FRIENDS WORLD COMMITTEE FOR CONSULTATION (QUAKERS)

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First of Two Reports: COP31 at the Midpoint

Challenges & Hopes from Antalya

QUNO is present at UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP 31) in Antalya, Türkiye. Bringing a Quaker voice through the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC), we uphold Quaker Testimonies in our advocacy for urgent, equitable, healthy and transformative global climate action.

Our efforts here range from supporting climate negotiators seeking ambitious global climate action, to one-on-one conversations with those struggling to overcome political divisions, to co-hosting events and inter-faith efforts which call for ambitious, effective and rights-based global policies that protect both people and nature.

Hosted unusually in a bridge-presidency model between Türkiye as host and Australia as Chair of Negotiations (labelled as the 'Implementation COP'), this COP is held at a time of continued challenges to principled multilateralism, increasing militarism, escalating debt and worsening impacts from human-induced crises to Earth and the climate. In addition, not one developed or developing fossil-fuel-extracting wealthy country publicly committed to decreasing extraction. Yet winds are shifting. This COP comes within weeks of several national elections overcoming candidates promoting hate and division. Country roadmaps to transition away from fossil fuels are increasing. While the United States country delegation remains absent, there is an increase in the presence of progressive '*We Are Still In*' US state representatives. Israel was not issued a diplomatic invitation to the COP.

The first week has revealed a recurring tension between technical ambition and structural justice. Across negotiating rooms, side events and informal conversations, there is broad recognition of what needs to happen. However, agreement on how to achieve it fairly, who should bear the costs, and how progress should be measured remains deeply contested.

Repeatedly, discussions return to three interconnected questions: how quickly can the world reduce emissions, how equitably can we transform human activities driving planetary crises, and who will pay for the transition? Beneath these lie deeper questions: how can climate action be implemented in ways that strengthen peace, human dignity and trust rather than deepen existing inequalities?

In this first of two QUNO reflections from Antalya, we share some of the challenges and sources of hope that have shaped our experience of the conference so far. Our second reflection, published following the close of COP31, will analyze the final outcomes of the negotiations and provide an overview of QUNO's engagements and side events.

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Plastered across banners, trams, and meeting halls throughout the Antalya Expo Centre is the COP31 slogan: *"Dialogue. Consensus. Action."* However, as UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Simon Stiell reminded delegates during the opening plenary:

"No COP is a silver bullet. No single conference can bridge the chasm between the science and reality. We must deal with the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be."

Those words have served as a fitting backdrop to the first week of negotiations. A decade after the Paris Agreement, global cooperation has helped bend projected warming trajectories (based on existing policies) downward from 4.8°C (2014 IPCC AR5) to 3.2°C (2023 IPCC AR6), and approximately 2.4°C if finance is committed to implement policies in Nationally Determined Contributions. However, this COP convenes after the latest UNEP Overshoot report confirming that we are set to exceed 1.5°C unless ambition and implementation accelerate dramatically.

Moving into the decisive second week of negotiations, we identify six defining challenges and six quieter, but equally significant sources of hope that have emerged from conversations, side events and negotiating rooms across Antalya. Whether COP31 succeeds in turning dialogue into meaningful action will depend not only on what is agreed in final texts, but on whether negotiators are willing to confront the structural barriers that continue to slow progress while nurturing the seeds of transformation already visible throughout the process.

THE CHALLENGES

1. Mitigation Without a Clear Fossil Fuel Phaseout

Adaptation and electrification have rightly gained prominence in Antalya. The Presidency's flagship 35-by-35 initiative seeks to increase electricity's share of global final energy consumption from 23% to 35% by 2035. Yet one difficult question remains unresolved: where will this electricity come from?

Despite the historic Türkiye-Australia presidency partnership, neither co-presidency has used its platform to champion either a significant additional country contribution to climate finance or a commitment to transition away from fossil fuel extraction and burning.

Observers are therefore watching closely to see whether fossil fuels are explicitly referenced in any final political outcome. The discussion has become a test not only of ambition, but of whether implementation efforts are aligned with the scale of the climate challenge itself.

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2. Climate Finance, Debt and Militarization

Public, grant-based climate finance remains the sharpest fault line running through COP31. Developing countries continue to stress that implementation cannot occur without sufficient financial support, while many face growing debt burdens and shrinking fiscal space. Throughout the first week, civil society organizations and political leaders increasingly highlighted the contrast between the enormous sums devoted to military expenditure globally and the limited resources available for climate adaptation, resilience, and recovery.

Questions of finance are ultimately questions of justice. Who pays? Who benefits? And who bears the costs when support fails to materialize?

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned during COP31:

"You cannot build peace on a burning planet."

3. Loss and Damage - From Recognition to Delivery

For Quakers, Loss and Damage is not only a policy discussion. It is the key moral and ethical call on responsibility to protect the most vulnerable affected now by climate impacts.

Ensuring that the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage provides rapid, accessible assistance rather than creating new debt burdens remains a major concern for many vulnerable countries. Discussions throughout the first week revealed a persistent gap between political acknowledgement and practical implementation.

For communities already experiencing irreversible climate impacts, the question is no longer whether support is needed, but whether it will arrive in time.

4. Science Under Pressure

Science remains one of the strongest foundations of global climate action.

During the opening plenary, IPCC Chair Jim Skea highlighted the extraordinary contribution of scientists preparing the Seventh Assessment Cycle, despite increasing geopolitical tensions and funding challenges. At the same time, negotiations on Action for Climate Empowerment and related processes have revealed growing contestation around references to '*based on the best available science*'.

