One Week at Doha

by Oliver Robertson Associate Representative at QUNO and QEW Representative to COP 18

It always seems impossible until it is done. --Nelson Mandela

This is one of the inspiring phrases sitting on my desk at the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in Geneva, a desk more than 4,500 kilometres from the Qatar National Convention Centre. The impressive Centre was the venue for the 18th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), held November 26 to December 7, 2012, in Doha.

This was the first time QUNO has attended these COPs, but this is not QUNO’s first foray into environmental negotiations – it played an important behind-the-scenes role over several years around the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Other Friends have been coming to the climate change talks for years: some as negotiators or other delegates, others under the banner of Quaker Earthcare Witness. But, having heard calls from several sources over several years for Quakers to help more directly with the climate talks, this year QUNO responded. We attended a between-sessions meeting of the UNFCCC in Bonn, Germany, last May, spoke to diplomats in Geneva and New York, and produced a short paper that drew on our knowledge of other UN bodies. All with the overarching message: How can we help?

COP 18 was huge and dispersed. Around 11,000 people were expected to attend, working in seven negotiation streams (as opposed to the one or two that UN talks usually have). It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that the venue itself was cavernous, a vast edifice of glass, marble, plastic, and metal. Almost a dozen halls, each thousands of metres square, housed plenary chambers, smaller side event rooms, and rows of civil society stalls. It took 15 minutes to walk from one end of the complex to the other.

“The inequality in the world inhabits the halls where these negotiations go on,” said one of Oxfam’s representatives. You can see it physically. One hall contained the offices and pavilions of different countries, but not all of them. Many European governments had offices, as did the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), the Gulf, and the other Western states. Aside from this, there was one other African office, that of Kenya, one Small Island Developing State (Nauru), and none from Latin America. If you want to meet anyone else, you have to catch them as they come out of meetings or run into them in the corridors.

The focus of our activities in the UNFCCC was not the details of the discussions (though we did sit in on meetings, because knowing how something works is important if you’re interacting with it). We are not technical experts and probably do not need to be: there were literally thousands of people in Doha who know their CP2s from their CDMs and can spot a QELRO at 50 paces. Instead, we wanted
to support the process and help build trust between parties, which is the same kind of work we have been doing at the UN for more than 60 years. In our experience, this works best (or perhaps only) when the participants know one another and can build personal relationships. Building these relationships is exceptionally difficult when negotiators are based in their national capitals and come together only a few times a year for two weeks of intense negotiations.

But we certainly won’t achieve anything if we don’t try, so QUNO’s staff emailed diplomats we knew, drew on Quaker links with others, and went knocking on doors. And, through a mixture of hard work and serendipity, ways began to open. Diplomats took time to talk with us, contacts led to other contacts, and we did, on occasion, bump into someone going up an escalator. Many shared our analysis of the problems and even offered some thoughts as to possible ways forward, but no clear next step emerged. Presumably, if the answer were obvious, it would already be in place (though the failure to adequately act to prevent climate change, despite knowing what is needed, does show this isn’t always the case).

I found it interesting that the “flavour” of the conference changed as the week went on. During the first couple of days, before detailed negotiations got underway, we had more interactions with diplomats, and the stacks of QUNO publications in our stall quickly disappeared. But later the tenor changed, as diplomats spent more time sealed off in closed negotiating sessions and non-government representatives left to speak to each other at side events. The quality of our discussions with government representatives was as good as ever; it was just that the length and frequency of meetings declined.

Other work pressures meant that we couldn’t stay at COP 18 for the second week, which is less likely to be effective because government ministers arrive and they really are hard to meet. So we returned to Geneva, ready to follow up with contacts made and to digest and reflect on what we’ve experienced. No doubt we will need to continue our conversations in the months to come. If Friends know of diplomats or others engaged in the talks, please let us know, as some of the most helpful conversations we had were with people already familiar with Quakers, who understand how we work and what we do. As for the rest, we shall see.

What will ultimately arise from our participation at COP 18 in Doha? We might move to action, we might continue to observe and consider, and we might decide not to carry on. It could be that this is not the way Friends are called to witness to climate change and that not everything that needs to be done, needs to be done by Quakers. But what can be done is for Friends to offer, in prayer and action, their support for those engaged in the climate talks. Many of the negotiators feel the same fears and frustrations as the people looking on, and they need our encouragement as they try to achieve what must sometimes feel like an impossible task.

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Oliver is associate representative at the Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva. He attended the COP in Doha with QUNO Geneva director Jonathan Woolley, in the name of QEW. A version of this article originally appeared in the Friend, the weekly Quaker magazine in Britain www.thefriend.org.

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