



Quaker
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Affairs

around europe

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“Our
defining
generational
task”

Rebuilding society
for a post-COVID,
post-carbon world



No coronavirus respite for people seeking sanctuary in Europe

↑ People on the move seeking to enter the EU via the Bosnia-Croatia border are being met brutality at the hands of Croatian police. But coronavirus – as well as an alleged "cover-up" to save face in Brussels – have pushed their plight off the agenda.
PHOTO: FOTOMOVIMIENTO (CC)

Around Europe has regularly reported on the desperate situation of people on the move in Europe, with increasingly frequent reports of violence at the hands of police forces along the Bosnia-Croatia border. But the coronavirus pandemic has made conditions for many migrants and refugees even more perilous, whilst pushing brutal abuses further down the agenda.

In May, the NGO CARE International called on EU leaders to act after a group of about thirty people alleged that Croatian police officers spray-painted their heads with crosses, telling the mainly Muslim group that the symbol represented a "cure against the coronavirus." The migrants say the officers were "laughing and drinking beer" while they carried out these actions.

And on June 15 *The Guardian* published an exclusive report claiming that EU officials had deliberately concealed evidence of rights abuses by police in Croatia from MEPs. The aim, as revealed in leaked emails between staff, was to draw attention away from €6.8m of missing European funds, which had originally been allocated to professionalise policing on the country's borders but has since disappeared.

Croatia is seeking to join the EU's Schengen free movement area, which is dependant on Zagreb's adherence to EU border control standards. This makes the wanton violence being exacted in the Balkan mountains by some police officers particularly awkward. Irish MEP Clare Daly said: "It is outrageous – the [European] Commission appears to be colluding with the Croatian authorities in a cover-up."

Meanwhile, on the Greek-Turkish border, migrants and refugees have begun to arrive at the EU frontier once again after having their movements curtailed by lockdown. After a hiatus of almost three months, Greek authorities reported several boats of men, women and children landing on the shores of Lesbos in early June. At the same time, Athens has been accused of detaining and illegally deporting asylum seekers back across to Turkey.

The Greek government argues that Turkey isn't respecting its promise to stop facilitating the passage of migrants and refugees to the EU border. Meanwhile, Turkey – which hosts more refugees than any other country – accuses Greece of human rights violations. The two countries have a fraught relationship, and there is a fear that skirmishes between police forces on the border may flare up once again now lockdown has ended, with refugees caught in the middle.

Meanwhile, civil society organisations and parliamentarians continue to raise the alarm about unsanitary and overcrowded conditions in refugee camps on the EU's borders. German MEP Dietmar Köster told QCEA that the situation was "already inhuman – even more so now. The requirements to keep your distance, wash your hands and stay at home cannot be met." (see page 8)

The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has expressed hope that the COVID-19 crisis will lead to a rethinking of how the world supports refugees, migrants and internally displaced people. Sadly it seems that this is far from a reality on the ground in much of Europe.

Europe declares states of emergency – our rights at risk?

Every European state with the exception of Belarus is party to the European Convention on Human Rights, which has formed the bedrock of the continent's fundamental rights framework since the end of WWII. However, Article 15 of the Convention allows signatory states to suspend their obligations in times of emergency – and several EU countries have already done so, including Estonia, Latvia, Romania and Bulgaria.

The activation of Article 15 raises yet again the concern that governments will – by accident or design – facilitate human rights violations and abuses of power as they seek to contain COVID-19. In Hungary, Viktor Orban's authoritarian government has already made the most of the crisis to push through a variety of restrictive measures unrelated to the pandemic, targeting the trans community in particular. The move, which plays to Orban's traditionalist and Christian conservative base, reminds us of the potential human rights crisis brewing across the continent as unprecedented powers are assumed by the authorities.

QCEA is collecting evidence of rights abuses and new powers across Europe during the pandemic. To find out how to make a contribution to our grassroots human rights tracker, see page 7.

