



Minutes of the UNA LASER AGM held on Saturday 10th December 2022 in Bermondsey Village Hall, London SE1 3TD and by Zoom

1 Apologies

Sheila Kesby, Marguerita Morton, Anita Punwani and Hana Shono.

2 Minutes of last AGM and Matters Arising

The minutes were accepted. There were no matters arising.

3 Chair's Report

1. Zoom, In-Person and Hybrid

This year we have gradually emerged from a world dominated by COVID. We have continued to have many online events and meetings, but we have also managed several in-person – as well as hybrid – events. In fact, we are learning to have the best of both worlds, being able to reduce our travelling when it would be difficult to bring people together in-person, but enjoying coming together when we can.

2. Campaigning

Campaigning is a central part of our activity. We have addressed many important international issues, while continuing to tackle the two major international challenges that have stood out during the year: the war in Ukraine and Climate Change.

We were delighted to welcome, in February, Valeria Minisini, as our Campaigns Officer. She has put detailed background and suggested actions for many of the campaigns on our website.

- Following our AGM in November, we had an excellent summary of COP 26, with thoughts on the next steps, from **Peter Chalkley**, Director of the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit. He reminded us that the UK continued to hold the presidency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change COPs' process right up to COP 27 in Egypt, so we continued to put pressure on the UK government to keep up the momentum in working towards Net Zero and in financing Loss and Damage (social, cultural and economic) for the countries most affected by – but least contributing to – the carbonisation of our atmosphere.
- We worked throughout the year in partnership with other members of the Climate Coalition on various climate campaigns – such as: individual letter-writing; a joint letter to the Prime Minister; and the Great Big Green Week (which, in 2023, will be on 10th – 18th June – to give you time to prepare your branch events!).
- In February, led by former BBC correspondent **Keith Hindell**, we wrote to the Foreign Secretary, urging as much as possible use of the UN Security Council in addressing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This was the first of several campaigns during the year linked to the horrific events in Ukraine: these included support for the work of the UN Human Rights Council's resolution to set up a commission of

enquiry; and support for the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia's action and demanding their withdrawal.

- In March, considering the terrible suffering in Yemen, we called for the full restoration of UK aid to that country, and for the cessation of the sale to Saudi Arabia of UK arms, many of which are being used in Yemen.
- In June, in light of the new *The Nationality and Borders Act*, we campaigned to help protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.
- In August we analysed priorities for the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. We also shared responses to the BBC's programme, *The Whistle Blowers: Inside the UN*.
- In November, we urged support to address the famine afflicting the people of Somalia

3. Regional Councils

Our **Spring Council** was our **Policy Conference**. This was our first hybrid event, held online as well as here in Bermondsey Village Hall. Thanks to many branches and the Policy Committee, led by Peter Walker, we agreed 30 resolutions. This will be reported on separately.

Our **Summer Council** in July was run by UNA Harpenden, again as a hybrid event. Those of us who went in-person were made very welcome by Suheil Shahryar and his team; we enjoyed the informal discussions that zoom excludes. The theme was *Climate Change: Impacts, Reports, Solutions*. Excellent speakers included: Unnikrishnan Nair from the Commonwealth Secretariat; Samiya Selim from the University of Liberal Arts in Bangladesh; John McLavery from Oxfam; James Clarke from Rothamstead Research; Paul Ekins of University College, London; and Dieter Helm from Oxford University.

4. UN75 *Building a More Secure World*

We continue to build on our UN75 *Building a More Secure World* Festival, trying to link our activities into the Actions that were agreed at that event. Our partner in the festival, Peacechild International, is extending the *Whatnext4UN* website to cover further activities looking at ways forward for the UN. The Festival part of the website is unaltered; we encourage branches to build on the workshops and agreed Actions from the festival.

5. UNA-UK

This has been a disrupted year for UNA-UK. Their Chief Executive, Natalie Samarasinghe, left soon after completing her sabbaticals in New York. Her successor, Marissa Conway, has recently returned from maternity leave. Several aspects of their work – especially some of those supporting members and branches – have slipped. Recently, there has been confusion about membership and the election of trustees, which is not yet resolved. We are working with Marissa and the new Chair, Baroness Joyce Anelay, to help ensure appropriate support for branches and members. Please let me know your experiences and suggestions.

