

Facing the Limits of Reconciliation

Interview with Andrew Tomlinson

Andrew Tomlinson has been Director of the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in New York since 2008. He grew up in the U.K. and became a Quaker when he moved to Philadelphia for graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. His academic background is in archaeology and anthropology, and he worked for many years as a banker, including several years with a socially responsible investment business. He is currently a member of Chatham-Summit Monthly Meeting in New Jersey. Andrew spoke by phone with Western Friend on December 19, 2014. Following are edited excerpts from a transcript of that interview. More information about QUNO is online at quno.org.

Western Friend: I'd like to start by getting some background on the history of QUNO.

Andrew Tomlinson: Surely. In 1945, the UN Charter gets signed in San Francisco, and the Quakers are there, as are various other NGOs. Then in 1947, Quakers in Britain and America get the Nobel Peace Prize, which came out of the ordinary work they did after both world wars. So there was really a sense of Quakers being there right at the birth of the UN. I can just imagine the excitement and the feeling that Quakers were able to change things in the world.

So the world decided that the UN itself would be based in New York. Then while all the diplomats were arriving, and the civil servants were getting assigned, and the whole thing was kind of coming together, the first wave of Nongovernmental Organizations was getting accreditation with the UN system. And it was required at that point that any accredited entity had to be international in its scope. The only Quaker body that could say that in 1948 was the Friends World Committee for Consultation. So FWCC became the Quaker entity that was accredited to the UN, and it remains so to this day. So that's one little piece of the puzzle.

Now, going back in time, there had been a Quaker presence in Geneva since right after the First World War, in relation to the League of Nations, which was sort of an unsuccessful precursor to the UN. So the set-up that eventually took form for was that QUNO became the overall umbrella organization, with the accrediting entity being FWCC, and with two different governance partnerships for the two offices in New York and Geneva. In New York, there is a partnership between FWCC and AFSC. And in Geneva, there is a partnership between FWCC and Britain Yearly Meeting. Each office is directed by a governance committee whose members drawn equally from two organizations.

WF: I don't know about the UN's role in Geneva. I only know about the offices in New York.

AT: The two largest footprints of the UN are in New York and Geneva. New York is essentially all the political stuff – the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Secretariat, also the Peace-building Commission, which is important for our work. And within the Secretariat are some important bits and pieces, like the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. Also based in New York are bodies like the UN Development Program, UNICEF, and so on. So a lot of the coordination of humanitarian affairs is done out of New York. But New York is generally political. It's where a lot of the peace and security apparatus is.

By distinction, Geneva is more operational. You have member-state bodies such as the Human Rights Council. The primary work the UN does on things like human rights and refugees is done in Geneva. And a lot of other operational work gets done in Geneva, everything from labor standards to trade to disarmament.

So you can see then, that the program work we do in New York focuses particularly on peace building and the prevention of violent conflict. It's political work. New York is where the world comes together to think about violent conflict and large-scale human rights violations – both in terms of responses and in terms of setting standards and putting together strategies for longer term peace building, peace promotion, and mediation. Whereas in Geneva, QUNO has more operational programming bits, like human rights, disarmament, food security, climate change, and so on.

WF: So from the materials you sent me, I understand that one of QUNO's main priorities right now is encouraging the UN to include "Freedom from Violence" in its next set of global development goals – for the period of 2015-2030.

AT: Yes. Running up to the year 2000, the world put together the Millennium Development Goals, MDGs, which were relatively traditional development objectives, focused things like maternal health, poverty, and so on. It was sort of a list of things that the world had agreed were really important as key focuses for development aid. The target date to achieve the goals was 2015. So over the last two years and going on for another year yet, is an extensive process in trying to work out what the next set of goals will be. And the process has been much more ambitious than the original MDGs, partly because it's been joined up also with a process of deciding targets for sustainability, from a big set of agreements coming out of Rio, Rio plus twenty, and so on.

And just to give you a sense of the ambition of this thing, Goal One – and there are seventeen proposed goals– Goal One is to eliminate extreme poverty by 2030. It's mind-boggling, this thing.