Kosovo rejects EU pick for dialogue with Serbia

The EU's efforts to normalise relations between Kosovo and Serbia suffered a setback in late May when then Kosovan President Hashim Thaçi rejected the EU's proposed special mediator.

Slovak diplomat Miroslav Lajcak was appointed to the position in March by the European High Representative for Foreign Affairs. But Slovakia is one of five EU member states which does not recognise Kosovo's independence – making him an inappropriate candidate according to the government in Pristina. Instead, Thaçi called on the United States to take the lead in talks.

Normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo after the conflict in the 1990s isn't only vital for reconciliation, but is also a condition set by the EU for eventual Kosovan membership. Similarly, Russia – an ally of Serbia – has opposed Kosovo's joining of the United Nations until the two countries come to terms.

The snub comes as something of a diplomatic embarrassment for the EU, which has sought to play a major role in peacebuilding in the Balkans.



↑ Swedish MEP Jytte Guteland has proposed an EU-wide CO2 reduction target of 65% by 2030.
PHOTO: EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (CC)

The "European Green Deal" continues to divide

In December 2019, the EU launched its proposed "European Green Deal," a roadmap towards climate neutrality by 2050. The proposals included both legally-binding rules to cut emissions by 50-55% by 2030, as well as massive targeted investments in sustainability via green industries and technologies.

But the ambitious targets continue to cause debate. On May 28, Swedish MEP Jytte Guteland proposed raising the emissions targets to 65%, citing a "need to start now and move faster than the Commission's proposal." But the idea was criticised in the European Parliament's Environment Committee for being unrealistic – and some conservative MEPs took the opportunity to attack the entire concept of the Green Deal when Guteland's motion was debated.

Sylvia Limmer, a German MEP from the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD), called the proposals "nonsense", suggesting that the radical plan would not lead to increased prosperity and would represent a financial burden. The Commission's own estimates put the cost of meeting a 65% target at over €620bn.

For now, the 50-55% target remains, and the Commission's budgetary response to coronavirus (see *overleaf*) doubles down on sustainability as a pillar of the EU's economic recovery. The proposed massive public stimulus package should "do no harm" environmentally, according to the draft plans.

But green industries have given a muted reaction to the proposals, suggesting they are thin on specifics. And Climate Action Network Europe has said that "the Commission [has] failed to make the Green Deal the European Union's roadmap out of the COVID-19 crisis", arguing fossil fuels remain eligible for EU funds.

€1.85 trillion

to rebuild the EU for a post-COVID future

The COVID-19 pandemic is stress-testing solidarity within and between EU member states like never before. The speed and scale of economic damage done by the pandemic has been staggering to watch. While many people have enjoyed the clean skies and improved air quality that societal lockdown has brought large parts of Europe, the impact of halting economic activity has had major ramifications for millions of Europeans, particularly those already in vulnerable social and financial situations. As the pandemic eases its grip on our physical health, the focus has shifted towards ensuring as strong an economic recovery as possible.

On the 27 May, the Commission published a proposal for a vast European recovery package called **Next Generation EU**. Recognising the scale of the "defining generational task" in hand, and that this is bigger than the economic crisis in 2008-9 thus demanding more ambitious investment measures, the Commission has proposed a stimulus package of €750bn – more than triple the EU stimulus agreed in the last economic crisis (€200bn). Alongside the long-term EU budget (MFF) for 2021-2027, this will bring the total financial

firepower of the EU budget to €1.85 trillion, with financing particularly focused on those hardest hit by the pandemic. Commissioner after Commissioner have stressed that the mistakes of the eurozone crisis must not be repeated and that it is only through mass investment rather than austerity that the economies of Europe will recover.

The spending proposals – not to mention the language in which they are couched – clearly illustrate the scale of the task ahead. But they are not without controversy, and have yet to receive the unanimous agreement of all EU member states. The European Commission describes this as "Europe's moment" to re-make the economy and re-think our collective priorities, particularly in the context of climate change. But it could also be the crisis which finally condemns the European project to irrelevance if national governments fail to grasp the importance of the moment, and the need to work together.

