

Patents and Quaker action

The esoteric and complicated rules about patents, copyright, trademarks and other so-called ‘intellectual property rights (IPRs)’ increasingly affect Quaker concerns with justice, conflict prevention and the environment. These rules:

- may restrict access to medicines, seed saving, use of traditional knowledge, and the sharing of scientific and other knowledge;
- affect the distribution of power and wealth, influence who drives the direction and pace of technological change and what individuals can do.

Today these rules are often set globally in remote international bodies like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), both based in Geneva.

“Wealth is attended with power, by which bargains and proceedings contrary to universal righteousness are supported”

John Woolman, *A Plea for the Poor*, Chapter 10

How did Quakers get involved?

Our current work grew from the concerns of British Friends about unjustly made rules leading to possible conflicts over the environment and genetic resources. In the early 1990s, global rules governing plants, animals and micro-organisms were being negotiated in powerful international bodies. It was often without the participation of many countries, especially those in developing regions with their rich biological resources and disadvantaged groups. At first, in a programme in what is now Quaker Peace & Social Witness in London, the aim was to ensure Southern African voices were heard in negotiations on an international treaty on plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. Later, the focus shifted to the WTO rules that affected genetic resources. These rules were in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and were to be reviewed in 1999. The work on TRIPS was passed to the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in Geneva. In 2001, Canadian Friends through the Quaker International Affairs Programme (QIAP) also took up these concerns and began work in Ottawa.

Why work in Geneva and Ottawa?

A. Quaker UN Office, Geneva

Work in Geneva is important because it is a centre where crucial decisions are negotiated that affect people throughout the world. Two Quaker UN Offices represent Quakers at the United Nations and other multilateral institutions in Geneva and New York. QUNO Geneva has long-standing relationships with various government negotiators, having done work on arms control, disarmament, child soldiers, human rights and labour standards over many years. The TRIPS work became a key issue for QUNO’s trade and development work.

Our aim is to help prevent and defuse conflict as well as seeking greater justice for all in the negotiations. The experience of Friends has often shown that conflict can arise when very unequal parties make agreements in which the strong dominate the weak. The QUNO programme on patents, copyright and other monopoly privileges - and their effects on biodiversity, food security, traditional and indigenous communities and access to medicines - is helping, in a small but focussed way, to redress the imbalances between rich and poor countries. It is a quiet, thoughtful voice that complements the work of others.

“Developing countries...negotiate from a position of relative weakness”

UK Commission on Intellectual Property Rights, *Integrating Intellectual Property Rights and Development Policy*, p7

B. Quaker International Affairs Programme, Ottawa

Trade negotiators from developing countries frequently commented on the need for greater understanding of their concerns in the capitals of developed countries. They urged QUNO to do what it could to enable them to be heard. QIAP is working closely with QUNO to address Quaker concerns in Canada about these issues. Canada is part of a key group of developed countries known as ‘the QUAD’ that help set the WTO agenda. The other members are the USA, EU and Japan.

For several years, Friends at both Canadian Yearly Meeting and at regional gatherings had engaged with government over concerns about biotechnology and the patenting of life forms. After hearing about QUNO work in December 2000, Canadian Friends decided that their new Quaker International Affairs Programme would build upon QUNO’s approach within a Canadian context. The decision was made to work on ‘intellectual property rights’ and development as its first project.

QIAP has been able to draw on QUNO’s activities, approach, materials and experts to engage with Canadian officials, non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations to raise concerns about the intellectual property regime and development. To date, QIAP has convened or facilitated formal and informal meetings on issues concerning traditional and indigenous knowledge and access to medicines – again trying to engage in a dialogue that enables a range of people to hear and consider the concerns of developing countries. As is clear from the Canadian experience, rules on patents can affect, among other things, access to medicines in developing countries.

What do QUNO and QIAP hope to achieve?

