

Finding a European Quaker voice for the moment

This year has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We mourn the significant loss of life that that has resulted from the pandemic, as well as the separation, loneliness and other consequences it has had. The lockdowns and social distancing required to control the spread of the virus are having significant economic consequences, forcing radical shifts in public spending and compounding economic and social inequality. What will a post- COVID Europe look like, how will Europe pay for it, and will Europe seize the opportunity to decarbonise as it recovers?

The pandemic has been coupled with the growing realisation of the parallel of systemic racism, as following the murder of George Floyd there has been a growing awareness amongst Quakers and wider society. Even as we experience the effects of global warming and of a global pandemic, we see the dangers of nationalist and selfish responses to them.

The following document draws upon:

- Discernment by the QCEA General Assembly between 2005-2009, culminating in the publication of 'A Quaker vision for Europe'. This was a widely distributed QCEA leaflet produced in four languages, including key messages on peace and human rights, but also sustainability and economic justice.
- The Quaker response to the Open Letter from the Conference of European Churches on the Future of Europe, written mainly by QCEA General Assembly Members, and endorsed by the General Assembly in April 2017 and by the EMES Annual Meeting a month later.
- Work by the Quaker Peace and Social Witness Economics & Sustainability subcommittee and staff that led to the QPSW document Principles for a green and just UK recovery.

A journey to European renewal

March 2021

A Quaker approach to rebuilding European economies after COVID-19 has much in common with the advocacy that Friends have been conducting over many years. Our approach is grounded in faith, and arises from centuries of experience of expressing our values through action.

We hope that this is a 'Kairos moment' - a crucial moment of truth - for the future of Europe. If people and nature are to be at the centre of our action, then European economies need to be reorganised and decarbonised. For all too long governments have protected banks and markets in the erroneous hope that these interventions would trickle down to support society more widely.

A green recovery needs to go beyond blind 'quantitative easing' to minimise hardship caused by the pandemic and providing good quality jobs and livelihoods in sectors and activities which care for people and the environment. It is particularly important in Europe that economic crisis does not further encourage nationalism and far-right hatred. Europe must not miss this moment to be bold - delivering a just transition to a zero-carbon economy.

1. Build a sustainable economy, that provides quality livelihoods

Urgent action to reduce net European greenhouse gas emissions to zero is vital if we are to protect the living world, including its human species. Water scarcity and ever-increasing extreme weather is already affecting large parts of the world, and climate projections for the end of this century threaten a bleak future.

Continued improvements in resource efficiency are essential but have proved insufficient in reducing carbon emissions quickly enough. It is necessary to address the demand side of the equation, including changes to the life style of many Europeans.

Economic progress should also be measured in qualitative terms to ensure that the output of goods and services address inequality and improve lives in Europe and worldwide, and are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The dominance of GDP growth within economic discourse contributes to resource overuse while failing to address inequality or improve the lives of people in Europe. We can and we must define increased wealth in better ways than GDP growth, a measure which includes weapons production but ignores contributions to society which are not bought and sold.¹

Policies should focus on preserving and enhancing lives and livelihoods, rather than seeking to balance protecting lives and preserving 'the economy', which has been the case in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Greener industries and practices should be favoured. Carbon hungry and polluting sectors should be allowed to wither, but through ways that are socially just for the people they employ.

European governments and institutions should support retraining and job creation that accelerates the transition to zero carbon. This investment would pay for itself many times over, help Europe meet its carbon reduction objectives, develop the skills base and protect employment in a new economy.

Europe risks entering a time of high unemployment, but enhancing the zero-carbon transition would provide work, for example retrofitting homes, restoring natural habitats - alongside investment in nurturing human capital through the arts, education and social care. Priority should be given to creating decent livelihoods for all.

The economic crisis brought on by COVID-19 invites Europe to rethink its aims as a community, and to encourage those elements of the economy and of society that support the journey to European renewal. There are positive developments which we encourage such as the European Commission's proposals on local production that favour local supply chains and building resilience. The EU's subsidiarity principle provides a good basis for further developments in localism.