Our particular perspective on this has come out of our work over the decades in beginning to understand what it takes to actually assist societies who are trying to find their way out of repeated cycles of civil war, sometimes genocide, and violent conflict. How do you do development in those contexts? What has become very clear

to us is that the countries that have not been able to progress towards the Millennium Development Goals are the countries that have been particularly impacted by violence. Where countries have been broadly peaceful, they have been able to make progress on addressing the needs of their populations. But countries that have not been able to emerge from conflict, that progress hasn't happened. So violent conflict is fundamentally anti-development.

On a broad basis, the global statistics over the last fifteen years on progress towards the Millennial Development Goals generally look pretty good. The global numbers are heavily impacted by what happened in China and India, where economic development has been quite rapid. The problem is when you look at this country-by-country. If you look at the distribution of where people are earning less than \$1.25 a day, a basic measure of extreme poverty, whereas that used to be fairly widely distributed around the globe, now it's hugely concentrated in Africa, and in parts of some larger countries.

One difficulty related to the original Millennial Development Goals is that the work to meet them tended to be rather isolated and fragmentary. The traditional development way of doing things is that you target one particular thing and then you focus a lot of external assistance and intervention on it. And that hasn't worked particularly well in societies that are fragile, with weak government, weak institutions, and weak civil society. In those situations, trying to do traditional development aid is like pouring water into a bucket with holes in it.

Instead, you have to find ways of assisting and accompanying societies to strengthen society itself, helping them find ways to address their own problems. And it turns out that's actually quite hard to do. How are you going to help a society build a functioning health system? It's much easier to say, oh, we're going to put in half a million bucks and send in a team to build a couple of clinics. Then look at Ebola. In these countries that have actually been receiving a lot of international assistance, we're discovering suddenly, oops, there are only a hundred doctors in the country and now half of them are dead, to state it in rather bold terms.

But actually finding ways of assisting these societies to rebuild, it's a multigenerational project. And it has to be driven by the countries themselves. It needs to be a partnership, with every country in the world, every society, trying to work together in this project of achieving these goals for themselves and others.

WF: And how receptive is the general international community to shifting to that point of view?

AT: A lot of the things that go on at the UN are all about framing issues in ways that don't seem political, that make very broad connections, sometimes in simplistic ways. So, for example, "freedom from violence" is a framing that really makes sense for people around the world, whether you're in a village or an urban slum or Ferguson, Missouri, or even to policy makers. Because, you know, violence is a

fundamental dimension of human suffering, just as much as hunger or disease or ignorance.

So, you try to get a fundamental messaging that works. Where it gets much harder is when you do get into a political space, because what we're really talking about here is actually about how individual societies organize themselves, and particularly about how they address issues like inclusion, justice, and rule of law, how they organize themselves so that the needs of regular people, not just elites, get addressed. And so suddenly, you're talking about issues that are very, very sensitive politically for individual countries. And that's where it gets tough.

WF: So how do you envision that setting this goal of "freedom from violence" will actually make a difference on the ground? And how you can actually point to it in 2030 and say, "Here, we've succeeded here, and this is how."

AT: So the first level is at the level of the goals themselves. And we've got another year to go on this. These issues are still very much alive, but they could all disappear at the last minute. But Goal Sixteen, which is the heading for this goal, is: To promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, to provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. And then, underneath that, is a list of targets and that is where the measurement comes in.

For example, one of the targets is: significantly reducing all violence-related deaths and death rates. And that's something you can measure. Or another example: end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence and torture against children. Or one that's harder to measure: ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. And some targets are very specific. For example: provide legal identity for all, including birth registration. That sounds very minor and technical, but actually, it is hugely important. Hundreds of millions of people around the world don't have a proper legal identity. And that has an amazing impact on provision of services and all kinds of things

Now what is happening on the measurement side is that there is actually quite a lot of work being done by a number of people to try to measure this stuff. There is an organization called the Institute for Economics and Peace, which produces something now called the World Peace Index. They use statistically valid techniques of combining already available statistical data points in an appropriate weighted way to give a picture of where the societies are that are more or less peaceful and how that's changed over the prior year. And they are also trying to work out what factors contribute to violence. Another example is this gentleman called Mo Ibrahim, who is an African businessman, who has a foundation that produces an index of African governments. There's actually a Mo Ibrahim Prize for the African leaders who've produced the greatest improvements in their countries on governance, and it has categories like safety and the rule of law, participation and human rights,

economic opportunity, human development. And he ranks African countries by scores on this index.