The COVID-19 rescue plan is on the table, but will Europe's leaders show the solidarity required to make it a reality?

Economic recovery

- A new **Recovery and Resilience Facility** of **€560bn** to support investments and reforms for a greener, more digital economy
- **€55bn** in extra funding for **social cohesion initiatives**, weighted to benefit communities hardest hit by the coming recession
- An initial spend of **€31bn** on **solvency support** for companies hit by the crisis
- **€94.4bn** for **Horizon Europe**, the EU's scientific research programme, to support pandemic research and new technologies
- A **Strategic Investment Facility** which will receive **€15bn** to support sensitive EU industries and foster "strategic autonomy"

Business remains central to the EU's strategy, but the private sector has not been subject to state intervention on this level since WWII.

Green transition

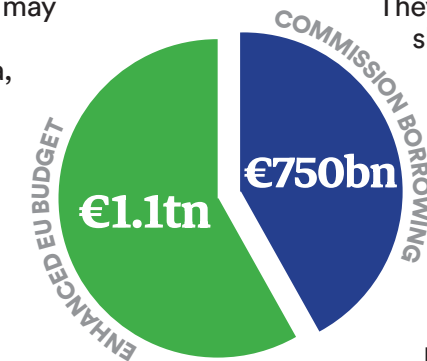
- A **Just Transition Fund** worth **€40bn**, to assist member states in accelerating the transition towards climate neutrality
- An additional **€15bn** to support sustainable **rural development** and agriculture practices
- A **European Climate Law**, which binds the EU to achieving climate neutrality by 2050
- "Massive" support for renovation of building stock and investment in **renewable energy**
- The Green New Deal is mainstreamed throughout the recovery plan, which must "do no harm" environmentally

The proposals build on the existing Green New Deal, and their ambition cannot be doubted. However, civil society and businesses have both cast doubt on the lack of specifics and the pro-business focus.

The stumbling blocks

ECONOMIC TABOOS

Several elements of the plan may prove a bitter pill for member states to swallow. Firstly, the vast spending would be partly funded by the European Commission borrowing money via the markets. **Common EU debt** on this scale has never been contemplated before, and it's only recently that Germany – the main opponent – accepted that it may be necessary. Secondly, the so-called "frugal four" (the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark) have argued that solidarity should be conditional on sweeping **economic reforms** in favour of increased competition and public spending cuts – something which was incredibly divisive when imposed on Greece during the financial crisis.



Mid-July

The **European Council** (the gathering of EU heads of government) will discuss the proposals on June 19. They almost certainly won't agree the specifics, but will likely set themselves a deadline of agreeing to both the stimulus package and the EU's budget before the summer recess. That means the middle of July will likely play host to the conclusive final negotiations.

Quaker concerns

While many of the Commission's proposals represent progress towards a more social, sustainable EU, some of the concerns we had about the pre-COVID budget plans still persist.

- Plans to invest massively in **military research and development** remain in the draft MFF
- A **securitised view of migration and asylum** prevails which will leave countless people on the move at risk on Europe's frontiers
- The plans emphasise the **rule of law**, but do not concretely address how this will be upheld in places like Hungary and Poland

Even if an agreement is reached, its implementation must be monitored closely by European NGOs such as QCEA to ensure that our values are not forgotten as we rebuild.

GRANTS OR LOANS?

The Commission proposal foresees that much of the money will be distributed in the form of grants. But once again, **some member states have balked** at what they see as a massive wealth transfer from north to south, less than a decade after the massive cash injections intended to prop up the Eurozone. They argue that fiscally-prudent countries shouldn't be repeatedly obliged to come to the rescue, and would prefer a greater proportion of the stimulus to be distributed as loans. But critics of their position argue that this misses the point of solidarity, and the benefits of the plan will be felt by all. More crucially, southern member states may feel abandoned in a crisis and permanently **lose faith** in the European project.

