

Humility and Respect are THE key words of Cooperation

“WE SHOULD NEVER FORGET THAT WE ARE GUESTS IN BOLIVIA”

Coordination is the back-bone of North-South exchanges

By Sergio Ferrari*

Twenty-six Swiss volunteers currently work in Bolivia on a wide range of projects. They belong to three of the Swiss NGOs – Members of the umbrella organization UNITE – that have specialized in the exchange of personnel: E-Changer, Interagire and Interteam. A binational coordination is responsible for taking care of them and maintaining relationships with over twenty partner organizations, movements and institutions. This involves close cooperation, and many fundamental questions are raised by the political situation of the country, explains Elke Kalkowski, co-coordinator of the Swiss NGOs. Elke Kalkowski, who is originally from Southern Germany, came to Bolivia almost thirty years ago, and has maintained close relations with the European solidarity movement as well as the main social actors of Bolivia ever since.

What does the coordination work consist of?

There is a wide range of tasks, which makes the work interesting, not to say fascinating. We follow-up with the participants in the exchanges, visit them at their project sites and get to know their partners. We often get to visit different areas. When we are in Cochabamba, where our headquarters is, we have a lot of contact with the volunteers and the partners. But we also have relationships with all sorts of networks and organizations, in Bolivia and in Europe. We maintain close linkages with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and with other Swiss NGOs working in the country. We exchange messages, we write reports, we review requests, we keep the headquarters of the organizations in Switzerland up to date. But the core of our work is the relationship with the volunteers and the partners.

Who are the Partners?

Some are base organizations. Many are different kinds of Bolivian NGOs, with a wide range of aims and fields of work. We also work with government authorities, particularly at the local level. This kind of relationship is not always easy. They are generally very political institutions, in the traditional sense of the word. The objectives and the way we cooperate very often depend on the vision of the mayor, for example, who sent us a proposal. Yet, the authorities keep changing, which does not help when you are trying to build a stable relationship.

BUILDING SOMETHING NEW TOGETHER

Does that mean that it is easier to work with base organizations, social movements or civil society actors as partners?

Without a doubt. However, working with government authorities can open up possibilities, especially given the current political situation. But, as I already mentioned, it is complicated. Old habits cannot disappear from one day to the other, and they do not

make the work of the volunteers from different cultures, including from Switzerland, any easier.

Which aspects of this exchange are the most enriching?

The intercultural relationships, the chance this sort of collaboration gives actors from different societies to know each other better. The exchange contributes to fight certain prejudices we see in Switzerland as well as in Bolivia; for example, in the Southern countries, the idea that all *gringos* are rich, and that they come to engage in questionable activities, etc. The presence of human beings who came to work together helps to show the common interests of the two societies in this globalized world. It is difficult to achieve this if you just fund projects. The exchange of people is a vital compliment, a strong back-bone for an integrated collaboration. Thanks to this exchange, international cooperation has a human face. Besides, it is a guarantee against those fantastic projects that do not always really benefit the people of the South.

And what about the technical expertise?

That is, of course, a very important component, especially if it is provided by societies where the education and professional training systems are very developed. Some professions do not exist in Bolivia. But a word of warning: our partners do not want foreign experts who bring the Truth or transfer their knowledge in a mechanical way. What is important to them is knowledge that is useful for them and that is adapted to the Bolivian reality. Besides, they desire a true exchange, where each side gives and receives, and they understand collaboration as the joint building of something new, a building process to which both sides make contributions.

After all these years of work in the field, what do you consider as the most problematic aspects for the volunteers from Switzerland?

As for the Bolivian side, the never-ending changes of people in charge and contact persons, particularly when it comes to government authorities, that really complicates things. You can adopt two kinds of attitudes towards it: either you figure that this turn-over definitely makes it impossible to work together, or you stay calm and analyze possibilities to continue to engage in collaboration. We believe it is, in any event, important to continue to support the ongoing process – and I mean the process, not the party in office – and to offer our modest support to strengthen the democratic structures, for example to fight corruption. The country really has taken on the fight against this curse and does not intend to stop half-way.

