

1. The United Nations and multilateralism today: reflections for Quaker work

The broad range of institutions set up in the mid-1940s, that became the foundations of the United Nations system, reflected a greatly enhanced understanding of the conditions and factors that had brought about the Second World War, including international economic relations.

The very nature of those institutions was predicated on the assumption of a continuing consensus on what needed to be done. And there was great hope. But, as we all know, the UN nearly from its inception was hampered in its role and development as a peace institution by the emergence of the Cold War, which dominated and hobbled it over the first 45 years of its existence.

When that feature of international life was removed around 1990, the things that had been left undone became more obvious. The spotlight could at last be shone on conditions in the world that were fostering violence at great human cost. New steps could be taken in developing peacemaking and peacebuilding roles that were so sorely needed.

Nevertheless, more than 20 years later, we find ourselves in a world facing a broad range of challenges—ecology, security, development, health and others—all far more demanding than those of 65 years ago. Yet we face these challenges with institutional structures that, despite the end of the Cold War

and the new opportunities that that presented, are simply not keeping up. That said, a couple of orientations are helpful to keep in mind as we think about the UN system today and our approaches, as Friends, to it.

The first is that it seems to me important to put this observation on the present into a historical context. Way back in 1995 when it was the 50th anniversary of all kinds of things, I was asked to speak to European Friends on the theme ‘50 years of peace’. My first reaction was that it felt like anything but 50 years of peace to me, especially having had the Vietnam War as a key formative element in shaping my thinking about the world.

But, as I reflected on the topic, I could indeed see that in some core ways the nations of the world had made progress—despite the profound divisions of Cold War dynamics—in building institutions that helped to reduce the likelihood of war and increase the possibilities of human flourishing.

It seems important that when we think about the UN system and what we demand of it we keep in mind that it is just over 65 years old. As human-made institutions go, this really isn’t very long. It is perhaps not surprising that some of our expectations of maturity have so far eluded this rather immature structure.

Today’s UN is gangly and awkward. It is unable to respond as adequately as we wish to the challenges that we feel require global responses. A large part of what it is remains a reflection of our division of the world into nation states.

Fundamentally, it is the limits of common agreement among these states about what needs to be done, and how it is to be done, which continue to hinder the UN from more fully being able to prevent violence, and to more fully ensure just treatment of the planet’s now seven billion passengers.

When we think about ‘pursuing peace at the UN’, our thoughts today tend to reflect on the system’s failures rather than its successes. These include such things as:

- failure to prevent the war in Iraq, which is now into its ninth year
- failure, despite apparent new consensus on the Responsibility to Protect, to be able to find adequate, appropriate, and consistent responses to the protection of people under attack by their own

governments or in places where ‘state failure’ leads to seemingly endless human suffering

- the fact that, despite repeated pledges, there are still tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in our world, and continuing threats of further proliferation
- recognition that, despite broad commitments, progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals is either very slow or totally stalled for the poorest nations in the world
- increasing understanding that our environment is threatened by our human behaviour and an inability to construct a global response to these realities which will have their greatest impact on future generations.

While we rightly see these as ‘failures’, they are in reality less failures of the UN than failures of the state-system which continues to dominate it. We often do not take note of the fact that the UN has been coping with a tremendous growth in the numbers of its member states (up to more than 190), all of whom seek to have a say in the work of the institutions which make up the UN system.

On the positive side, the UN system that we see today is made up of a broad range of institutions and mechanisms. These work not only on efforts to reduce the political differences between member states, but also on the enhancement of the requirements for peaceful relations among the peoples of the world—for example, through norm development and the delivery of services which help to create conditions for peace.

This work extends far beyond Geneva and New York. We can observe considerable maturing in understanding of the institutional requirements for peace to prevail.

In the immediate post-Cold War period of the early 90s, this deepening of the expression of the UN’s peace function was most fully developed through an important document, the then Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s *An Agenda for Peace*. Through this document the Secretary-General sought to reflect on what was required by the international system in an era when most conflict was no longer between states, but within

states; or in places where states existed only in name. He reflected on the need to enhance the responsibilities and capacities of the UN in preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict peacebuilding.³ There has been much work in the subsequent 20 years in strengthening the institutions and processes for this work.