Parliamentarian's perspective

JUDE KIRTON-DARLING

Quaker and MEP (2014–19)



This unprecedented crisis demands unprecedented recovery and solidarity measures if the eurozone and the EU are to emerge and a mass social crisis across Europe is to be averted. In this context, the European Commission seems to be stepping up to the historical moment and unfortunately a number of national leaders seem to be missing the mark.

This package is premised on solidarity between countries and sharing risk. Meanwhile, it focuses on building the economy back better by delivering our common political objectives and supporting the dual societal challenges of decarbonisation and digitalisation, as laid out in the Green Deal and the new EU industrial strategy. The plan targets job-rich sectors and activities tightly linked to these objectives, notably substantial boosts in investment in the building sector through a renovation programme, in cleaner mobility, automotive and rail, in renewable energies and hydrogen.

These are long-term investments to fundamentally change our economic model. It's disappointing therefore to see some national leaders – notably the "frugal four" – repeat the language of nationalists and call for less ambition, less solidarity between countries. History will be unforgiving if the EU is undermined and those impacted by the pandemic are left to fend for themselves.



Bringing Friends together to ask the big questions



↑ Coronavirus raises profound questions about Quaker concerns, now and in the future. Via the internet, QCEA facilitated an exchange of ideas and views among almost seventy Friends from across Europe.
PHOTO: SCREENSHOT BY QCEA

Making sense of what is happening, and discerning what to do. That was the idea behind an open conversation which the Quaker Council for European Affairs organised on Friday 12 June.

Sixty-eight Quakers and friends from across Europe met, virtually, to explore the implications of COVID for work now and in the future.

In the first session, *During COVID*, we explored the immediate implications of the pandemic on peace, human rights and European politics. Czech, Swiss, British insights came in a stream. How to compress so much into a few minutes when so much is happening? We heard of the unequal impact of COVID, reinforcing patterns of inequality and privilege. We heard examples of solidarity, of the complex intertwining of gratefulness and anguish which experience of isolation can provoke. **Clémence Buchet-Couzy**, working on the QCEA Peace Programme, warned of the insidious negative impacts of using war language to encapsulate efforts to control the epidemic.

In the second session, *After COVID*, we sought both to understand what may happen, and what we can collectively do to have positive impact. **Molly Scott-Cato** called for massive support for job creation and the green economy while letting carbon-intensive industries wither. And reminded us that the hallucinating levels of wealth inequality must be levelled. **Juliet Prager** implored us to feel the interconnectedness of our lives and the world around us. We must act in the present while taking a long view. **Jude Kirton-Darling** pointed out that the virus' unequal impact results from decades of growing inequality and austerity. We must build a better economy, we must build a better society. These were only some of the reflections from a whirlwind session.

QCEA will distil all this so that its General Assembly – representatives of Yearly Meetings across Europe – can take stock when next they meet. Our 'meeting of minds' will not stop with this meeting, we'll see how to take it forward, to make positive change more possible.

Jeremy Lester, QCEA Clerk

QCEA and QPSW still hard at work for peace education

*Despite the challenges of lockdown, we're still working hard to spread the word about the ongoing relevance of peace education. **Clémence Buchet-Couzy** (QCEA Peace Programme Assistant) and **Isabel Cartwright** (QPSW Peace Education Programme Manager) write:*

This time last year QPSW and QCEA embarked on a project to strengthen peace education involving movement building from the 'bottom up', and influencing policy makers from the 'top down'. Working together on this two-year project, supported by BYM legacy funds, QCEA and QPSW staff are adapting their workplan to the current health crisis and subsequent restrictions in terms of meeting.