6. Contributions

LASER is very much a team effort and I should like to thank the many who are contributing to our Region's activities. However, first I want us to remember several wonderful friends of LASER who have died this year, but much of whose ideas and work live on: **Peter Greaves** (important worker with UNICEF and writer of many major articles); **Eirwen Harbottle** (tireless worker for peace and security); **Margaret Rayner** and **Derek Smith** (important local workers mostly with Richmond UNA); **Frank Judd** (NGO leader and peer who focussed particularly on the world's poorest people); **Bruce Kent** (peace campaigner); **Rod**

Fielding (who held many voluntary roles with UNA-UK); **William Say** (journalist, UN and UNA activist).

We appreciate their many contributions to making the world a better place; we shall miss them.

Now to acknowledge those still being active:

- Thank you to the **Executive Committee** for all their support. I would particularly like to thank those who are standing down after many years of substantial contributions: **Neville Grant** (former LASER Chair, current Chair of Blackheath, instigator of today's Ukraine resolution); **Rodney Mantle**, **René Smit**, **Rob Storey**, all continuing to be active in South London branches. All the Executive Committee have been very supportive in their ideas and actions this year. A few deserve special recognition:
 - **Peter Webster**, our indefatigable Treasurer and Chair of the Policy Committee, has not only managed the money effectively (and, for the first time for many years, got all our accounts up to date and fully examined) but has also led a successful Policy Conference and helped many meet the technical challenges thrown up by our new zoom-centred activities as well as hosting many successful events for his local Streatham branch (all while still holding down a demanding fulltime job),.
 - For the first half of the year, we were grateful to Peter and **Sarah Webster** for mailing out our Newsletter; we are grateful to **Suheil Shahryar** for taking on this role, as well as leading Harpenden UNA. I am grateful, too, to **Salem Mezhoud** for helping me edit the Newsletter, jazzing it up and giving it the name *Pulse*.
 - **Jane Beeley** has found time – as well as chairing the Tunbridge Wells and Wealden Branch, and nursing her husband Brian through various medical challenges with which we all wish him well – to continue as our Regional Secretary.
 - **Gonzalo Alvarez** has become our Climate and Oceans Officer, building on the remarkable work he has been doing, often involving young people, mostly based around East and West Sussex, but also including people and organisations from all over the world.
- I would also like to thank **Annesha Kar Gupta**, who, as well as being a diligent Environmental Officer and carrying out the mandate given to her by our Policy Conference, has helped keep our website up to date, even though, since the start of the pandemic, she has been based in India. I'm sure you all find useful the Events calendar and access to recent editions of *Pulse* that Annesha keeps up to date on unalaser.org
- More than a dozen branches have run a wide range of activities. I will highlight here a few especially noteworthy ones:
 - Twickenham and Richmond, with Wandsworth, included an event partnering with Amnesty International on *The Uyghurs of North China*.
 - Luton often link the local and global, such as their marking of Human Rights Day this week by focussing on *Homelessness* at all levels.
 - Harpenden's events included one giving a thought-provoking and original perspective on *Ukraine and Geopolitics*.
 - Streatham and Clapham included an event to mark the *International Year of Sustainable Mountains*, linking to a remote community in the Western Ghat mountains in South India.

- Canterbury's activities included an Earth Day and continuing their work with others on promoting the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Bexhill and Hastings have used some meetings to develop a report, *If the United Nations Was Founded for World Peace, Why Is the World at War?* They are now consulting us all on how to take this forward.
- Westminster's events included one run with the Aga Khan Foundation to mark the UN year for *Celebrating Indigenous Languages and Defending Endangered Languages*; they also held a party on the central London UN Green, for the naming of which they had worked for many years; they partnered with RUSI and the Scottish Office to organise the moving 18th International Peacekeeping Ceremony at the cenotaph, with its associated peace conference.
- Climate and Oceans produced an influential *Youth Report* on Sustainability and Climate Change, as well as a remarkable video on regenerating biodiversity. They have also created an online COP27 video library. Their many events included an Ocean Symposium and working with groups around the world for World Clean-up Day.
- This is just a quick selection from the dozens of branch activities that have been publicised in *Pulse* this year. Some of our branches show amazing energy and imagination in their range and engagements; they win our heartfelt admiration. But we admire those, too, who focus more carefully, such as having coffee mornings to write campaigning letters or do an annual event with local schools. Please don't let the perfect in your branch aspirations be the enemy of the good.
- Several members of our Executive Committee are keen to help branches flourish. This can be in campaigning, awareness raising, becoming better informed. It might include building stronger local links, such as with colleges, think tanks or international commercial organisations or with a major international NGO with local branches like Rotary International, who have a lot in common with us and whom I think some branches might find a useful source of support in running the branch. (It's generally more successful to tap someone on the shoulder and say "I think it would be great to have you in our team" than to put out a general advertisement.) Please get in touch with me if you'd like us to work with you to help your branch flourish.
- And my final thank you is to You – **all our members** – who are the lifeblood and raison d'être of the organisation,

We should welcome a range of further contributions, such as with the website, with branch support, with engagement with young people, with suggesting (then leading) other regional activities. Do get in touch with me to take this further – but thank you for all you already do.