In a supplement to this document in 1995, the Secretary-General also gave the first official reflection on what he called the need for ‘microdisarmament’. This was a reflection that, although most international disarmament attention had been paid to so-called weapons of mass destruction, the real weapons of mass destruction—the ones taking the toll in human lives and livelihoods of people around the world—were small arms and light weapons.⁴

Progress in all the areas outlined by the Secretary-General, while slow, can be seen over the last decade and a half.

Further examples of milestones of this post-Cold War era in deepening the peace and justice capacities of the UN system can be seen in the challenge which states set themselves in establishing the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, and in agreement to establish an International Criminal Court in 2002.

The 2005 World Summit, in underlining that peace and security, development and human rights are ‘the pillars of the United Nations system and the foundations for collective security and well-being’, took further institutional steps in establishing the Human Rights Council and the UN Peacebuilding Commission.

The *World Summit Outcome* document of this Summit also recognised the need to move beyond simple assertions of state sovereignty to reflections on the responsibilities of the international system, when states either refuse or are unable to respond to situations where the rights of their peoples are being abused or inadequately met. This so-called Responsibility to Protect (of which more later) is of considerable importance in terms of the evolution of global norms and practice.⁵

Peace is complex and must involve many different elements if real human security is to be achieved. The challenge, of course, is to turn shining rhetoric into solid action. The record is incomplete and ragged over the last 20 years.

One is regularly left with the glass half-full/half-empty dilemma. From the longer-term perspective suggested here, however, I believe it is neither unrealistic nor utopian to opt for the half-full orientation. It gives elements of hope as well as solid foundations on which to build.

A second orientation, which I believe is important in thinking about the way we Friends shape our work at the international level, has to do with the highly complex nature of our current international system.

Increasingly, as the previous few paragraphs have noted, the issues facing the planet are multi-faceted, highly interactive and inter-dependent; and they demand policy responses which cut across normal institutional boundaries and are multi-disciplinary in nature.

While our global connectedness presents many problems, it also presents many opportunities for increased understanding among peoples and societies, and for the development of new norms of behaviour.

Up against such challenges and opportunities, responses are sought from states and institutions often designed in a different era. These 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.

To give one example, the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, the only permanent multilateral disarmament body which the world has, has been stymied for a decade and a half due to the inability of the states making up this body to rise above narrow national interests. This, despite regular protestations to the contrary by these same states of the need for action on a range of disarmament-related subjects that are perceived as critical to global security.

An additional element to be considered here is that we also live in a multi-stakeholder world. While the now more than 190 states remain preminent in terms of shaping the outcomes of the UN-system, the last half century has seen 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.

For better or worse, their actions make up important dimensions of our highly interactive world. Both the complex nature of international issue links

and the multi-stakeholder nature of international relations must be taken into account as we Friends seek to shape our actions towards the betterment of our world. This indeed makes greater demands on us for good analysis and clear strategy in the directions we set for ourselves through QUNO and other Quaker initiatives, but it also offers up many potentially fruitful opportunities. When chosen with insight, particularly focused work on one issue area—examples to be illustrated in this lecture—may have important synergistic effects beyond the particular issue under concern.

Further, the multi-actor nature of our world and the exciting opportunities for communication and transnational interaction also open up many avenues for potentially influential work through new kinds of partnerships. I shall seek to demonstrate each of these, while pointing out that these realities of our world put new demands on how we organise ourselves as Friends.

As Friends, we always have high hopes and high expectations. We are passionate and impatient. We want change for the better. We want it sooner rather than later. We reject lovingly those factors that prevent peaceful relations among people and prolong injustice. This is already a fairly audacious approach to the world and it has driven Friends' work for real change in the relations among nations from the start.

Friends' interest in, and engagement with, what a former director of QUNO in Geneva, Duncan Wood, called 'building the institutions of peace' is at the root of current Quaker work at the UN. It runs all the way back to William Penn and his *Essay on the Present and Future Peace of Europe* in which he laid out a plan for a world (then European) peace system.⁶

We always have expected a great deal of our precious and flawed UN system, and rightly so. As we look at the particular contribution QUNO can make, we must at the same time keep our understanding of it in the broader context of Quaker work for peace in its many manifestations at different levels in many parts of the world.