplomat, and partner of the late Sergio Viera de Mello (who died in the explosion at the UN complex in Baghdad during the Iraq war). Carolina is now the founder of the Sergio Viera de Mello Centre in Brazil. The 20-minute interview can be heard at the following website – www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/sundayextra/12656114