So quite a lot of work has been done, and there is a great deal of will and momentum around trying to make it happen. But the reality is that it's really only the tangible stuff that you can easily count. You can count how many bags of rice you send somebody, but what you're not able to count is how much you completely distorted the local food security and food economy by delivering those bags of rice. So, it's an ongoing effort. Donor countries want to demonstrate to their taxpayers that their money is being used appropriately and responsibly. But it's always going to be tough.

WF: You spoke earlier about work that QUNO had done for years in helping societies find their way out of cycles of violence. Would you talk more about that work?

AT: If you compare a country that has been devastated by natural disaster and one that's been devastated by civil war, they kind of look the same. If you go through those towns and villages, you'll see a lot of destruction of infrastructure, of people's lives, you'll see a lot of graves, you'll see a society that's been torn apart. Yet, the case in which the society's undergone violent conflict, a civil war or otherwise, is different because people have done this to each other. Rather than a tsunami or a mudslide, people have done this to each other. Which means that to set things right, you have to address that. You have to address the relationship between people, their communities, and their governments. If you don't address the divisions, if you don't address the scars of war, then you are not able to help the building of sustainable peace.

So reconciliation and dialog are central to peace building. But this is a difficult space. It's interesting that most of the mandates from the Security Council for peacekeeping operations include some references to reconciliation, and yet the toolkit is fairly bare. There are things like truth and reconciliation commissions, like the South African example. And there are ways of using local traditional methods of truth telling or justice, and sort of readapting them, which has been seen in Rwanda and Burundi and Liberia and Sierra Leone. And we're seeing some work around things like national dialogs, but it's very fragmented in the U.N. system. The world really hasn't worked it out yet. And I think this is an area where Quakers really have a lot to add and a lot to offer.

WF: Can you say a little bit more about national dialogs?

AT: Well, the first steps of a traditional peace agreement, coming out of a conflict, are largely about bringing together the main combatants, the guys with guns, and trying to get them to stop shooting at each other. Now, that what you have to do to put an immediate stop to violence, but those are not the people who you need to be involving in order to build sustainable peace in the country. There you need to have a much broader consultation, including very much in particular, women, and non-

combatants, and people beyond the political elite, in order to get some kind of a dispensation for the country that is going to actually have some chance of surviving over time. It's more than getting their buy-in; you actually need their input. You need an agreement that reflects the priorities and needs of as broad a range of the population as possible. So there needs to be a shift from just bringing the fighting to an end to something which is working toward a much broader societal agreement about how you want to structure your society. And it's really tough.

WF: Have you seen this done?

AT: Well, people are trying bits of it. The traditional way that the world has done this is to try to move as quickly as possible from a peace agreement to elections. But as we've seen, elections in themselves can be trigger points to violence. Elections really should emerge from a society's consensus as to how to structure itself.

But one example, last year, was the national dialog in Yemen. For a society that had been extraordinarily divided, the process was really quite inclusive. They really did set out to include civil society groups, women, youth, private sector, and so on. The consensus is sort of falling apart now even as we speak, but for a while, it did provide some basis on which there was a broader discussion.

Another place where we have seen some degree of successional transition on the basis of national and political discussion has been Tunisia. The place where the so-called Arab Spring started was in Tunisia, four years ago. And now it's the place where some of those initial hopes have actually emerged in terms of a far more inclusive national consensus and constitution.