As far as the Northern partners are concerned, you have to keep in mind that the volunteers come from a country with a very different reality. Often they do not manage to adjust, to leave behind the competitive mindset, which is very deeply rooted in the mentality of people from Northern countries, and which manifests itself in their work rhythm and the way they work. Sometimes the “volunteer-cooperants” have a sense of failure if they do not manage to reach all the objectives set for their project. Furthermore, it is true that we are undergoing a “generational” change among the volunteers, who maybe now have a less “militant” vision. But of course you cannot generalize. People are all different, and so are the NGOs to which they belong.

LISTENING WITH HUMILITY

Bolivia is currently going through a very special moment in history. How should the international community position itself in this situation?

The international community in general has to give thought to some fundamental considerations. It really has no choice, since President Evo Morales has made it clear that he does not want bosses or masters but partners and even friends. A new era has begun for development cooperation, we cannot keep acting like before and expect to wield a power that nobody dares to question. From now on, the international community has to orient itself according to the programs and strategies of the State – and I would like to emphasize the State, not the political party in power. This can entail some risks, because of the lack of stability of the institutions. But the potential is huge. Whoever really wants to help Bolivia overcome poverty can only support the process. This is totally logical to me.

So development cooperation has to humble itself and listen?

Well, development cooperation anywhere in the world should always be like that. But probably more so in present-day Bolivia. We need to listen with humility. We have to keep in mind that as aid-workers, we are visitors, we are guests in this country. We are welcome here because we pursue a very important common objective, a transformation of structures in favour of the most marginalized people. But the international community has to revise its guiding principles and acknowledge that the nature of North-South relations is changing. I'll say it again, it is the partners who invite us and welcome us at their place, in their country. The international community does not have the right to tell Bolivians what they have to do in their own country.

“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS THE COMMITMENT OF THE AID-WORKERS”

Originally from Southern Germany, the journalist and theologian Hildegard Willer has been living in Peru for nine years. She started as a volunteer with the Bethlehem Mission Immensee (BMI) and worked with two projects in a row. Then, for the last four years, she has been coordinating the nine volunteers of this Swiss NGO, which has been present in the Andean country for many years. According to H. Willer, “our volunteers work in three areas: pastoral activities, as theologians, communication officers, and educators; renewable energy; and, a more recent but promising sector, human rights and the environment.”

The coordination has a wide range of day-to-day functions, the list is almost endless: official representation of the organisation; identification of new projects and ongoing relations with all partners; welcoming new volunteers; follow-up with all volunteers in the country, their support, monitoring and evaluation, etc.

“And,” as H. Willer emphasizes, “don't forget the relationships with the Swiss organizations and institutions as well as national and international NGO networks – even though each volunteer represents BMI to a certain extent and maintains his or her own contacts.”

Since the BMI volunteers work on projects that are related to the Church – essentially the Roman Catholic Church, even though, as H. Willer underlines, the BMI has an

ecumenical vision, – they are also confronted with the upheavals and the contradictions within this institution.

“Peru was the cradle of liberation theology in Latin America, but in the last few years we have seen a strong upsurge of the conservative sectors of the Church, who see their function as guardians of moral values at the individual and family level, and who are not interested in social issues, but consider these as the role of the State.”

This trend sometimes has a negative impact on the day-to-day work of the volunteers, who have a strong social commitment. “A confrontation with a conservative bishop or priest can be very frustrating.”

But working within the Church also has positive aspects. “In a country where everything is based on the circle to which one belongs, which is based on friendships or social class, the trust and acknowledgement resulting from relationships with people help a lot. If you can conduct your activities in a region with the approval of an institution like the Church, that enjoys great credibility within Peruvian society, that makes it easier to fit in, to get closer to the people, and to carry out your day-to-day work.”

According to the BMI representative, “the professional profile and expertise of a volunteer are important; however, I don’t think that they are the deciding factor to ensure successful integration.” What is essential to “gain acceptance in Peruvian society and establish good communications is definitely the personal profile and commitment of the volunteers,” which are recognized and accepted “when they win people’s trust and confidence.”

This is not always easy, because the different cultural codes can get in the way. “It is hard to get past the differences, to understand each other as different human beings and as complementary actors.”

(Sergio Ferrari / BMI)

**Collaboration UNITE; Translation Silke Reichrath*