

OPINION ARTICLE

A TRIP TO KENYA: THE COMMUNITY AS AN ENCOUNTER WITH SENSE AND DIGNITY

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Jambo!

On the first days of October 2018, Julio and I had the amazing opportunity to travel to Kenya¹ to learn about and share efforts and perceptions that, thanks to DIGNITY (Denmark), two organizations from two different continents can offer the world. It is about the organization MIDRIFT, located in the Rift Valley, the largest valley in the world. This organization works for human rights and violence prevention from its Head Office in Nakuru, Kenya. The other organization, to which we belong, is the Centre for Investigation for the Prevention of Violence in Central America- CIPREVICA, located in Guatemala.

For more than one week, our Midrift colleagues not only took us to the different places where they work and in Kenya, but also enabled us to understand and to get close to their reality overall. As days went by, we felt and discovered that neither the language complexity, nor the distance of more than 14 thousand kilometres were a reason not to learn from each other, and for not acknowledging that sharing and learning among us triggers good news: together we can be stronger in the difficult but significant fight to prevent violence in this world.

Of course there are differences in the way in which we evidenced structural problems in both countries, but when access to basic rights is denied or when life becomes difficult because wealth is concentrated in a few individuals around the world, and misery spreads upon millions, isn't the totality of injustice, indignity and exclusion evident? What purpose would it have to make the issue of non-fulfilment of human rights a Central American or a Kenyan issue since it happens in both places?

Does violence not cause the same physical, moral, psychological and social suffering in both realities? The face of a poor child I got close to, near Midrift's Head Office, is the same face of poor and migrant children in Latin America. His phrase "I'm beg you" was a drastic slap to my very core. His words sound different, but his sharpened, penetrating look, deprived of any dignity, is just like the one we see in excluded human beings, deprived of their rights, in Guatemala, Central America or any other Latin American country. Superficial things, what we see or what we hear... that's different. But, in the deep, the things that talk about self-esteem, internal feelings, and humanity per se, that is common. Even more so, it is universal. Cultural and linguistic differences, the way in which we feel and live reality as well as our history, are quite different, but complexities are very common. Thus, intentions, longings and vindications can also be common. We have the horizon ahead of us, from which we can see the sun rise. It is the same sun, seen from different places, and sought through varied paths. But we also have the same horizon – dignity and human plenitude. Theoretically, this is something everybody knows. To put a voice to it, a face, a gesture of friends and colleagues 14 thousand miles away, that is something else!

Perhaps it was not necessary for us to have stopovers – both ways – in three continents, changing time zones four times and being on a plane for over 20 hours, to acknowledge that human dramas are not only local, but that they are also global. But when you are faced with denial of dignity or when you put a name and a face to a man or a woman fighting for dignity for his or her people, we understand, then, that it is not only worth sharing between different

1 Julio Le Masson y Carlos Aldana Mendoza, Regional Executive Director and Regional Programme Coordinator of CIPREVICA, respectively.

persons, but also that it is necessary to deepen our global vision on how to construct human rights in our world. In order to contribute to this, I will put into words some of the most relevant learnings from this opportunity to get close and to undertake this South-South exchange.

The sense of community that transcends the community itself

Midrift colleagues work in communities where human rights are denied on a permanent basis, with violence evidenced in its different forms and expressions. But this does not mean that they leave behind the importance of a community sense to work. They are in the communities, working with them (rather than “for” them) and this contributes to fostering the community sense of violence prevention. That is how sense transcends the community itself: the community side is not reduced to nor does it end in the physical community, but it is taken to other communities, but – fundamentally – to public bodies. These are also a constitutive part of a community, they cannot nor should be oblivious to, nor felt distant or superior. This is clearly a learning that needs to be built, for which conditions are being generated, and which has its own time and rhythm. This, precisely, is Midrift’s contribution to the communities: to create relations that deepen the community beyond the people who live in the community.

Above all, because emphasis and learning about the value of the community as a cross-cutting issue for all institutional strategies or actions, it takes us back to an element on which very few of us reflect on: in community life we find the sense for institutional existence. What is an institution without a community from which it can connect to real life?

The sense, the reason for being, the justification for any organized initiative, can only be found and renewed in community dynamics, in the

recuperation of a life in and for the community. Thus, if we go beyond the community, because we are convinced that everything makes sense if acting is an action “in” and “from” the community. If there is where we see the denial of dignity, it is there where its reconstruction, its affirmation and its real and concrete practice begins.

The inter-sectoriality of reality is inter-sectoriality in solutions. It is philosophy+ strategy

Education, health, security... Any social reality, at least in the current structures and systems of human life, comprises several sectors. Nevertheless, there do not always converge, or act upon shared agendas assumed in a collective manner. They even tend to generate contradictions and ruptures that always have harmful consequences for the population.



If reality comprises a diversity of sectors that somehow touch people’s lives, it is clear that authentic, profound and effective strategies or satisfiers of needs and rights will always be intersectorial. The complexity of social processes tells us that, for example, a security issue is related to how people see life and it has consequences to their health, access to permanent income, etc.