QCEA's Peace programme assistant Clemence Buchet-Couzy is contributing an **interactive map on peace education** with the Global Campaign for Peace Education, which will be launched this summer. Also, despite the lockdown, many conversations on peace education happened in the last few months – notably thanks to the Global Campaign for Peace Education, who gathered the voices of different peace education practitioners from all over the world to share their experience and advice on peace education during the pandemic and organised a workshop on Peace Education and the pandemic (see bit.ly/3hD7oyg).

QPSW staff have ensured that the **Case for Peace Ed** publication is being widely accessed in the UK, including as part of teacher training on courses run by the Institute for Education and Roehampton University. The coronavirus pandemic has meant that the peace education conference planned for September 2020 has had to be postponed, but people can register interest for the **August 2021 conference** (www.qcea.org/conference) and we can't wait to bring together Quakers and others interested in peace education across Europe!

For anyone connected with schools a really useful framework has been drawn up by peace education practitioners and teachers in the UK called **RESTORE**, which asks questions to help prepare for a healthy reopening of schools, recognising the varied experiences and trauma people have experienced and encouraging reflection upon what we really want our schools to return to. For info visit bit.ly/37ANQ96. This resource might be useful for others (even Quaker meetings) with a little adaption.

Also coming up is the **peace education webinar**, part of the QPSW Summer Series. The webinar will be on 23 July and you can register at www.quaker.org.uk/events/summerseries.

Help us to keep track of emergency powers in Europe

Many governments across Europe have gained sweeping new powers of surveillance and detention in order to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases, this may be in the public interest; sometimes it will not. The message from Europeans must be absolutely clear: **today, we willingly cede our freedoms in a crisis – but tomorrow, we want them back.**

It's vital we keep track of what powers are being granted, and how they're being used. As such, we are currently accumulating a record of the following from across Europe:

- **new powers** claimed by governments which have human rights implications,
- the **legislation**, often passed very quickly, which granted these powers,
- details of **how long** governments will retain the right to use these measures,
- reports of **abuses** by authorities,
- examples of **solidarity** and resistance/resilience.

If you'd like to make a submission to our record of something you're aware of, please visit www.qcea.org/DuringCOVID for more details.

Viral content

QCEA's YouTube channel features exclusive interviews with policymakers, civil society leaders and key experts, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on peace, human rights and the future of the European project. Come and join the conversation, and subscribe to see new videos as soon as they're online. Visit www.youtube.com and search for "QCEA".

Conditions in
refugee camps on the
EU's borders were already
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DIETMAR KÖSTER

German MEP





PHOTO: GASDUB (CC)

Sahifa Mirza is a graduate from the Université Catholique de Lille, France and the University of Szabist, Pakistan. Now a researcher living in Paris, she writes —

The question of police violence is not new in the history of France. But since 2018, with the appearance of the *Gilets Jaunes* (yellow vest protestors) the use of force by police in France has been more widely discussed. Since the COVID-19 lockdown began on 17 March there have been an increasing number of videos of police violence, especially from the suburbs.

Many protesters called for justice for Adama Traoré, a 24-year-old Black Frenchman who died in the police custody in Persan (Val-d'Oise) in July 2016. Neck compression is also suspected of being the cause of death – drawing parallels with George Floyd's death.

Videos shared on social media in recent weeks have shown the heavy presence of police in economically deprived neighborhoods, and the disproportionate use of force in these areas. This has included use of gas grenades and rubber bullets against the residents in areas where many people of African and Arab descent live.

COVID-19 brings an added dimension, as many people from the northern suburbs most affected by police violence are also 'key workers' at high risk of exposure to the pandemic – hospital staff, bus drivers, cashiers, security guards and postal workers.

In May, Amnesty International reported that fifteen videos shared between 18 March and 25 April depicted excessive use of force by police, alongside verbal abuse that points to a broader culture of hostility from police towards residents. The artist Camelia Jordana openly denounced racist police violence on television on 23 May. In response to the singer's remarks, the French Minister of the Interior, Christophe Castaner, denied the accusation via Twitter, calling Jordana's words "untruthful and shameful"; a complaint was filed against her by the police union.