4 Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer, Peter Webster, having thanked Alan Palmer, chartered accountant, for examining them, presented the year's accounts (up to 30th June).

<https://unalaser.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/221210-LASER-2022-fully-signed-Accounts.pdf>

This year you can see we were operating on a much smaller basis after the significant income and expenditure in the previous year on the *What Next for the UN? Building a More Secure World* online festival that marked the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations.

We have not been asking branches for contributions to the campaign fund for this year, because our expenditure was virtually non-existent as a result of the pandemic and lockdowns. However, there were a few donations that were still received. We are very grateful to all those who have made donations of any sort during the year or helped to keep our costs to a minimum.

We also sought donations at regional meetings towards their costs and received £93.98. Alongside the very reasonable charges for the Bermondsey Village Hall, you will see that our other expenditure has been on Zoom, and the WhatNext4UN website, leaving a small deficit for the year of £95.16, but since we transferred the internet and website costs from the remainder of the WhatNext4UN fund, the general fund rose slightly to £4,453.26.

On the balance sheet you will see that there remains a little over £300 in that fund and our total funds are nearly £5,000.

We received £103.47 from the closure of the Dartford and District branch. We no longer keep separately sums received from branch closures, but we remain happy to provide start up grants to new branches.

At the end of the presentation a question was raised about a contingency fund. Peter replied that there is no contingency fund, as there is plenty enough in the general fund. Adoption of the accounts and report was proposed by David Wardrop and seconded by Jane Beeley. This was passed unanimously.

5 Policy Committee Chair's Report

As Chair of the Policy Committee, Peter Webster reported that this year we held our usual Policy Conference in the Spring and passed new or updated resolutions on topics ranging from Afghanistan's Assets through to Women, Peace & Security. The full list appears on the Region's website, where you can also see previous resolutions that we believe remain relevant on a total of 31 topics.

Following the Conference, we wrote to the Foreign Secretary and shared the full text of the resolutions discussed and we received back a much fuller response than in previous years. We have placed this on our website as well.

Members, supporters and local groups who wish to pursue these discussions further with their local MPs or other decisions makers can make use of this, and are very welcome to quote the resolutions as being the views of the UNA London & South East Region.

We are grateful to all those who spent the time and effort drafting the resolutions and amendments, as well as everyone who attended. We would encourage those who put forward resolutions to consider whether the response from the foreign office deserves further particular follow up.

6 Environmental Officer's Report

This report is based on a survey of branches in accordance with the Carbon Footprint Reduction Resolution agreed at the 2020 Policy Conference. Of those approached, six branches and UNA LASER had responded to Annesha Kargupta, the Environmental Officer. Here is a link to her full report:

<https://unalaser.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022-Environment-Officers-Report.pdf>

7 Resolution concerning situation in Russia

Here is the text of the resolution:

<https://unalaser.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/221210-AGM-Resolution-on-Russia-Ukraine.docx-1.pdf>

Neville Grant initiated this resolution to update that produced by LASER earlier this year, and several members have since helped draft his new version. He introduced it to the meeting. There followed a full, wide-ranging discussion on genocide, on the issues involved in the conflict, and on the detailed wording of quite a complicated resolution. Eventually it was proposed that in the coming days the policy committee should sort out the details and agree a final version on members' behalf. This was put to the vote and agreed.

8 Distinguished Service Award

Peter Webster was delighted to report that Barbara Judge, who has kept the Dartford branch going for many decades, has been chosen by the LASER committee to receive this award, but he regretted that she was unable to receive it in person at the meeting because of multiple health issues. He commended her length of service and dedication. For years she organised an annual UN Day service in the local church and she also maintained links with churches, mosques and temples in the wider area. Dartford is the longest standing branch supporter of UNICEF. Barbara has raised substantial sums of money for the charity over the years and continues her support. Perhaps her most distinctive contribution has been to provide a quarterly newsletter of UN news to local churches, other places of worship, local civil society organisations and individual UNA members and supporters for many years. She did so despite having no access to the internet. It is hoped to present the award to her in her home.

