

Hagen Berndt



“International Peacebuilding has to Begin at Home”

**Cooperation across borders only successful
at eye-level—“Logic of peace” as the basis for
nonviolent action**

25

Hagen Berndt, born in 1959, was the Educational Coordinator of KURVE Wustrow from 1992 to 2000 and afterwards Managing Director until 2002. During those years, the International Trainings were set up, and the Civil Peace Service (CPS) was established as a programme financed by the German Government. Hagen studied Indology, Islamic Science and Communications Research and has worked in India and Sri Lanka. Nowadays, his prime field of action is Communal Conflict Transformation in German cities and communities.

We have been engaged in professional international peacebuilding long before the German Civil Peace Service was officially established in 1999." Hagen Berndt likes looking back to the 1990s when he decisively shaped the profile of KURVE Wustrow. As Educational Coordinator, he was responsible for the "International Trainings" which have been offered since 1994 and have remained a hallmark of the Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action. In this context, the following point has always been of utmost importance to Hagen: "International cooperation must not be a one-way street where we Europeans impose our own concepts and methods upon the rest of the world. What really matters is an exchange at eye-level and mutual cross-fertilisation."

26

A prime example for a reversal of alleged European superiority was the „Gorleben International Peace Team“ (GIPT), set up in the late 1990s. Representatives of various peace organisations from Europe as well as North and South America, Asia and Africa were invited to the North German Wendland in order to monitor local resistance against the transport of nuclear waste to Gorleben and document the response of the security forces. These observer missions were registered and officially approved by the German authorities, even though some

questions were raised why delegates from outside Europe, of all people, should monitor proceedings in Germany.

"On many occasions, GIPT has had the effect of de-escalating conflict situations", Hagen emphasises. "Often, its members were allowed access to critical locations where demonstrators were barred, and they were also permitted to monitor the interrogation of arrested people. The presence of international observers reduced the potential use of intimidation and violence on the side of the authorities."

GIPT can be seen as a successful means of nonviolent conflict transformation in a volatile situation. The final report comes out with a clear yes to the question whether this international monitoring mission was useful. Not only did it increase the number of observers and thus the number of documented cases: "Even more important is the fact that GIPT could enhance an awareness of the Gorleben issue all over the world, since it made use of international contacts and published its report in various languages. This will secure international support for the resistance movement."

The latter prediction was confirmed many times during the anti-nuclear protests of the following years. Initiated by KURVE Wustrow, GIPT also became a model for other interna-

tional monitoring missions. Similar teams, for instance, observed the proceedings at the German border to Poland just before the latter country joined the European Union in 2004. Hagen believes that their presence prevented potential human rights violations by the authorities, be it arbitrary rejections or offending interrogations of people wanting to cross the border.

“Effective peacebuilding always has to start within one’s own country and must be fully established there”, Hagen stresses. “At an international level, one can then offer logistical and strategic support.” An example of this was the provision of safe spaces for peace organisations from the Balkans during the Bosnian war. Serbian and Croatian activists thus got a chance to meet each other at the premises of KURVE Wustrow around 1995. As Hagen recalls, the goal was “not to present our guests with our own suggestions for a solution, but to build up mutual trust and, if wanted, give some strategical input. Eventually, however, only peacebuilders from the conflict area itself can decide which strategies are best for their region.”

Another opportunity to offer protection to people from conflict areas arose around the turn of the millennium during the civil war in Sri Lanka, where Hagen had been deployed as a peace worker back in the 1980s. Representatives of the

“The presence of international observers reduced the potential use of intimidation and violence on the side of the authorities.”

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) tried to extort money from Tamils in German exile. Those who resisted were severely intimidated or beaten up; most of the victims were women. Under Hagen’s leadership, KURVE Wustrow offered support to a female activist who announced detailed documentations of such incidents and supplied a phone number for confidential whistle-blowing. Initially this woman was threatened, too, but her pending publications obviously did the trick: the violent intimidations stopped.

In Hagen’s opinion, the most important prerequisite for effective non-violent resistance is a strong civil society. Its organisations should be committed to a consistent “logic of peace”, based on solidarity and cooperation of all stakeholders in any given conflict: “That’s the only



28

“Only on the basis of a consistent logic of peace can civil society offer a genuine alternative to government institutions which are usually resorting to the logic of security in conflict situations.”

way how civil society can offer a genuine alternative to government institutions which unfortunately are usually resorting to a logic of security.”

The “logic of security” implies relying on confrontation and the demonstration of power in order to safeguard one’s own interests in a conflict situation. The consequences are restriction, exclusion, surveillance and finally rearmament and military intervention. To offer an alternative, civil society should lead the political discourse into a direction in line with the logic of peace. This means that there will be no preconceived solutions which are then violently enforced, but dialogue at eye-level, mutual listening, a willingness to learn from each other and a broad cooperation in finding solutions. “Only under these circumstances is nonviolent action likely to have a genuine impact”, Hagen stresses.

For him, this holds good even in extreme conflict situations when fundamental values of peace should still not be relinquished. He refers to the attacks of 11th September 2001 in New York after which KURVE Wustrow started a broad campaign against the military intervention in Afghanistan. This was symbolised by a post card showing geese running into different directions under the motto: “Goose-stepping straight ahead? Take a turn!” For alternative

solutions, contacts were established to peace groups, women’s networks and democratic organisations within Afghanistan. The KURVE Newsletter presented examples of nonviolent action in conflict areas and explored the roots of terrorism from the angle of a thorough conflict analysis. Readers were invited to come together and discuss crisis exit strategies based on the very logic of peace. Hagen wishes for such an invitation to be still offered in present-day conflicts as well.

“International cooperation must never be a one-way street. What really matters is an exchange at eye-level and mutual cross-fertilisation.”