

## Promoting peace and human rights

*Interview with Susanne Brenner, BMI-coordinator for Colombia*



**Colombia has been a tormented country for fifty years because of its complex internal conflicts. Several armed parties like the guerrilla, paramilitary forces, drug dealers and the army are fighting for hegemony in the various regions. What is the role of international co-operation in such a complex reality as Colombia? How can co-operation efficiently contribute to an end to war and a peaceful solution that large parts of the population and the social movements are hoping for? These are key questions in this**

**interview with Susanne Brenner (46). She is a Catholic theologian who has also trained in intercultural communication. From 1992-2004 she was working as a lay theologian in Düringen (Freiburg/Switzerland)) and was the national Spiritual Advisor for Blauring in Lucerne. Since 2006 she has been working as the coordinator for Bethlehem Mission Immensee (BMI) in Colombia.**

*BMI is a Catholic organisation based in Immensee (Switzerland). BMI consists of two branches, the missionary society „Missionsgesellschaft Bethlehem“ (SMB), which is the confraternity for priests and friars, and the affiliated society „Bethlehem“, which is the alliance of employees, development workers abroad and people of the public interested in BMI.<sup>1</sup> BMI is dedicated to the holistic liberation of disadvantaged people in Africa, Asia, South America and Europe. It has been present with its own programme in Colombia for several decades and coordinates Swiss and German personnel's assignments. These volunteers are working together with dioceses, organisations of the Mennonite church and NGOs. Presently, volunteers are working in the dioceses of Quibdó, Pasto and Tumaco, in the capital Bogotá in the organisations „Kairos Educativo“, Mencoldes, „Creciendo Juntos“ and in the conference of religious orders of Colombia.*

### **What is the role of the BMI-coordination in Colombia?**

My most important role is to be a link between the head-office in Immensee, the volunteers and our partners, in whose projects we are working. One of the challenges is to create good conditions in order to allow the volunteers to work efficiently. I also have to ensure the planning and realisation of the BMI-programme: Content wise every assignment has to agree with the programme. I am in charge of looking for new projects, of supporting and supervising the development workers and of the dialogue with our partners without neglecting the considerable administrative tasks. I introduce visitors from NGOs to our work in Colombia and to our view of the situation in the country. Besides, I assist small church base communities in the south of the capital.

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<sup>1</sup> The religious community „Missionsgesellschaft Bethlehem“ supported the foundation of „Bethlehem Mission Immensee“ 10 years ago.

## **In which fields is BMI working in Colombia?**

Presently, there are ten employees in Bogotá, Cali, Quibdó, Tumaco and Pasto. All the assignments are part of the BMI-programme's main focus in Colombia: Peace and holistic pastoral work. In both Quibdó and Tumaco there is one person who is a member of the commission called „Vida, Justicia y Paz“. These are diocesan structures fighting for human rights. Another person is part of the pastoral work with indigenous people of the diocese in Quibdó. Part of his task is helping the Embera people defend their land rights. In Bogotá, one person is a member of the commission for human rights in the conference of religious orders in Colombia. Two of our people are working in a project of the Mennonite church and support internal exiles. Another three of us are reinforcing alternative processes in the church, which focus on empowering lay people.

## **Helping to establish peace in Colombia is an essential aspect of BMI's and other Swiss NGO's work in Colombia. What role does it play in the programme of BMI?**

The aim of our work is to support communities, groups and organisations affected by the social and armed conflicts in order to help them to reinforce their social network. Starting on a local level, we want to build an integrative peace that includes autonomy, political and / or religious participation, cultural identity and social justice.

We are trying to support organisations that are fighting against division and individualism. We normally work at the base. However, one of our people in Cali is part of planning and realising a study about the observation of human rights. This is a project for the Pacific region, so it is situated at a higher level.

## **What is your relationship with local or regional partner-organisations? What kind of networks does BMI support?**

Our development workers are part of the team in their partner organisations. We don't have our own projects. Therefore it is important to choose partners who share our philosophy and who want to support marginalised people in the spirit of Liberation Theology. We have had four assignments working with the Mennonite church of Colombia. Their vision of non-violence is inspiring in such a complex national environment.

For BMI it is clear that we don't want to create our own networks but we want to support the already existing networks of our partners. It is our institutional strategy to create synergies between the different projects and the development workers in order to enhance the impact of every single assignment. BMI is a member of the Round Table of Swiss NGOs working in Colombia and of the SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) platform, whose aim it is to improve collaboration between Swiss organisations working in development in Colombia.

## **How could international and Swiss co-operation be improved in order to contribute even more to a better future for Colombia? How could organisations sending personnel contribute?**

NGOs sending personnel are playing an important role to make the conflict visible in Europe. They serve as a link and can give up-to-date information. The local people appreciate the volunteers' work and especially their solidarity. To see the volunteers living alongside the local people, working, suffering, a way of life that could be called „missionary presence“, is a sign for the local people, who have no voice in their own country, that they are not forgotten in this world. Solidarity with Colombia has existed in Switzerland for many years: There is the very active „Arbeitsgruppe Schweiz-Kolumbien“ (working group Switzerland - Columbia), the coordination of Swiss NGOs who have programmes in Colombia as well as the programme „Suippcol“, which is run by eleven NGOs and supported by the Swiss Ministry for Foreign Affairs (EDA). The level of awareness about Colombia in Switzerland is quite high but never enough.