Quite simply – a better, more just world, with rules that are fair and equitable for those who are poor and powerless. We work to achieve this by:

- supporting the capacity of developing country governments to negotiate on intellectual property issues;
- promoting greater dialogue between developed and developing countries; and,
- widening the base of dialogue.

So far, with relatively little, it has made a difference. For example, QUNO’s work complemented the widespread activities around the world focussed on access to medicines, in particular related to HIV/AIDS. It helped in the development of a declaration on TRIPS and public health that was adopted at the WTO Doha Ministerial in 2001. The declaration’s aim is to ensure the patent regime does not impede access to essential medicines for poor people globally. QUNO and QIAP are also involved in supporting follow-up to that declaration. Yet with so very far to go, it is just a beginning.

Our hope is that others too will see the importance of the rules on intellectual property in shaping people’s lives and opportunities. The more people who work to reshape the current regime in a more just manner the better it will be for all of us. Only then are the rules likely to promote developing countries’ access to science and technology, defend basic rights to food, medicines and other essentials, as well as safeguard the public ownership of shared knowledge and resources.

Are we advocating a specific position?

Unlike individual Friends and some other Quaker organisations, QUNO and QIAP do not advocate specific positions in their work on intellectual property. They work to create greater justice in international negotiations in Geneva and a better understanding in national capitals. They do so in a way that allows different voices to be heard, especially those representing the poor and powerless in developing countries. It is practical action to help to achieve a fairer balance in international negotiations. To be effective, QUNO and QIAP have to understand and work within the processes in which policy decisions are made.

“...we prefer to regard IPRs as instruments of public policy which confer economic privileges on individuals or institutions solely for the purposes of contributing to the greater public good.”

UK Commission on IPRs, p 6

What happens?

QUNO and QIAP provide space for the people who negotiate and develop policy on these issues to meet in a quiet, informal setting. Here they are able to interact, not only with various experts but also to hear often unheard voices of those affected by their trade decisions. QUNO and QIAP:

- have help from a specialist consultant and a group of experts;
- listen to the negotiators’ concerns, in the light of Quaker concerns for peace, justice and sustainable living;
- develop a programme of activities that includes small off-the-record meetings that allow dialogue, sometimes with negotiators from North and South, sometimes with people with different perspectives;
- produce publications to better inform negotiators and others; and,
- co-operate with other organisations as needed, for example, in making sure unnecessary overlap is avoided.

An example from QUNO is the work begun in connection with a review in 1999 of a specific part of the TRIPS Agreement (Article 27.3(b)) that deals with exceptions to patents for plants and animals. A QUNO Discussion Paper led to a series of follow-up meetings (including residential seminars) with negotiators and specialists from around the world. These discussions have helped inform negotiators throughout the review process. The outcome of the review is yet to be resolved. The need for continued work was included in the declaration issued at the WTO ministerial meeting in Doha in November 2001.

What difference does it make?

This work contributes to making the processes of rule-making more just and does not claim responsibility for successful results. Whatever is achieved is inevitably done so by the parties involved. Those involved may be influenced by a wide range of factors.

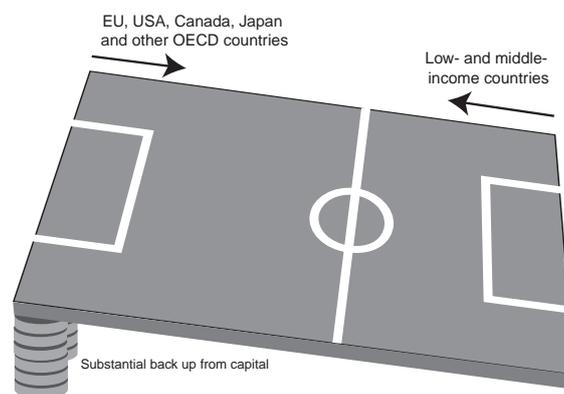
Informal feedback from developing countries makes it clear that QUNO facilitated processes have helped their negotiators to develop their understanding and activities on food and biodiversity. Their experience of QUNO’s work on these areas (in 1999-2000) led to requests to facilitate similar processes on TRIPS and public health. Again, informal feedback, and various academic reviewers, suggest QUNO was able to play a useful role in Geneva. It is too soon to comment on the impact of QIAP’s work but early feedback is positive.