2. Choose corporate responsibility and fair wealth taxation, and not austerity policies

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the economic and health inequalities in European societies unavoidably clear. Those parts of European societies that suffer the highest deprivation are also at greater risk due to existing health inequalities. Some policy

¹ See, www.QCEA.org/mff.

responses to the crisis have exacerbated inequality, increasing wealth disparity while jobs are lost.

Fair and progressive taxation supports the economy by reducing inequality and creating jobs, rather than generating excessive savings. High carbon emissions are linked to extreme wealth through luxury lifestyles, excessive air travel and meat consumption. Many interventions that are necessary for rapid decarbonisation - such as retrofitting homes for energy efficiency, more community control over energy, and investment in walking, cycling and public transport - will also improve the lives of people on low incomes.

The EU budget has been rewritten in response to COVID-19, overcoming different government perspectives on common debt and public spending. Balancing economic disparity by austerity economics alone must be avoided at all costs as it leads to social and economic disaster, while better alternative policies are manifestly available.

Binding social responsibility requirements should be placed on large companies in receipt of public money. QCEA welcomes that many European countries have prohibited companies based in tax havens from receiving financial support. Support for large corporations should also be compatible with Europe's need to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero.

Employees should always be supported, polluting industries such as oil and gas and aviation must not be bailed out without a clear and binding plan to wind down their high-carbon activities. Weapons manufacture and the European arms trade makes the world more dangerous, feeding conflict and undermining European security. We can do better than this.

3. Solidarity within and beyond Europe

We celebrate the achievements of the EU over several decades. Amongst its real achievements it has shown solidarity with those Member States that started from a lower economic base and provided resources to accession countries, contributing to higher living standards for millions of people and in so doing laying a better foundation for a sense of shared purpose and identity.

Given the colossal economic crisis facing Europe and the world, we call on governments to show solidarity with each other and beyond. QCEA welcomes the stimulus proposals being developed by the European Commission, in terms of both scale and focus.

Where economies falter, collective and state spending is responsible and should be vigorously and judiciously encouraged. It must be pooled so that poorer countries do not suffer like they did after 2008. Europe needs to implement debt relief for the world's least well-off countries, and listening to their calls for trade justice and reparations. Debt cancellation becomes more necessary in a changed world when everyone will be laden with the coronavirus bill- the costs of economic recovery should be met by those who can best afford to meet them.

4. Human Rights at the centre of post-COVID Europe

We are grateful for the essential role that the Council of Europe, the European Union² and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe have played in protecting human rights, promoting human security and reducing hateful political discourse for much of their history.

The European Convention on Human Rights, the European Court of Human Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights are all milestones for Europe. However COVID-19 has been a cover for backsliding in democracy and human rights in several European countries.

We have heard of the unequal impact of the pandemic, reinforcing patterns of inequality and privilege. But we have also heard examples of solidarity, of the complex intertwining of gratefulness and anguish which experience of isolation can provoke.

We have heard about infringements of refugee rights, LGBTI rights, of media freedom, and heard of the poor conditions of many agricultural workers.

During the pandemic the lives of key workers, (driving buses, working in supermarkets, etc.) have received new public recognition. But for many this recognition did not protect their lives. Many of those living at the margins have long been envisaging and working to build a world where peace, justice and equality have real meaning for all - whether it is a time of crisis or not. Europe must address the structural reasons for marginalisation, and make human rights a reality for all.

5. The recovery must build peace

QCEA celebrates the successful peace project that the EU represents. It has been, at least in part, a manifestation of the long-held Quaker calling to 'take away the occasion for all war'. QCEA calls on the EU to maintain the focus of its internal and external policies on the basis of non-military and nonviolent approaches, and is concerned about the ease at which the EU is beginning to embrace military 'train and equip' missions, border militarisation and support for the arms industry.

To that end we call for sustainable, appropriately funded, conflict-sensitive approaches to policies relating to all countries within or beyond the boundaries of Europe. As an affiliate of the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office and the Human Rights and Democracy Network in Brussels we call for security based on justice, cooperation and sustainability.

