

A close-up portrait of Edelberto Torres Rivas, a middle-aged man with a grey beard and mustache, wearing glasses and a dark suit. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression.

ALL THAT CONTRIBUTES TO **DEMOCRACY**, CONTRIBUTES TO **PEACE»**

A conversation with Edelberto Torres Rivas
on the 20th Anniversary of Interpeace.

By Arnoldo Gálvez and Otto Argueta*

The War-Torn Societies Project (WSP), which years later became Interpeace, began to operate in Guatemala at the beginning of 1997. It was created within the United Nations to assist the international community and national actors to better understand and respond to the complex challenges faced by a society that was emerging from war. Matthias Stiefel, the founder of Interpeace, offered the post of director of the project to Edelberto Torres Rivas (Guatemala, 1932), a researcher and sociologist whose name was mentioned unanimously during a wide-ranging search for the position.

To celebrate Interpeace's beginnings in the region and to revisit the contributions of WSP-Guatemala, we interviewed Edelberto on this and other matters and, subsequently, after afternoon coffee in his apartment, we received rigorous answers, all of them loaded with an indefatigable and strict critical outlook which does not allow for easy optimism, nor immediate congratulations or self-complacency.

Upon the signing of an Accord to Establish a Firm and Lasting Peace, in December 1996, between the Government of Guatemala and National Revolutionary Union of Guatemala (URNG), a three-decade long armed struggle in the country came to an end which, at the same time, represented the culmination of ten years of negotiations that involved four democratically elected governments. The end result of these efforts was a dozen agreements aimed espe-

cially at preventing another tragedy like this ever happening again in Guatemala. The war left behind, according to numbers prepared by the Commission for Historical Clarification of the United Nations, a total of 200,000 dead, 45,000 disappeared, and more than one million displaced persons. In 1996, together with this still fresh memory of immense suffering, there emerged, simultaneously, a desire for peace: an end to the war was perceived by many sectors as an

opportunity for dialogue, for the reestablishment of bonds of trust, for overcoming fear, in sum, for reconciliation.

Within this context the War-Torn Societies Project (WSP) was born; it began to function in Guatemala at the beginning of 1997. The WSP, that years later would become the International Alliance for the Consolidation of Peace (Interpeace), was founded within the United Nations tasked with helping the international community and national actors to better understand and respond to the complex challenges of a society emerging from a war.

When the project began to operate in Guatemala, it already had some lessons learned previously in Eritrea and Mozambique as told by Edelberto Torres Rivas and Bernardo Arévalo de León in the introduction to *From Conflict to Dialogue: the WSP in Guatemala*: "... in November 1994, a meeting was held in Cartigny, Switzerland, with about 80 people in attendance, half of them from countries that were emerging from conflictive situations, and the other half from multilateral, bilateral, and non-governmental cooperation agencies, together with a small group of social scientists interested in lending a hand to resolve the problems associated with the processes of reconstruction and reconciliation in post-conflict contexts. As the meeting progressed, the need became evident to better understand the complex characteristics of these new emergency situations, especially the interaction among

the actors and the problems involved in the processes of reconstruction and reconciliation. In addition, the possibility of using the "participatory action-research methodology" was evaluated. This methodology involves research and a process of social intervention by which the participants in the process become active subjects and protagonists in a project that transforms their reality, as well as creating knowledge. This was the origin of the WSP and four countries were chosen to apply this methodology: Eritrea, Mozambique, Guatemala, and Somalia.

After some preliminary explorations undertaken during 1995 and 1996, the WSP-Guatemala was publicly launched on 9 January 1997. This event brought together a very wide and plural representation of diverse political and social organizations as had never been seen in Guatemala and constituted the first of a series of meetings that continued during the following fifteen months with no slacking of attendance by the participating organizations. "The problem addressed by WSP-Guatemala involves the construction of confidence in the country. The destruction of human lives during 35 years weakened universal values and social norms for the respect of life and human dignity... This type of destruction requires significantly greater efforts of reconstruction than those required for material reconstruction." ("Reconstruyendo Guatemala. Las modalidades del WSP." Working paper. Guatemala, October 1996). As a consequence, the project's

objective in Guatemala was to create analytical and operative capacities to document experiences in peace building, analyze them through participatory research, and extract lessons and translate them into policy recommendations while, at the same time, facilitating dialogue among the principal internal and external actors, thereby starting a process of collective analysis and problem resolution (Rubén Zamora and Christophe Bouvier, "Un proyecto

para la transición, reflexiones en torno a WSP-Guatemala").

