

BARBARA HINTERMANN

The Dialogue at the Heart of Conflict Resolution

With a wealth of twenty years' experience in the humanitarian field, Barbara Hintermann is today at the head of the Initiatives of Change Switzerland Foundation. It focuses on dialogue in peacebuilding, reconciliation and ethical leadership in business by working at the personal and global level.

Barbara Hintermann's interest in the peacebuilding world finds its roots in her childhood. Her grandmother, a strong and passionate woman, wanted to work in the field with the «Mission Bâloise». Even though she did not achieve her objective, she conveyed the desire to help others to her granddaughter. Barbara Hintermann always wanted to «contribute to the peacebuilding world in some small way». After studying economics and working in the private sector, she felt the need for a change, in order to find a career that corresponded to her convictions and values.

She began work with UNICEF Switzerland in the fundraising unit, but still felt that something was missing. The missing piece was working in the field. Barbara Hintermann wanted to be confronted with reality, and decided to leave on a mission with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). She went to Israel/Occupied Territory, Rwanda, South Sudan, Guinea-Conakry and Colombia. Her work was based on emergency response to bring help aid to conflict-affected people.

From emergency work to long-term dialogue

Today, Barbara Hintermann wants to turn towards long-term peacebuilding work. Thus, three years ago, she joined the Initiatives of



Change Switzerland. The foundation has worked on conflict resolution and peacebuilding since 1946.

Its headquarters are located in the former Palace Hotel in Caux (above Montreux), and offers a platform for facilitating international meetings relating to peace and conflict. Various delegations visit Caux, assisted by experts, facilitators and mediators that encourage and stimulate dialogue. Thanks to this work of mediation, Russian and Ukrainian delegations, as well as Israeli and Palestinian, and Turk and Armenian delegations have come to Caux, searching for dialogue, despite long-standing conflict.

The idea advocated by the foundation is the will to change oneself before changing others. Indeed, delegations come on their own initiative to Caux, with the desire to change. To illustrate the importance of dialogue, Barbara Hintermann gives the example of a delegation from Tulsa, Oklahoma. In 1921, the city of Tulsa was the staging of what is still considered one of the

worst racial riots in the history of the United States.

Even a hundred years after this traumatic event, this subject remained taboo to African Americans and Caucasians. In Caux they had the opportunity to discuss this subject for the first time and to break a taboo that weighed heavily on both communities. The delegation left after five days and still organizes round tables and meetings in Tulsa, in an effort to promote dialogue and change.

“We have to look for dialogue with all the actors”

The difficulty in peacebuilding

If the example of Tulsa shows that reconciliations are possible, it is important not to neglect the difficulties linked to peacebuilding work. For example, how to position yourself when confronted with war criminals or inhumane situations? How to stay professional and not be affected? How to continue believing in peace in the actual context of conflict? These questions are inherent to the work of Barbara Hintermann.

In 1999, five years after the genocide in Rwanda, she visited a prison there, where many that had committed genocide were detained. Some of them were lying on the floor, already dead, and others were close to death. Shocked by what she saw, she met with the prison warden and forced him to confront the reality of the situation and then began proceedings according to protocol. «They were prisoners, but they had the right to be treated when they were sick. These are rights that cannot be violated», explains Barbara Hintermann. They have to be considered as human beings before criminals, despite the crimes they have committed. She adds that «regardless of what the person has done, I am here to rationally observe their conditions of detention». And, once again, preference should be given to dialogue: «we have to look for dialogue with all the actors. We must talk to the armed forces as well as the non-state armed groups, such as the Taliban or ISIS».

It seems that Barbara Hintermann succeeded in her task to «contribute to the peacebuilding world in some small way» and to advocate the values of justice she deeply cares about, thanks to dialogue.

Léa Gillabert

