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Quaker work at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

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May 2023*

Away from the buzz of the UN, young Indigenous people gathered at Quaker House under the shade of the ginkgo tree, finding respite through casual conversation, ceremony, and friendship after two weeks of political dialogues at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), held in New York in April 2023.

For Rachel Singleton-Polster and Jeremy Vander Hoek, who conduct work on Indigenous Rights at the [Canadian Friends Service Committee](#) (CFSC) alongside Jennifer Preston, Quaker House provided a unique space: “In our conversations with young Indigenous activists, many spoke of the need for quiet spaces during the Forum to reflect and recuperate. The gift of Quaker House was a huge part of our ability to provide these spaces in small ways. We were able to share this space for the purpose of ceremony and participate in the joyful conversation and community building that came with that.”

Established in 2000, the UNPFII promotes awareness and action around Indigenous issues, ensuring the respect for the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). It works to provide advice and recommendations to the UN’s Economic and Social Council. This year, Indigenous leaders and delegations from across the world met around the theme ‘Indigenous Peoples, human health, planetary and territorial health and climate change: a rights-based approach’.

Discussions across the two weeks were a space for uplifting the vital role of indigenous Peoples in environmental protection and the importance of centering their rights and lands in climate justice work. For Rachel and Jeremy, it was the voices of young Indigenous People at this year’s Forum that stood out: “Their enthusiasm and heartfelt statements reminded us of why we do this work and the importance of everyone’s voice being heard in these international arenas.”

CFSC has been engaged with the Permanent Forum since its inception, accompanying Indigenous Peoples in the work to advance their human rights. During the Forum, CFSC usually hosts a quiet, off-the-record dinner between Indigenous Peoples and State representatives to facilitate constructive dialogue on the priorities of Indigenous Peoples attending the Forum. In recent years, their focus has been supporting Indigenous Peoples’ enhanced participation at the UN, which means giving Indigenous governing bodies a seat at the UN that respects their rightful place as governments, not as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This year, they also supported a statement delivered by their long-time partner, the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) and in partnership with many Indigenous Peoples and organizations across Canada concerning the need for national action plans to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Speaking with Rachel and Jeremy it was clear that CFSC’s work goes far beyond the two-week Forum and is grounded in long-term processes and collaborations: “It is the friendships and relationships that have emerged over decades of carrying out this work, which are an energizing and uplifting aspect of this work.

This work is slow, for instance, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other milestones for Indigenous rights were not achieved overnight but took persistence and dedication over many decades.” CFSC has played a key facilitatory role: “The opportunities include making deep connections with both Indigenous Peoples and state representatives. These relationships are the core of our work and can lead to major breakthroughs on Indigenous Peoples’ human rights over time.” Yet, this work is far from easy: “A challenge has always been the disrespect, lack of recognition, and outright racism that accompanies Indigenous Peoples' struggle for their human rights.”

As Indigenous Peoples’ rights, lands and freedoms continue to face attacks, what role does and can the UN play? Beyond the two-week Forum, the UN has an important function in setting and monitoring the minimum standards for the survival and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples globally, particularly through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This is also a question of self-determination: “By encouraging States globally to commit to action plans to implement the Declaration, the UN can encourage and support the advancement of Indigenous Peoples' rights. Enhancing the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the UN is another way these rights can be advanced. Indigenous Peoples are not NGOs or local communities but hold collective rights as self-determining Peoples. Working within the UN system to create a status akin to observer status for Indigenous Peoples is a major step towards greater participation and rights advocacy.”

For Rachel and Jeremy, promoting Indigenous rights is Quaker work: “Quakers share a common belief that all human beings have inherent dignity and worth, and our work in advancing Indigenous Peoples' rights is an extension of this belief.”