Trisha added thanks to Peter and Sarah for regularly printing the LASER newsletter and sending it to Barbara to help her produce her own. Sadly, in the last couple of weeks, UNA-UK have told her she can no longer be a member because she doesn't have email. We will do our best to get her reinstated. Other members gave personal accounts of her dedication.

9 Awarding of the Stevens Trophy

Trisha announced that this year Canterbury branch has won the Stevens Trophy.

Perhaps the most important feature of their work is that Canterbury UNA plays a very active part in local affairs. For many years they have coordinated the annual service for world peace in Canterbury Cathedral. Many local organisations participate. This year's theme was the role of the UN as a global mediator. Her Excellency Linda Scott, High Commissioner of Namibia and Chair of the Commonwealth Board of Governors, delivered the keynote address.

In partnership with organisations such as the Canterbury Fairtrade network and Kent's Climate Action Partnership, they have helped to highlight and tackle important issues and in so doing raised the profile of UNA. Where necessary, they hold the local councils to account. Climate issues figure prominently in their campaigns. This year they participated in the Canterbury Climate Action Festival and on UN Rivers Day in September they showed the film *The River Blue* at Christ Church University. They have collaborated with Greater Lincolnshire UNA in exploring climate challenges and action. This year Dr Bala Subramanyan, Canterbury committee member, was one of five delegates representing Kent's Climate Action Partnership at the COP 27 summit in Egypt. He was also a panellist at COP 26 in Glasgow. The branch supports Climate & Oceans UNA, and Bala has chaired a key

C&O meeting. In April on UN Earth Day Canterbury UNA hosted a hybrid event at which Michael Vince, committee member, reviewed how the GA should tackle climate challenges and Professor Richard Norman examined how local groups are addressing biodiversity within the SDG framework. It's a very impressive range of activities.

The branch was applauded. Trisha thanked Valeria, branch chair, for her inspiring leadership. All attenders from the branch were on zoom, so the trophy would be presented to them later.

10 Elections

(A representative of the winner of the Stevens Trophy – this year Valeria Minisini – is automatically on the Committee.)

The following were elected:

Chair: Trisha Rogers Treasurer: Peter Webster Secretary: Jane Beeley
Continuing Committee members: Gonzalo Alvarez, Salem Mezhoud, Titilayo Odukale, Catherine Pluygers, Suheil Shahryar, Antony Vallyon and David Wardrop.
Two new Committee members: Gillian Dare and Ali Hessami

11 AOB

11.1 Reports for inclusion in the next newsletter should be sent to Trisha by 9th January.

11.2 The next Executive Committee meeting will be on 18th January.

11.3 Normally one of the LASER branches hosts either the Spring Council or the Summer Council. Those interested in doing so in 2023 are invited to express their interest, choose a topic on which to focus and let Trisha know.

Patricia Rogers Chair

Jane Beeley Secretary

Appendix

The AGM was followed by a recorded presentation from the LASER President, **Sir Peter Bottomley, MP**, Father of the House, and joint Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on the United Nations. He showed parts of the Palace of Westminster, stressing the importance of democracy and of our national relationship with the United Nations.

This was followed by a presentation on zoom on **Human Rights** from **Dr Maria Varaki** of the Department of War Studies at King's College (delivered on Zoom), particularly appropriate as we were meeting on Human Rights Day. Dr Varaki had worked for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in New York and for the Legal Advisory section of the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Since November 2017 she had been a member of the ILA committee on human rights in times of emergency.

Dr Varaki spoke of two key documents launched in 1948: *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide*. To carry forward the visions of these documents, she stressed the importance of ethical leadership, particularly in four areas.

- Forced displacement has sometimes been well addressed, such as in the good work of the UN Secretary General Guterres (UN High Commissioner for

Refugees from 2005 – 2015) and Angela Merkel. This contrasts with examples of poor leadership after the Syrian, Afghanistan and Iraq crises;

- Pandemics have resulted in massive inequalities and injustice. The rich countries have shown poor leadership resulting in a poor record of sharing vaccine with poorer countries;
- Conflicts create major challenges. That between Russia and Ukraine has led to a massive global food security challenge. She reported an initiative for a special tribunal to address the crime of aggression and stressed the need for accountability and justice concerning leadership during and after conflicts.
- The World Cup, with its huge demand for – and exploitation of – migrant workers had provided threats to their families and examples of corruption among leaders in the choice of venue.

Dr Varaki stressed that the struggle for Human Rights is continuous, with states often wanting to avoid legal commitments. Good leadership – with sound judgement in an ethical framework – is crucial.