A nationwide protest took place on 2 June, both in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter protests in the US following the murder of George Floyd, but also to draw attention to police racism, sexism and impunity in France. The following day, government spokesperson Sibeth Ndiaye said "I don't believe that France is a racist country and we are not all comparable to the US, neither historically, nor in the way our societies are organised."

For many academics and activists, the modern-day French policing (structures, attitudes, and tactics) cannot be isolated from its violent history, shaped during the Vichy rule in France and later in the former French colonies in Africa, specifically Algeria. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted existing and longstanding aspects of racism on the social fabric of France, and government responses appear to only further highlight their state of denial.

*QCEA's publication, **Framing Human Policing**, calls for a human rights-focused policing reforms in Europe. See www.qcea.org/HumanPolicing*

Post-COVID economic justice: Considering Universal Basic Income

Marcie Winstanley, a Trustee of the British Friends of QCEA, writes about the challenges and opportunities of an idea which is rapidly gaining support

I write this on a sunny day in rural Northumberland, isolated amidst trees and fields, extending far into the distance across the Tyne Valley in Northern England. Without the sights and sounds of others living, working and travelling that are so visible to those living in cities, it may be possible to lose awareness of the constant changes being brought about by COVID-19 for both our planet and people. But to me, togetherness is more important now than ever before, and the response to COVID-19 and its human impacts could be an opportunity to bring about change, connecting our economies, wellbeing and environment in new ways. The opportunities for reflection that lockdown has brought have made me think more deeply than ever about the wider world.

One topic of many current discussions, particularly in Europe, is the concept of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), or Citizen's Income, and what that may mean in practice. As with other models of providing social security, such as the welfare state in Britain, the implementation of a Universal Basic Income can vary greatly depending on the priorities of the government introducing it. One recent experiment in Finland, from 2017 to 2018, saw monthly payments of €560 made available to 2000 unemployed citizens between the ages of 25 and 58. These payments were unconditional and had a positive impact on wellbeing and facilitating reemployment. However, they also came at a time when Finland had recently passed legislation which restricted access to unemployment benefits, known as the 'activation model'. This highlights the complexities in implementing UBI alongside existing legislation, and tailoring it to meet the needs of vulnerable and diverse communities.

In what ways, then, could UBI help countries respond to the COVID-19 crisis? The Spanish Government has passed a policy that guarantees a basic income, particularly designed to provide financial security for those with no or low incomes. Eligible recipients must be between 21 and 65 years old. Survivors of abuse and human trafficking, however, can receive the benefit irrespective of age. This is an example of a government choosing to acknowledge the needs of the vulnerable, adapting their economy for social justice. Spain has also gone further than Britain in guaranteeing protection for those fleeing persecution. In Britain, those without a settled immigration status, such as asylum-seekers, have no recourse to public

funds. While basic accommodation is provided for those seeking asylum, many destitute asylum-seekers rely on the support of local charities such as the West End Refugee Service in Newcastle, with whom I did a volunteering placement in 2016.

In Britain, there is also an ongoing debate about the possible advantages of UBI. The Green Party of England and Wales, in particular, advocates for a government scheme to guarantee an income for all. In a recent conversation with QCEA, the Quaker former MEP Molly Scott Cato emphasised the Green Party's longstanding commitment to this policy.

From my perspective, as someone with little economic education, but two years' experience volunteering as a constituency caseworker, the idea of implementing a UBI scheme raises some questions. I have seen the delays and devastation caused by the roll out of Universal Credit, and its inadequacies in responding to the diverse range of reasons why people may seek financial support: because of housing need, living with disability, caring responsibilities, in-work poverty, fleeing abuse or often a combination of intersectional factors. It would be vital for a scheme which could potentially replace Universal Credit to respond to these needs, and for those determining policy to consider the different causes of poverty and unemployment faced by people at different times in their lives. This is something that could help to challenge the stigma around discussing state benefits that is still common in Britain, as well as to improve the nation's financial wellbeing.