What we also have are a number of places where you can say, it could have been a lot worse. Unfortunately, we are a world of incremental progress. I mean, South Africa, what was not addressed with the end of Apartheid was a fundamental set of economic inequalities that remain in place to this day. In some ways, it was almost like there was merely a change in who the elite were, from a racial perspective. So it was a necessary but incomplete transition. And it's no different from the United States, frankly, where the Constitution is still an imperfectly implemented agreement. And so all countries perhaps are doing this. The question is how can we help each other at least keep things going in the right direction?

WF: I'd be interested if you could also say a little bit more about traditional practices of reconciliation and places where you see examples of that.

AT: Yes, well, almost every society has come out of a civil war, a violent situation. The reality is that almost no justice exists in the conventional sense. If you look at the tribunals that have happened in various places around the world, the justice that does happen is at best symbolic. You get an international tribunal; it costs millions of dollars, it meets for ten to fifteen years, and then three perpetrators go to jail. Now, I don't want to say that that's a bad thing, because even then, that has huge

symbolic value. If even some people are brought to justice, and if they are some of the worst perpetrators, then it's obviously a good thing. But the reality is, if you think of, oh, rape victims in the Balkans, you know, almost none of them have ever had any kind of compensation or even really any formal justice recognition of their suffering. And this is the case almost universally across the world. Look at all the African cases or other places. Formal justice mechanisms are largely insufficient, although important. Because if you think about these are places where formal justice barely exists, a Somalia or a Burundi, the institutions are not strong enough.

So you're looking to do two things. Firstly, if there are any kinds of local justice mechanisms, then they may be brought into play. So for example, in post-genocidal Rwanda, the *gacaca courts*, which have come into their share of criticism, were local justice mechanisms, which were able to process a far larger number of cases than would have been possible through the official court mechanisms of the state. Secondly, in other cases, you can turn to other traditional mechanisms that relate less to justice than to truth telling, so that people can be recognized in what actually happened. And there, we have in Sierra Leone a process known as *tombol talk*, in Burundi, the *bashingantahe*, Liberia, *palava hut*, a lot of these have been at the community level, where people have been able to have some kind of a protected space where they can just as individuals address both what happened to them, but also potentially where the perpetrators can tell their stories, too.

This is where the Quaker experiences in restorative justice are hugely relevant. Systems of justice around the world vary. The most prevalent type are mostly punitive justice mechanisms – you do something wrong, you get caught, there's a judge or a jury, and you are formally punished. And the challenge with that approach is that it actually provides very little in terms of recognition for victims, rehabilitation for victims, or for that matter, rehabilitation of offenders. The Quaker approach has always been different. William Penn's notion of the penitentiary was all about trying to help society heal itself, not by having a purely punitive approach to justice, but a restorative one, which both recognizes victim suffering and also finds ways for society to heal itself, finds ways for forgiveness and rehabilitation to occur. This particularly speaks to the reality of a society emerging from huge violence. If a it is trying to find a way to reconcile itself, then healing has to take place, not just punishment.

However, reconciliation is tricky. For us, reconciliation and dialog need to usually appear in the same sentence, and here's the reason. When we think of reconciliation, we often think about it in human terms of putting people in the same room to share their own experiences as human beings and try to come to a new place where, effectively, they're able to forge new lives as a community together.

The thing is, in many situations, what is needed is not just addressing pain and trying to move to healing. Here's an extreme example – a slave and a slave master cannot really be reconciled. You can have dialog. You can try to get them to

acknowledge each other a little bit more as human beings, and that may somehow improve the conditions of the slave. But you can't really get to reconciliation unless you address the underlying structural injustice. And it's where there are these huge imbalances of power that reconciliation gets really tricky.

The place in the world today where this is most clear is in Israel-Palestine, where there is this huge power imbalance. The Israelis have all of the power. They control most of the resources; they control the tax revenue; they have overwhelming military might backed by the U.S. The Palestinians have an utterly destroyed economy; they have no political power; they don't control their own resources; they have no basis upon which to bargain. You can have dialog here, but the only way to even up the power imbalance is through the use of external mechanisms, like international human rights law, like the Geneva Conventions, these external points. And you need external actors to emphasize the necessity for an approach that will give equal weight to the needs of all peoples in the region. But it actually is not justice to say they should sort it out themselves.

