

IN DEPTH

Towards a shared future

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ETA's declaration of a definitive cessation of armed activity on 20 October 2011, three days after the conclusion of the International Conference of Aiete in San Sebastian, opened the door to a peace process which this time seemed irreversible. It generated a sense of relief, not only among those who had lived under their threat, but also among society in general, for whom decades of violence had become unbearable. At the same time, the subsequent legalization of Sortu ensured the representation of all political projects, providing the necessary elements to deal with a peace process scenario. Minimum conditions were in place to open dialogues aimed at addressing issues such as the disarmament of ETA, the situation of prisoners, reconciliation and a political framework of coexistence.

However, the desire to move in that direction has been hampered by dynamics of the past that continue to weigh on the present: the rejection of dialogue to address the process of an orderly disarmament of ETA, which has forced them to seek other avenues such as international support to verify the irreversibility of their decision; the rejection of dialogue to review and adapt prison policy to the current scenario of a definitive cessation of violence; the lack of significant process in achieving political consensus regarding the framework of coexistence; and the arrests and political trials of a sector of society are some examples of these dynamics that persist.

Moreover, for a part of our society all of this is very alien, either because it was not experienced firsthand, or because these issues are considered to belong to a past that is not theirs since, after the cessation of violence by ETA, they understand that we have achieved peace, or because it is considered to be something that is beyond their scope

of influence. And one must not forget that the deep economic crisis is a local reality that has changed the order of social priorities.

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But, despite this context of old dynamics and new social realities, of resistance and difficulties, there have been advances in the areas of memory of the victims and of coexistence, or what has been called reconciliation. These steps have been made possible through the generosity of many people who have suffered violence directly, through the commitment of ordinary citizens, and through the sense of responsibility of Basque institutions. The creation, in early 2013, of the Secretariat for Peace and Coexistence of the Basque Government – with the aim of defining and implementing public policies of memory, Human Rights, coexistence and peace education – along with the Program for the Promotion of Peaceful Coexistence, launched in the same year by the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, are examples of institutional commitment in this area. But they are not the only ones. Because, while it is true that for many years social movements have led initiatives to build peace – which have contributed to the fact that respect for Human Rights and the use of dialogue as a means of conflict resolution are socially and politically accepted – in this new scenario it is the local governments that, to a large extent, are taking on this leadership, building coexistence from the bottom up, working locally while thinking globally.

Several experiences have been launched in recent years, each quite different from the others, but all extremely interesting. We are talking about processes that are still in progress, in which each municipality has adapted to local needs and realities, and whose final outcome is unpredictable. But they are processes in which the path taken,

that of listening and of dialogue, also becomes the objective. Because, while it is important to find solutions to the problems of coexistence we experience, it is just as important to be careful about how we go about doing so. And that means giving up dynamics of imposition and exclusion, and opting for inclusion and collaboration. It means giving up short-term gimmicky results and opting instead for results with a much deeper and lasting impact.

It is important to remember that, even though Basque society has lived in a context of ideological polarization, which required taking a stance with either “our side” or “the other side,” at the same time, there have been shared spaces: emotional, recreational, cultural, sports-related, etc. There was a need to participate in common spaces where one could breathe, relax and enjoy oneself. There was an unstated agreement to talk only about what united us, for fear of fracture, although it was not always possible to protect those spaces and sometimes polarization penetrated and atomized even those common spaces.

“ For many years social movements have led peacebuilding initiatives but now it is the local governments that are taking on this leadership, building coexistence from the bottom up ”

Hence the importance of local dialogue processes. Because these initiatives that are being developed at both a grassroots and political level aim not only to rebuild common spaces, but also to create spaces where we can explicitly address everything that weighs upon us, that hurts and confronts us. And, in order to do this, we take as a starting point that which unites us: the desire to improve coexistence, to freely express diverse and even antagonistic points of view, to be listened to with respect and without being attacked. That is why, in these initiatives, caring for the space and for the dialogue process itself becomes vitally important.

In this regard, the presentation of the Glencree initiative¹, in June 2012, was a source of hope and inspiration. After five years of discreet and confidential work, victims of different forms of violence made known their particular dialogue process. They described how, from a mutual understanding, they were able to recognize and empathize with the suffering of others, in spite of legitimate ideological differences.

The various dialogue processes that are being carried out at a grassroots level are forging their own path, each at its own pace. They represent a real and existential exercise of coexistence with those we still perceive of as “the others.” And although they do not represent the entire plurality of society (in processes at a political level, all the city council’s political representatives do participate) these initiatives are representative of society. Among the profiles of participants in these local face-to-face dialogues, there are people who have suffered violence directly, others who have been “active agents of the conflict,” people who have suffered, or still suffer, persecution and threats of various kinds, politicians, trade unionists, institutional authorities, business leaders, church officials, as well as citizens who have felt that their lives and relationships have been affected by everything that has happened. In short, they are people who, from their own experience, have decided to make a social commitment to contribute to coexistence in their municipality. And they have done so in a paradoxically difficult context, in which social disaffection is perceived regarding this issue.

**“ The processes of local dialogue are building
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At first discretion was essential, especially in a scenario without political consensus, where the fear of being manipulated or used by the other was great, where the weight of our own history and our immediate surroundings have long prevented empathizing with the suffering of those who were furthest away from our political ideas, where approaching the other has been seen as a betrayal of our reference group and their suffering, or as a renunciation of one’s own ideological position. That is why, in these

processes, discretion has been essential in order to care for the space, to create the necessary conditions of security and confidence that have allowed participants to speak honestly and freely; to question certainties that had always been unwavering based largely on mutual unawareness and stereotypes; to listen closely in order to understand despite disagreement; to explicitly state one's own limits and recognize those of others; to look for solutions that are different from one's own but that have something from everyone. This confidence has ultimately allowed for a renunciation of expected results in exchange for supporting the process and collaboration.

Some of these experiences are beginning to see the light, such as in Errenteria, an icon of the past that now symbolizes the future in the words of the dialogue group that has been working in this town in recent years: "We have been able to share our deepest experiences, we have felt respectfully listened to, we have felt believed, we have felt recognized, and we have been able to travel on the path of empathy and make the pain of others our own." The social impact of these local initiatives is hard to measure but, continuing with the example of Errenteria, their protagonists have stated that some of the political consensus reached on coexistence within the town council would not have been possible without this space of citizen dialogue.

Almost five years after ETA's declaration of a definitive cessation to armed activity, and in the face of a lack of progress in other major issues, the processes of local dialogue are building common spaces and generating movement from the grassroots in the framework of coexistence. Hopefully, these experiences will multiply and help lay the foundation for a shared future.

1. About the Glencree initiative, it has been published *Ondas en el agua*, by Carlos Martin Beristain, Galo Bilbao and Julián Ibáñez (ICIP and Angle Editorial), available in pdf and ePub (in Spanish)

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