One of the most important lessons that I have learned as a caseworker has been that no issue impacting someone's wellbeing exists in isolation, and only a small part of an individual's unique story is shared with me when I respond to their needs at a particular moment in time. It is a privilege to feel I am building trust and connectedness in my work. **Both during and after COVID-19, an opportunity presents itself to make policy decisions with compassion, and it is clear to me that economic justice must be part of that.** Whether through UBI, through doughnut economics to rebuild sustainable economies – as is currently being explored by Amsterdam's local authority – or through a wellbeing budget like in New Zealand, it is my hope that the needs of our planet and people will be prioritised through new ways of working.

Neville Keery, a founding member of QCEA, recently contributed an article to our blog on the subject of UBI. You can read it at bit.ly/3dUSCR9

Privilege and the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is shining a powerful spotlight on the deeply rooted injustice in our societies and our economies, writes **Paul Holdsworth**, the alternate member of QCEA General Assembly representing Belgium and Luxembourg, and part of the Executive Committee of the Europe and Middle East Section of Quakers.

I'm writing this in my quiet study, where no one will disturb me. If I need fresh air, I can go outside and enjoy my garden. I live in a village away from the crowds of the city. I've no need to take public transport to work. If I need food, I can drive down to the local supermarket and buy whatever takes my fancy. Lockdown is no real hardship for me, for I am privileged.

The privileged can avoid many of the negative effects of lockdown. For example, home-schooling may be fun in the middle-class home where every child has her own room and computer, but it may be impossible in a cramped inner-city flat where children have to share bedrooms, have to share a computer and cannot find a quiet space to study or a garden to play in.

The privileged are more likely to avoid the virus itself. Working from home is a recommended way to 'stay safe' during the pandemic; people who work with words and numbers can simply swap the office for the spare room; but for others – carers, delivery workers, bus drivers, cleaners, refuse collectors – the safety of working from home is not an option, and in many cases their work actually brings them into close contact with the virus. My relative safety from the virus – my privilege – is built on the work of those whose health is more at risk.

The pandemic has shown just how much we all rely on people whose labour is undervalued: society's 'key workers' are those who are often the least well-paid, and have least status, in our society. Many people who already live a precarious existence, paid by the hour, with wages that only just cover their

basic needs, have been hard hit by the closure of their workplaces; with no savings in the bank, they have no financial cushion to cover necessary costs of rent and food. During the pandemic, the already alarming number of people relying on food banks has increased even further. My privilege is built on the underprivilege of many.¹

But my privilege has a more deadly side: the pandemic shows us that the privilege divide is actually dangerous for everyone. People on low incomes are more likely to have chronic health conditions (and to develop such health problems earlier in life), making them more susceptible to the virus. Recent data show that **COVID-19 deaths are 118% higher in the most deprived areas as compared to the least deprived areas of England and Wales.**

Part of my privilege comes from the colour of my skin. Social and economic inequality is closely linked to racial inequality. Racialised groups (sometimes recorded in statistics as Black, Asian and other minority ethnic or BAME) are much more likely to die of COVID-19 than the rest of the population; **in the UK, they make up 18% of the population, but 32% of critical care patients.** More than half of pregnant women admitted to hospital with coronavirus in the UK were from a BAME background. The first four doctors who lost their lives as a result of treating COVID-19 patients in the UK were all Muslim.

In all these ways, the pandemic is shining a spotlight on the inequality – the human suffering – on which economies and societies in the global north are constructed. But it's also highlighting major global inequalities between what are sometimes referred to as the 'developed' and 'developing' parts of the world.

Many work in the informal economy, so have no income if they are sick or told to stay at home. In India the lockdown affected 400 million informal workers, many of whom chose to walk hundreds of kilometres to their home villages, rather than starve in the cities. Economic migrants may lose their legal status in their host country if they cannot work.