While such debates may appear technical, they carry important implications. Climate decisions can only be as effective as the evidence on which they are based. Weakening commitments to science risks weakening the foundations of climate action itself.

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5. Who Gets to Be in the Room?

Meaningful climate action requires meaningful participation.

The first week saw concerns raised regarding civic space and accessibility within the COP process. Security restrictions and transport disruptions during the World Leaders' Summit temporarily prevented many civil society representatives, Indigenous Peoples and youth delegates from accessing the venue. Meanwhile, the absence of many major political leaders led some participants to question whether climate leadership is keeping pace with climate urgency. However, one highlight was the meeting offered by Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva with civil society.

As CAN's third ECO bulletin reminded delegates, observer participation is not an optional addition. It is an essential component of an inclusive and legitimate process.

6. The AI Dilemma

Artificial intelligence has emerged as one of the defining themes of COP31.

From AI-powered conference assistants to Türkiye's voluntary Antalya Artificial Intelligence Pledge, discussions about artificial intelligence are increasing. Supporters point to AI's potential to improve climate modelling, energy efficiency and adaptation planning. On the other hand, conversations throughout the first week have also highlighted the substantial energy, water and infrastructure demands associated with rapidly expanding AI systems and data centres.

In a moment of irony, a global Microsoft outage briefly disrupted Outlook and Teams services during the conference, forcing delegates to adapt and reminding many participants of a simple truth: technological solutions can be powerful, but they cannot replace resilient institutions, effective governance and human relationships.

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THE HOPES

1. Human Rights

UN Special Rapporteurs, including Elisa Morgera and Astrid Puentes Riaño, alongside the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), have worked tirelessly to highlight recent international advisory opinions, the protection of environmental human rights defenders, and emerging understandings of climate accountability.

Momentum is also growing around the Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment and the Right to Science, both of which are increasingly being recognized as essential foundations for effective climate governance.

Ideas that once sat at the margins, including ecocide law, are now entering mainstream conversations and being addressed during national statements.

2. Climate and Peace Are No Longer Separate Conversations

Another important development is the increasing willingness to discuss the connections between climate change, conflict and peace.

Through initiatives such as the Santa Marta Process on a Just Transition Away from Fossil Fuels, governments and civil society organizations are engaging more openly with the environmental, human and financial consequences of armed conflict.

As an organization rooted in the Quaker peace testimony, the growing recognition that climate, human security and lasting peace cannot be separated represents an important step forward.

3. New Voices are Reshaping Climate Governance

The climate movement continues to expand.

A growing coalition of countries is advancing ocean-related climate action through COP31's Oceans and Seas Action Agenda, while mountain countries continue pressing for greater recognition of the climate risks facing mountain ecosystems and communities. Although calls for a dedicated mountain agenda item were not successful, ongoing consultations and high-level dialogues have ensured that mountain issues remain part of the wider COP31 conversation.

Equally encouraging has been the growing visibility of the Disability Climate Caucus. Following recognition as an Informal Group in 2026, the caucus hosted its first high-level roundtable at COP31 while continuing to advocate for full UNFCCC constituency status.

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A stronger climate process is one in which more people can participate meaningfully in shaping decisions that affect their lives.

4. Multilateralism Still Matters

At a time when multilateralism is frequently dismissed as slow or ineffective, COP31 has offered reminders that dialogue remains indispensable.

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's direct engagement with civil society organizations demonstrated the value of creating spaces for exchange beyond formal negotiations. Similarly, efforts to increase transparency through livestreams, consultation broadcasts and overflow viewing spaces have provided observers with greater access to important discussions, including those surrounding potential cover-decision outcomes.

Progress often begins with difficult conversations.

5. The Quiet Power of Interfaith Witness

Some of the most meaningful moments of COP31 for QUNO have occurred away from negotiating texts.

Meetings of the Interfaith Liaison Committee (ILC) at the ecumenical booth brought together negotiators, youth representatives, faith leaders, and observers seeking space for reflection, community and moral grounding. Despite limited space, the gatherings were consistently crowded.

As Rev. Charissa Suli, President of the Uniting Church in Australia, reflected:

"We bring the spiritual accompaniment, the pastoral care... And if [we do not] speak in this space, then who will remind them of the human lives that are behind the data?"

Her words capture a truth often forgotten amidst technical negotiations being that climate change is ultimately about people, communities and future generations.

6. Signs That Implementation is Becoming Real

While many negotiations remain slow, important signs of practical implementation are beginning to emerge. Roadmaps focused on halting deforestation, informed in part by Brazil's significant reductions in forest loss, and initiatives supporting the transition away from fossil fuels are building momentum across regions.

No single roadmap will solve the climate crisis, but they do offer evidence that implementation is gradually moving from aspiration towards action.

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LOOKING AHEAD

As negotiations enter their decisive final stretch, outcomes remain uncertain. The familiar divides over finance, mitigation, accountability, and implementation have not disappeared. Neither have the inequalities that continue to shape who is most affected by climate change and who possesses the resources to respond.

However, alongside these challenges, COP31 has also demonstrated the continued value of bringing people together across differences, engaging in difficult but necessary conversations about the future they wish to build. Meaningful climate action is not measured only by the text agreed at the end of a conference. It is measured by whether trust has been strengthened, whether unheard voices have been included, and whether decisions are guided by a genuine concern for human dignity, peace, nature and future generations.

We look forward to sharing a second set of reflections following the conclusion of the conference.

Lindsey Fielder Cook & Sarah Demicoli

15 November 2026