To head the project, Matthias Stiefel, the founder of Interpeace, called on Edelberto Torres Rivas (Guatemala, 1932), sociologist and researcher, following an extensive series of consultations which unanimously mentioned his name. Torres Rivas is, without a doubt, the most important social scientist in the region, having reflected on and explained Central America for



more than four decades with undiminished curiosity, discipline, rigour, and a constant critical sense. In addition to having become an indispensable point of reference in the region, he is also an ethical reference for various generations of Central Americans. His academic career is closely linked with his personal life: he was a member

of that generation that breathed the fresh airs of the Guatemalan Revolution of October 1944; he was active in the revolutionary government of Jacobo Arbenz, who was overthrown ten years later; he subsequently joined the ranks of the Guatemalan Labour Party; in Chile, he studied sociology as part of the fourth class of the

Latin American School of Sociology (ELAS) of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO); his return to Guatemala was barred during the years of military rule, so he went to Costa Rica, where he contributed decisively to the institutionalization of sociological studies in the region; he was General Secretary of FLACSO and as of nearly twenty years ago he coordinates the National Human Development Reports of the UNDP. His academic output includes more than twenty books which, given his permanent interest in Central America, include topics as varied as its agrarian and socioeconomic structures, the dependent relationships of its countries, and its political crises, democracy, the political left, and youth. In 2010, the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), which brings together the principal experts and scholars from the United States, Canada, and other regions of the world who work on Latin America, awarded him the Kalman H. Silvert prize, one of the most prestigious in the world in the social sciences, in recognition for his scholarly contributions.

“I returned to Guatemala because of the WSP. I was living in Madrid and I was called to Geneva. There I met with Matthias Stiefel, who explained the project to me and I

immediately took the decision to return. Eight days later I landed in Guatemala. That was in September 1996, when we started the preparations, and I was present at the signing of the peace accords. In January the first meetings were held,” Edelberto explains to us when we talked about the project that brought him back to Guatemala.

What did a social scientist of your career and experience find in the Interpeace approach which convinced you to become involved in the project?

What we were involved with at that moment was a very precise project, very concise and detailed: examine, interview actors and bring together discussion groups, the causes of the internal armed conflict, and how, at the moment it was signed, it had been possible to secure peace successfully. What was planned at that moment was important but it was also feasible: if peace was being signed as an administrative, bureaucratic protocol, it was necessary also for peace to become permanent through other means. What interested me the most was the possibility of putting together a satisfactory explanation of why there had been a conflict and why it had ended in this manner. In that sense, when referring to causes one assumes a mechanical interaction of factors, as for example “poverty” but a society sunk in misery does not wake up demanding change. It does happen when

there are intellectual and political minorities that try to comprehend the factors that produce inequality, the groups in power that apply violence, the difficulties in accessing education, etc. When attempting to understand reality and to change it, many groups assume commitments; it is at the moment when the decision is taken to change the social order that the masses intervene and revolution seems possible. Let me mention

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one more factor, the most important: to avoid change and make the people accept their condition, the State and the dominant groups use violence. In Guatemala, the most important factor that mobilized the masses was violence.

And what conclusions did you reach?

We arrived at preliminary conclusions about the origins of the conflict, and we reached a series of recommendations by consensus – something quite outstanding at that moment – that were brought together in the documents of the project; they are of some value (see box). Here I must express self-criticism, because the documents were extremely useful in a practical sense but to observe their

implementation was beyond the terms of reference of the project. I know of hundreds of documents of great analytical value that are lost to researchers who don’t read them and other thousands of pages that “die” due to humidity or become food for mice.