The original concerns also remain. As the UK Commission on Intellectual Property Rights pointed out “...developing countries have been obliged to adopt the protection of plant varieties, by patents or by other means, without any serious consideration being given to whether such protection would be beneficial, both to producers and consumers, or its possible impact on food security.” (p58)

What’s wrong with the negotiating process?

“Active participation by developing countries is essential to ensure the legitimacy of standard setting and its appropriateness and relevance to nations at very different levels of development”

UK Commission on IPRs, p164



Over 20 countries have no representatives in Geneva, many have only 1-2 people who cannot attend all the meetings. EVEN if the pitch was level it would still not be equitable.

Thanks: Food Ethics Council

One problem is the imbalance between the parties. Another problem is that trade policy-setting processes in developed country capitals fail to give appropriate consideration to development concerns, and generally prioritise narrower commercial interests. Multilateral negotiations, however, tend to allow the weaker parties to gain more through coalitions than in bilateral negotiations.

“The immediate impact of intellectual property protection is to benefit financially those who have knowledge and inventive power, and to increase the cost of access to those without”

UK Commission on IPRs, p7

Broader concerns have also arisen about the development impact of the intellectual property regime introduced by TRIPS. The current programme of work continues to respond to these concerns. As part of their work, both QUNO and QIAP publish a considerable range of material that is widely referred to in discussions about these issues.

Who's paying?

British Friends funded the initial work in 1999-2000 as part of their Environmental Intermediaries Programme, with the first discussion paper being funded by the UK Department for International Development. Subsequent funding for this work has been provided by a range of individual donors, agencies, foundations and governments including the development agencies of the British, Canadian, Dutch and Norwegian governments, the Rockefeller Foundation and Oxfam UK as well as British and Canadian Friends.

What else is there?

This is just the tip of the iceberg. There are several short briefing sheets available from QUNO and QIAP on various aspects of the issues we have been dealing with, for example in relation to health, food, and development. These give a short introduction and suggestions for moving forward. Much more detailed information is freely available from QUNO and QIAP – the addresses are given below. Four major discussion papers and three TRIPS issues papers are listed below. Other, more technical, occasional papers as well as seminar reports are also on the websites:

<http://www.geneva.quno.info> or

<http://www.qiap.ca>.

Discussion Papers

Food Security, Biotechnology and Intellectual Property:

Unpacking some issues around TRIPS,

Geoff Tansey, July 2002

Sui generis Systems for Plant Variety Protection: Options

under TRIPS, Biswajit Dhar, April 2002

Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property: Issues and

options surrounding the protection of traditional knowledge,

Carlos Correa, November 2001

Trade, Intellectual Property, Food and Biodiversity: Key issues

and options for the 1999 review of Article 27.3(b) of the TRIPS

Agreement, Geoff Tansey, February 1999

Issues Papers

1. Regional and bilateral agreements and a TRIPS-plus world:

the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA),

David Vivas-Eugui, August 2003

2. Special and Differential Treatment of Developing Countries in TRIPS,

Constantine Michalopoulos, October 2003

3. Multilateral agreements and a TRIPS-plus world: the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO),

Sisule F Musungu and Graham Dutfield, December 2003

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Writer: *Geoff Tansey*

Designer: *Mike Barrett*



Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva

13 Avenue du Mervelet,
1209 Geneva, Switzerland
tel: +41 (0)22 748 4800
fax: +41 (0)22 748 4819
email: quno@quno.ch
<http://www.geneva.quno.info>



Quaker International Affairs Programme

97 Powell Avenue, Ottawa,
Ontario, Canada K1S 2A2
tel: +1 613 231 7311
fax: +1 613 231 7290
email: qiap@quaker.ca
<http://www.qiap.ca>