The pandemic has shown the weaknesses in Europe's governments' focus on military deterrents in security policy, and limited attention given to the risks which stem from the long-term underlying problems of economic inequality and climate change.

2 For the European Union Human Rights values are enshrined in Articles 2 (The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail) and 3 (1. The Union's aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples) of the consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union.

Because of our understanding of and commitment to nonviolence, Quaker renounce violence and military force. Thus we have been freed to explore other ways of dealing with conflict and crisis and develop methods of conflict transformation that uphold our peace witness. Peace is a process that involves the full spectrum of economic sectors, and government ministries, from environment to culture.

We warn against the insidious negative impacts of the use of war language by many European governments to encapsulate efforts to control the epidemic. It is insensitive to those who are really suffering war violence, such as the people of Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan. By referring to the 'invisible enemy' there is an increase in anxiety generally, and fear of the 'other' is unwittingly encouraged.

The response to the pandemic and the ongoing witness of the Black Lives Matter movement provide an opportunity to reflect critically on European education systems and the values they instil. QCEA is currently working with Quaker Peace and Social Witness on a joint peace education project. From long Quaker experience we know that peace education, with its emphasis on relationships and critical thinking, can be part of the rebuilding process. European policy must be delivered in an inclusive and gender sensitive manner, addressing long-standing forms of inequality and exclusion.

Conclusion

As a faith-based community with a long history and clear values that are also shared by many other people, we are well-placed to contribute a long-term, value-based perspective and to articulate the linkages among issues - both of which are important in times of crisis.

We are compelled to expose the false gods of the market, wealth at the expense of exploitation of others and of the earth's resources, and security through military might. We challenge the false gods and those who call on us to worship them. We must resist, bravely if necessary, the powers that would oppress our fellow human beings, even if this be at significant cost to ourselves.

Before the coronavirus, we were calling for a world transformed. For example, we have been concerned by EU's budget proposals that included - securitisation of asylum policy, opaque funding for the military-industrial complex - and many of these provisions are still present. Now, during and after the epidemic, is our chance and responsibility to set things on a better path, for the recovery from the pandemic is an opportunity to put things aright. It is an opportunity to build a better economy, and build a better society, and we as Quakers, as QCEA must not let this opportunity slip away.

Background on QCEA and Sustainability

Quakers have long witnessed to the need to protect the Earth, expressed in the life of Friends who lived long ago, such as John Woolman. In the last decade, the need for sustainability and climate justice has been the central message of the two world gatherings of Friends.

In 2016 QCEA's organisational review found that we had the capacity for two programmes, and the General Assembly discerned that at the European-level QCEA was best placed to work to discourage negative developments in the areas of peace and human rights, with the hope that a third programme on sustainability might be possible in the future.

In 2019 QCEA's revised strategic plan asked our two programmes to integrate climate justice into their work, recognising this concern rising among Friends. Staff and executive committee members developed a project proposal and found some additional funding to help QCEA to achieve this - and a Climate and Peace advocacy and dialogue project will hold its first event in early 2021.³

3 In 2012 nine hundred Quakers from around the world met in Kabarak, Kenya for the Sixth World Conference of Friends. The conference issued the Kabarak Call for Peace and Ecojustice, which said: "Now humanity dominates, our growing population consuming more resources than nature can replace. We have heard of forests cut down, seasons disrupted, wildlife dying, of land hunger in Africa, of new diseases, droughts, floods, fires, famine and desperate migrations.... There are wars and rumours of wars, job loss, inequality and violence. We fear our neighbours. We waste our children's heritage. All these are driven by our dominant economic systems -by greed, not need...".

In 2016 three hundred Quakers from across the world met in Pisac, Peru, where a key theme was 'living sustainably, and sustaining life on Earth'. We see that our misuse of the Earth's resources creates inequality, destroys community, affects health and well-being, leads to war and erodes our integrity... The gathering noted, "We are at a historical turning point... We recognise that the environmental crisis is a symptom of a wider crisis in our political and economic systems. Our loving and well-informed environmental actions as Friends, consistent with our spiritual values, must therefore work to transform these systems.