Economic shortfalls are reflected in emotional and family stability, as well as culture and education deterioration. Violent situations cannot be

attributed exclusively to mental disorders of a perpetrator since a comprehensive, profound and critical insight is required.

Learning to interact with different sectors, but above all, to connect them and place them in a scenario in which they dialogue, discuss and propose together with the communities, is the learning of the inter-sectoriality that we could observe in this small piece of Kenya. That a police officer shares his mobile number and through an app you can have access to information on how to prevent violent situations, or that a female police officer listens to hard critics from the community without this translating into ruptures in the relation, or to see a Midrift colleague lead an activity that is part of the forums in which the community and the Police come together. All these are examples of the depth of the effects of an inter-sectoriality vision, practices and strategies that bond and restore social networks. “The people are our employer, not the government”, we heard a policeman say. Translating this into reality, does it not represent bonds that, regardless of the political, social and cultural reality of any country, must be assumed as necessary and urgent for building peace?

No sector can solve the issues of community life. It can implement specific solutions, address specific circumstances, satisfy a few human needs, but only through an intersectorial approach can violence be prevented in all its forms and levels. Solutions must be intersectorial or they will not be comprehensive.

Hence, we need to take to our everyday nature a small formula that we heard in Naivasha: the practice of community police is philosophy + strategy: it is a way of life that entails a form of organization. In other words, believing in the intersectorial sense, but evidencing it in the implementation of practices that enables their execution, its experience. Their learning is intimate and deep.



Humanity is not denied to police officers

From Latin American realities, it is difficult to understand the humanity of a police officer. The story of wild repression, of violation of all basic rights (mainly dignity of the body, freedom and life), in which police structures have participated in a proven manner, has taken to a present of rupture, disdain and dissociations between communities, civil organizations, and the Police. So it is not easy to build bonds or links; but it is necessary to create them. Communities and the society in general, need for this to be a reality. It is necessary for communities to start getting close to others, to demand and audit police structures and, at the same time, for this institution to commit to human rights, dignity and justice. Only after that, we can start building bridges and bonds with the communities. All this is necessary for it to move, to happen, regardless of the time and efforts it entails.

From Nakuru, Navaisha or Baringo, Midrift colleagues share an urgent and necessary lesson: police officers have children, wives, mothers or grandmothers, they have friends, and are human beings just like everybody else. This acknowledgement that could seem unnecessary is crucial to break free from barriers and to build bridges. Seeing a man or a woman, dressed as civilians and without any weapons, but still being a police officer, is a message of a function that

cannot be deprived of humanity. We saw and lived this message in Kenya and it would not seem necessary to label it as nationalism or extreme localism. It applies to here or there, even though repressive stories must not be forgotten and they should be addressed.



Diverse stakeholders, common values

Diversity in unity is one of the longings of today's complex humanity. We will always be different, but we must have never felt or should we feel or seem unequal. In the fight to build a fair, dignified and violence-free world, there will always be different methods, forms, and concepts and even several aspirations. Nevertheless, variety is wealth, a blessing rather than a course that affects our meanings or aspirations.

Observing evangelic ministers, community leaders, police officers, educators, librarians, children, and social workers committed to intersectorial efforts to prevent violence, is a small sample of what we can do from a shared agenda, even though we take different paths along the road.

For realities like the Guatemalan reality, in which divisions are quite frequent and painful, between organizations that share a view, and even the same ideological, political or theoretical principles, work

based on a shared agenda and from a diversity of stakeholders could represent a crucial change in the actions of the civil society. It is difficult, but it has also been difficult in a reality like the reality of Kenya, with a historic cultural and linguistic diversity, with violent situations caused by the manipulation of tribal, religious or political issues, with the everyday poverty observed quite close to where tourists enjoy watching monkeys, buffalos or hyenas.

We will always be different in many ways, but these differences must not always be an excuse or a motive for us to leave behind those shared fights that give meaning and justify the existence of our organizations.

A necessary conclusion: the political and ethical force of kindness and friendship

The hardships of life, the lack of resources to work and create ideas, the denial of dignity and rights, are evident in Kenya and in Central America. They are a part of the diverse faces of our realities. But we must thank our Midrift colleagues for showing us those faces, together with others that are also important: kindness, smiles, open friendship, the feeling of life-long fellowship. These wonderful values and expressions were a gift to us, not only within the organization, but also in community meetings, in official visits (including meetings in Police units), in schools with dozens of children, teachers and parents. In all these places, we learned to acknowledge that there is a political and ethical force around their smile: it moves us to seek changes in the world. It moves us to acknowledge that dignity is built everywhere, it touches our very core so that, from our deepest conviction, we go and hold encounters with others without letting others take away neither or sense, nor our hope, nor our strategy.

The bully and patriarchal speech of a traditional leader, here, there or wherever we are, will never have the force of a colleague that fights, but who

does not let anyone steal his or her joy. O a female colleague to expresses her views with conviction, but with a smile that talks about an interiority loaded with force. This is the force we need globally to defend life in our planetary home.

Asante nyote!

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