Refugees and internally displaced people are at great risk from the virus as they often live in crowded conditions, already suffer from poor health and have limited access to handwashing, health care, safe shelter, and economic assistance.

The pandemic's socioeconomic effects particularly hit women and girls, who often work in the informal economy, or are expected to look after children home from school or sick relatives, and face an increased threat of domestic violence. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says the virus threatens to roll back "even the limited gains" made in addressing gender inequities.

These kinds of inequality and injustice, both local and global, are not new. We've known about them – and been complicit in them – for decades.

Data from the UK Office for National Statistics show the wide gap in school attainment and income between the rich and the poor; being born privileged still means you usually remain privileged. The better off are 80% more likely to end up in professional jobs than those from a working-class background, and even when people from disadvantaged backgrounds get a professional job, they earn 17% less than their privileged colleagues.² **Men living in the poorest communities in the UK live on average 9.4 years less than men living in the most privileged areas.**

Privileged people do not *earn* these advantages. Privilege is largely inherited. Simply being born into a family that is white, owns a house and has a university education is enough to win you a free ticket to a lifetime of major economic and social advantages over those who are not so lucky.

Before the pandemic, the European Commission had already concluded that "overall, income inequality has increased in half the Member States [...] the current level of income inequality in the EU-28 is too high. [...] It is desirable to achieve a level of income inequality that is at or below the EU-28 pre-crisis average".³ The results of the pandemic may well increase inequality and widen the privilege gap even further.

“My relative safety from the virus – my privilege – is built on the work of those whose health is more at risk.”

The pause in 'normal' activities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has given us a time to reflect about the kind of world we want to live in.

The pandemic has highlighted the human potential for togetherness and solidarity; will our vocal support for 'front line' staff, for example, translate into a willingness to pay more to fund higher salaries? Will we give up some of our privilege to create a fairer society?

Governments have reacted rapidly, often with major reversals of policy, to support their economies; will they be prepared to implement radical reforms to redistribute wealth away from the privileged to those currently disadvantaged, for example through a universal basic income?

Can we take advantage of the opportunity offered by this unique disruptive event to build a world that's fairer for everyone?

1. Yes, some governments have introduced schemes to underwrite the wages of some of the people unable to work because of the lockdown. But will the cost of these state payments eventually fall upon the most vulnerable through another round of 'austerity' leaving societies even more unequal than before?
2. State of the Nation report, 2018 to 2019. UK Social Mobility Commission
3. Addressing inequalities: a seminar of workshops. EC. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019. It also noted that "...policy instruments to address inequalities are primarily the competence of the Member States, with the EU playing a supporting role".

Time for my next chapter

MARTIN LENG

QCEA Communications
Coordinator



Dear *Around Europe* reader,

Since November 2016 I have been privileged to work for QCEA – part of its deeply human and profoundly dedicated team – to help shape our organisation's image and voice.

My aim has always been to make QCEA stand out and look professional in the crowded field of political advocacy, and I hope I've done the organisation proud. But in reality, the work of my colleagues speaks for itself. As the world changes around us, I'm more convinced than ever of the importance of rational, compassionate Quaker voices in our public discourse.

In these last three and half years, I've been given so many opportunities to represent a Quaker perspective on peace and human rights in a variety of exciting ways, from designing our reports to presenting our good work at major conferences. I've also been lucky enough to meet many of you, and overseen sixteen editions of *Around Europe*!

However, my own world is changing too, and in August I will be leaving QCEA for pastures new. While I'm excited about the next step in my career, I suspect I'll be hard-pressed to find the camaraderie, kindness and sense of fulfillment which have marked my time at Quaker House Brussels. I will remember these days fondly.

Thank you so much for letting me play a small part in your community and its pursuit of a better world.

In friendship,
Martin

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QCEA's important work on peace and human rights **depends on your generous support**. Over 50% of our income comes from donations. Donating is quick, easy and makes a real difference to our work. **Here's how to help.**



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