WF: You talked earlier about countries being careful to work together as partners and not to impose solutions on each other. So I'm curious what ways you see to shield victims of violence in nations that have fragile or ineffective or essentially no functional government. Where, who provides the framework of help in those cases?

AT: Where I think we're trying to come to (and it's an interesting question who the "we" is) is that people from a lot of areas – security, development, humanitarian action, peace building – across all these areas, people are seeing that in the end, the answer is about helping societies to become more resilient, more adaptable, and stronger in their own internal mechanisms and processes for addressing problems as they arise. That's part of it.

The other part of it is providing an external system that supports societies in becoming more resilient and stable. And that has to do with trade agreements; it has to do with trying to address flows of arms; it has to do with addressing external political and security agendas, like how you do your anti-terrorist work. It also has to do with addressing transnational organized crime and trafficking. It's about providing a context of international norms and standards that help societies themselves become stronger. And it's about making the world in the big picture a fairer place, where fragile countries' entire economies and political systems are not driven by the whims of a few more powerful countries.

WF: You mentioned the influence of organized crime. I'm also concerned about the role of legitimate multinational capital, which can overwhelm democracies. I'm interested in how you think the United Nations sees its position between nation-states and private capital.

AT: It's really quite an interesting area. And it's not necessarily just private capital; it's also state capital. In the U.S., we tend to see it in terms of private sector

companies, but in a lot of parts of the world, the commercial investors are state entities. So perhaps what we're talking about are commercial interests.

Also, we need to watch out for a little bit of a tendency – and I certainly see it at the U.N. among NGOs and government officials – to see the private sector as something “out there.” But the reality is, one way or another, it's most of what people do around the world. One way or another, it's how most of us spend our lives in a global way. So it is part of us, it is not something different. The same motivations that lead a farmer to take some of their surplus production to market to make a few bucks is not that different from the motivations that drive a managers of a large corporation.

The question is one of balance. And balance requires things like regulations and agreements. It requires global and national and local standards, which hopefully are enforceable. From the UN perspective, there are several sorts of frameworks and agreements that either exist under the U.N. banner or that the U.N. has tried to promulgate. There is something called UN PRI, a set of standards that are being taken up around the world concerning responsible investment. There are different commercial agreements and standards, that are all imperfect in one way or another, but they are things like the Kimberly Process for Blood Diamonds, a member state agreement. There's the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative – EITI – which is about reporting requirements for oil companies and mineral companies. The UN has a mechanism called the Global Compact, which is meant to be a sort of partnership between the UN and the private sector. And there are human rights principles for corporations called the Ruggie Principles for Corporate Investment. None of this is one wonderful big picture on corporate behavior, but these agreements are a way to proceed.

And of course, the thing is, the UN doesn't really have any enforcement mechanisms. The place where there is actually enforcement is mostly at the national level. But the UN can try to put together global standards, which then can find their way into national and real regional legislation, like an EU level, which are enforceable.

WF: And the standards that you mentioned, do you see much movement towards incorporating them into enforceable national standards?

AT: I think we do. It tends to happen in the easiest areas, things like disclosure. And it happens particularly where you're dealing with publicly held companies rather than privately held companies, because then you can get things into accounting standards, stock exchange listing standards, and things like this. You also see interest from a lot of countries in looking even at environmental impact. And people are also trying to work on things like corruption standards. I don't want to suggest that all is sweetness and light in this area. I mean, if you think how loudly money can speak in the United States, even with its extraordinarily strong institutions—everything from freedom of speech to your constitutional protections and so on – if

those institutions were weaker in the U.S., the situation would be much worse. It's not that people are bad or worse in other parts of the world. We're talking about a whole set of human motivations, for better or worse. What keep them in place are standards and norms, institutions, forms of government, and strong civil societies that keep naming names and pushing for things that benefit everybody, not just a few.