

REPORT ON AN NGO DISCUSSION ON

“Perspectives on Climate Ethics: from COP22 Marrakesh onward”

Monday, 13th February 2017

At the UN Palais des Nations, Geneva.

Background

In the framework of 22nd Conference of Parties (COP22) the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Marrakesh in November 2016 and for the preparation of the 34th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC),

- the Geneva Interfaith Forum for Climate Change, Environment and Human Rights (GIF),
- Franciscans International (FI),
- Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU) and
- the World Council of Churches (WCC)

organised a Public Panel Discussion on Climate Change and Human Rights, from the perspective of ethics, spirituality and justice. This Panel was also within the context of United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week.

Focus:

The Panel focused on

- Ethics, climate justice and human rights within the COP 22 UNFCCC negotiations;
- Interfaith collaboration for advocacy on climate issues at the UNFCCC and Human Rights Council;
- Human rights and Nationally Determined Contribution (NDCs): a space to integrate human rights as an element of climate justice in the climate change actions at national level.

Panelists:

- Mr. Benjamin Schachter, Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR)
- Mr. Jonathan Woolley, Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO)
- Mr. Dinesh Suna, World Council of Churches (WCC) and Representative of the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations

Moderator:

- Ms. Valeriane Bernard, Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University.

Ms Bernard opened the meeting by explaining that the interfaith community felt that it was important to come together to speak about the ethical component of Climate Change since the way Climate Change is impacting so many lives is a highly ethical issue.

Mr. Benjamin Schachter: said that the Paris Agreement is only the beginning; this work will take years if not generations. The effects of Climate Change are already being seen and it is a future no one wants, yet national contributions are still falling short in many cases and we are not on track for achieving 1.5 degrees or even 2. We need urgent action. The Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights has been playing its part and has participated or led events on how to integrate Climate

Change and Human Rights. Participants at these events have raised concerns such as the need to break down silos, raise awareness, and that businesses should do no harm. They have expressed urgency and stressed the disproportionate effects on the poor, migrants, women and all the vulnerable groups of the world. The OHCHR's next panel will be on 2nd March at the Geneva Palais des Nations entitled "What kind of world are we leaving for future generations?"



Ms Bernard thanked Mr Schachter and all those who had worked so hard to bring Climate Change and Human Rights issues together at Paris and in Marrakesh as this was not 'a done deal' before Paris, also commenting that it still seems business as usual in the world rather than reflecting and moving consciously into a transition period.

Mr. Jonathan Woolley: spoke first about ethics, stating that this is an ethical issue as human beings are knowingly causing harm and yet still we carry on doing so.

In fact, we have known this for at least 30 years. He also pointed out that those suffering the most harm are mostly not the cause of that harm and it is difficult to find a human right that will not be affected by Climate Change.

Faith leaders have an important role as they can help the voice of citizens to be heard where some international organisations cannot engage with citizens in this way. He spoke about the work of the Quakers in bringing people from different standpoints together and acting as mediators, often behind the scenes and even at the international level. They routinely find that when people come together honestly as members of humanity rather than as representatives or delegates, agreement and cooperation can result.

Quakers have the ability to work across typical divides. Much of the language of Climate Change has come from the political left, but Quakers have engaged positively with other political groups, for example with the Republicans in the USA. He stressed the importance of using language which does not put off people of different political persuasions but instead includes the other half of political polarisation.

Mr Woolley stressed that technical and scientific solutions are one aspect of action, but we will not succeed in our aims without behavioural change by us all. The Interfaith side event in Marrakesh, in which the Quaker organisation took part, was refreshing, said participants, because it focused on this and on people's humanity in the midst of many scientific presentations and discussions at the main event. At this side event people said that they were helped to cope with their fear.

Ms Bernard thanked Mr Wooley for his inspirational speech, noting that about 60% of the world's population follow a religion therefore it is relevant to address the moral issues with them and also try to use language that appeals to a wider group. When people come together and unite as human beings, it is a message of hope.

Mr Dinesh Suna: told the meeting about the size of the World Council of Churches which has had its Headquarters in Geneva since 1948 – they have 348 different churches around the world comprising 500 million Christians. The WCC have been involved in climate change and environmental issues for decades and have been very active at international events, including Rio and Paris where they handed over a document with 1.8 million signatures. The WCC also collaborates with other faiths e.g. coming together with Muslims at a Marrakesh event called “Making Peace with the Planet”.

The WCC has grave concerns about the possibility of the USA pulling out of the Paris Agreement, and has also called for the Climate Fund to be better activated.

The organisation itself has become a ‘blue community’ with members pledging to avoid bottled water if they have a clean water supply. He also gave various statistics about water use including the amount of the world’s fresh water being used on food production, especially the high use in beef production.

Ms Bernard expressed her gratitude that Mr Suna had raised the hot subject of food production which has such serious effects in many ways but is sensitive as many people want to preserve their cultural use of food.

There then followed a discussion between the panel and members of the audience.

Questions and issues discussed included:

- The linkages between Climate Change and Human Rights need to be improved, be more consistent and at a higher level than they are currently. Civil society plays an important part in pressing for action where some official organisations cannot.
- Many agreements can be reached if people come together but how can this be achieved when there are so many business interests and lobbyists? Mr Woolley gave examples of Quaker success e.g. agreements between different groups regarding child soldiers and landmines and stressed the possibility of small groups to change the world when people make a human connection. In Paris, the French Presidency was able to use multi-layered diplomacy to bring people together in this way too. Ms Bernard added that she had met many business people who had taken personal action on Climate Change – people are people and we can touch their hearts.
- The WCC can provide an example but the energy actually comes from the members themselves, and exemplary churches or countries can have a cascading effect on others.
- We can get depressed about non-compliant countries and the current fears about the statements being made in the USA, but something is rolling now and cannot be stopped. Many countries are carrying out their pledges and within the US, even if the high level language is of concern, much good work is being done at state level, including helpful legislation. It is also important to remember that sustainable energy makes economic sense and is in commercial interests, which will have an effect in any case.
- When asked for further information on water use for food production Mr Suna shared the calculation that every kilo of beef requires 15,000 cubic litres of water when all kinds of water use is added up. www.waterprint.org gives more information on this with the ability for individuals to also calculate their own water use, which can be shocking.

- An interesting question led to the sharing of personal viewpoints: Do you think the intellectual capacity of humans is sufficient to balance the forces of Climate Change versus Business As Usual? The personal response was given that we are impacting the world in ways that we do not fully understand and it is hubristic to think that just because we can destroy something we have the intellect to solve it. Will the coral reefs ever recover? What effect will the loss of such ecosystems have globally? What are the tipping points? At what point will we have caused so much damage that we cannot come back from it? What about when the ice caps have melted? We do not know the answers – it may not be the end for everyone, but it will mean change.

Ms Bernard closed the meeting with a group meditation suggesting that in such a space we can find solutions to problems.