From Pacification to Peacebuilding. A Call to Global Transformation

Dr Diana Francis
Expert in conflict transformation and peace activist

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Introduction

On December 7, the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform hosted Diana Francis for the launch of her latest publication, “From Pacification to Peacebuilding. A Call to Global Transformation”. Diana Francis is a former President of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the current Chair of the Committee for Conflict Transformation Support (CCTS). David Atwood, Director of the Quaker UN Office in Geneva, introduced the speaker.

Atwood remarked that in the peacebuilding community there is an ongoing debate on techniques and organizational ways of looking at conflict settings and social changes, but it is also necessary to ask questions about the very basis of peacebuilding. The book launch, besides being an opportunity to get the essence of the message of Diana Francis’ work, offered a significant opportunity to reflect about the fundamentals of peace and conflict transformation.

Peacebuilding vs. Pacification

Diana Francis started by expressing her own distress for the contradictory behavior of those governments who support peace work but also engage in violent conflicts. What can be an encouragement, however, is the work of those people who, even in situations of extreme violence and danger, can still find the capacity to build peace in their own society. If this can be done at a local level, it means that it can also work globally, thus representing an important possibility for humanity.

The impact and effectiveness of peacebuilding has been considerably reduced and undermined by geopolitical interests and power blocks, according to Diana Francis. The dominant culture of power, based on force and violence, should be replaced by the core values of interdependence, respect and nonviolent solidarity. The concept of conflict resolution rests on the assumption of interdependence: “You come together to the idea of resolving a
conflict, because you are mutually interdependent”. That is the reason why people take the risk of talking and trying to find a mutually acceptable outcome to a conflict.

For Diana Francis, the “clothes” of peacebuilding are too frequently “worn by pacifiers”. There is a danger that peacebuilding and conflict transformation are being coopted by pacification agendas. In order for the peacebuilding world to have its desired impact, it is fundamental to address this dichotomy. While peacebuilding relies on interdependence, pacification is based on the principle of national interest. Instead of being a unit of cooperation with other countries, the State is a model for domination, existing to pursue the national interest.

This concept of State, however, is not viable anymore. In a planet that has shrunk thanks to technology, a model of competing states is not adequate to address issues such as the financial crisis, the food shortage, or the climate change. Interdependence and cooperation become the key. If we apply these notions to the domain of peace, we have pacification, which conceives peace as control, domination, and peacebuilding, where peace is a way to achieve the common good.

The dichotomy between peacebuilding and pacification is also visible in the different approach to international regulations. While the peacebuilding model regards the UN fundamental for its work on peace and security matters, which requires genuine, unconditioned, principled commitments from the States, the pacificator approach to the UN will be instrumental. The State will try to obtain the endorsement of the UN to legitimate its actions, but in the absence of an endorsement it will carry out its plans anyway.

Militarism and non-violent means

In order to bring significant change to the world, Diana Francis suggests reexamining our beliefs on militarism. The good that comes from it is largely fictional. Even if we support the idea of national interest, and think in terms of responsibility to protect, we should consider what is the evidence that armies can have a positive impact in situations of extreme and unpredictable violence. If we really want to demilitarize, we need to reflect in a more serious and systematical way on the potential for non-violent means, unarmed power “to manage situations of ongoing violence, to protect people and to build their capacity to protect themselves, to assess their own rights, to struggle for justice.”

Diana Francis recommended that those who work in the peacebuilding field start to think globally, examining ways to build truly cooperative international relationships, rather than power block, competitive ones. In particular, she suggests to capitalize on the knowledge, credibility and respect achieved by engaging in peacebuilding to have more radical conversation with governments, about the whole approach to power and state authority.

A question from the public raised the issue of how peacebuilding actors can deal with governments in order to have a better impact. According to Diana Francis, this is the case of the emperor’s new clothes: it is about saying very basic things, without being afraid to say them. Some help can also come from “off the wall”, “what if” conversations and workshops, to analyse, for instance, what would it look like to model a very different system.

Such activities can enable people to think out of the box. “While we believe that it is impossible
to do differently, it will remain impossible. But when there is a will, there is a way." Other interventions from the public dealt with demilitarization and the need for multilateralism; the role of governments and the possibility of engaging them and other institutions to develop together new models of cooperation. Diana Francis concluded her intervention by saying that if there is a coming together of movements that are thinking about radically different ways of approaching life together, we have a much better chance of mobilizing the cultural and structural change that we need.