It is obvious that Colombia is an economically interesting country for foreign investors, including the Swiss. And sometimes we get the impression that economic interests are more important than respecting human rights.

For example many of these economic actors don't consider enough that human rights defenders and unionists are prosecuted; they also ignore the constant forced displacements, political corruption, parapolitics. In 2009, the Swiss government signed a trading contract with Colombia despite criticism from various sides because of the violation of human rights.

On the other hand there are very different evaluations of the present situation. Alvaro Uribe's government managed to make some European governments believe that everything is fine in Colombia. NGOs working with volunteers are making big efforts to create awareness of these conflicts in Switzerland and to make the voice of our partners heard.

### **In a special context like in Colombia, what are the most important problems that Swiss development workers encounter?**

The safety of the development workers and their partner organisations is a very important topic that is always present. Partner-organisations fighting for human rights are often threatened by paramilitary groups. It is difficult not to become depressed or cynical when confronted by the very small potential for change. In 2009 for example, living in Tumaco was very difficult. Every day new victims of murders were delivered at the morgue of the forensic medicine. And there was no hope for an improvement of the situation. How can you live for years without seeing the light at the end of the tunnel? This is a big personal and spiritual challenge.

For 18 years, BMI-SMB have been working with the Awa people in Ricaurte. Recently this people suffered a lot from the fights on their territory and from the forced displacements. To see this happening without the possibility of intervening and helping to change things can break the hearts of those who have worked many years in this area. Unlike in other countries nobody has a vision for creating a better future.

### **What are the most important points that you are trying to develop during your mission?**

We are a faith-based organisation. Since the Colombian conflict has cultural aspects, we can contribute to change on the level of religious culture.

In people's minds and in every day life there is still a theology of sacrifice. Here is an example: Mothers have to sacrifice their sons as soldiers for the benefit of the state. We want to contribute in the spirit of Liberation Theology. This theology does not accept such sacrifices but fights for the life and dignity of every single human being. This is why we are looking for peaceful change.

Another contribution of our presence is technical knowledge, which is still very weak in Colombia and we also want to empower institutions and alternative processes within the church. Another one of our strong points is our development workers' ability to analyse the situation from outside. For example there was a wave of suicides among teenagers of the Embera people in the Choco region. Embera authorities did not know how to react. The intercultural dialogue with the BMI-personnel allowed them to interpret this phenomenon in their own way. And even more important: they found integrative ways of healing through workshops and healing rituals carried out by experienced shamans.

Besides, the presence of foreigners enhances safety for those working in the field of human rights. The fact that we assist marginalised people gives back these people, who are disdained by their own compatriots, their dignity.

For these kinds of projects you need a lot of patience and you need to do long-term planning. The success and the impact of our presence often depend on how much confidence there is between our development workers and the people they are working with. In such a complex situation or in projects with ethnic minorities you can't win this confidence short-term. Our experience shows that it makes sense that some of our development workers have been working in Colombia for over ten years.

### **How do you create awareness?**

As I said before, feedback is important in order to promote an up-to-date picture of Colombia in Switzerland. We offer alternative information to solidarity networks. The two newsletters that every

development worker writes every year are important. Besides the BMI-magazine „Wendekreis“ often publishes articles about the situation in this South American country. BMI in Immensee is very involved in creating awareness and solidarity for Colombia in Switzerland.

### **Would you like to add anything?**

One important aspect of the conflict is gender. The female body is a place of war as well. For this reason many projects in international co-operation are dedicated to women. However, the majority of victims and abusers in armed conflicts are men. One should question the men's role in Colombian society generally. How can a man be a man without machoism and violence?

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English translation: Coletta Knaup, INTERTEAM

UNITE (Swiss association for the exchange of personnel in development co-operation)

### **BMI and E-Changer, members of the SUIPPCOL programme**

BMI and E-Changer, two NGOs, who belong to the Unité platform, are members of SUIPPCOL, the Swiss programme to promote peace in Colombia. Another nine Swiss NGOs participate in this programme. This initiative founded in 2001 is supported by the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (EDA) and develops its own active programme in Colombia. Especially supported are women's peace movements and the support of peace awareness at the base. SUIPPCOL has 25 networks, organisations and communities throughout the country, who are fighting explicitly for an end to war and for a peace with social justice.

### **THE CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA**

According to Susanne Brenner, for over fifty years the country has been living in an armed conflict, whose origin is the big social injustice and the struggle for land-ownership. This conflict is reinforced by the exploitation of the rich natural resources and the enormous biodiversity and by the optimal conditions for agro-industrial exploitation as well as by huge infrastructural projects. Another factor is controlling the cultivation of cocaine and the cocaine trade.

There is an oligarchy, which has been ruling the country for centuries and which is defending its hegemony regardless of the social costs. The cultivation of drugs and the drug trade are attractive as „easy money“. But it creates a lot of damage because it destroys the social structures in the local communities. It is an incentive for political corruption on all levels and is the source of money for armed groups of all sorts. How can such a flexible and attractive enemy, who has international connections, be conquered?

At the core of the whole conflict is the problem of land-ownership. Not only because of huge projects like the cultivation of the African palm tree that threatens the independence of nutrition sovereignty but also because of mining projects.

Every day, the ethnic minorities are losing more and more of their collective rights to the land, even though this seems impossible at a legal level. And they don't only lose them because of forced displacements but recently also because of corruption and the fact that their leaders are corrupted. This is part of a new strategy of the financially strong groups who wish to use the country for their own economic projects.