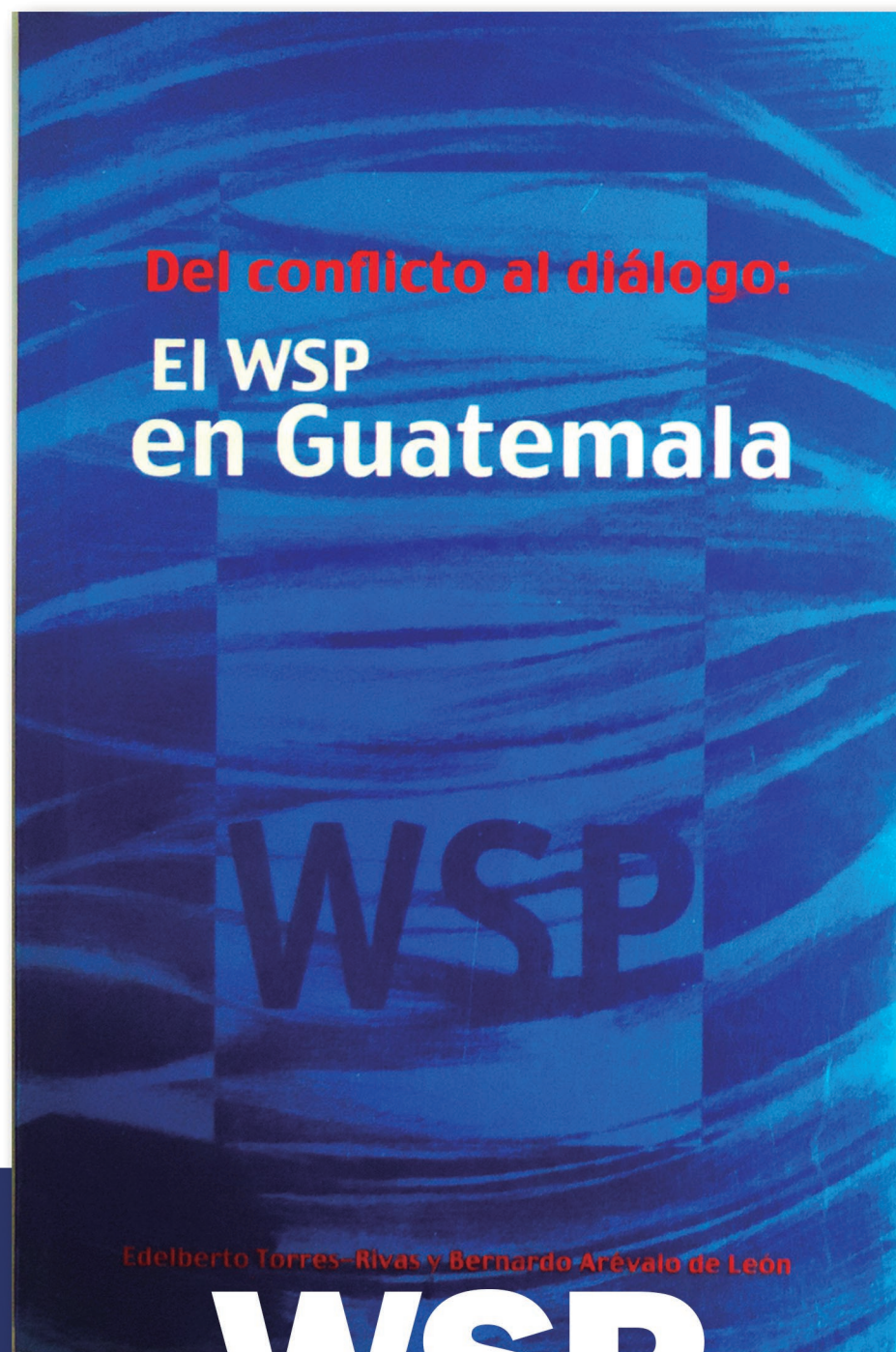
Nearly twenty years later, what is the main contribution of WSP-Guatemala?

I think that the most important was that for the first time in Guatemala all of civil society came together, all the organization of the society, including the CACIF (the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations, the powerful business

grouping that in Guatemala is the political and institutional expression of the private sector). The CACIF was involved continuously. In those days there was not so much visible resentment as there is today. Some military officers also were present. These were working groups that addressed different issues, each made up of 30 or 35 individuals that met every fifteen days during one year, without fail.

What was the environment that you found when you returned to Guatemala and in which the WSP developed?

A Guatemala with some groups that thought that with the end of the conflict a period of peace was beginning. What happened in 1997 was disappointing due to a lack of



WSP
Guatemala

initiative on the part of President Arzú (1996-1999). The moment of the signing of the peace accords was the great opportunity to appeal to the Guatemalan nation and place before the political parties a programme of modernization and change. If Arzú had been a visionary politician he could have called on the Guatemalan nation to support a nation-building project, well presented and involving all the political forces. He did nothing of the sort. He wasn't even willing to personally receive the Report of the Commission of Historical Clarification of the United Nations (Guatemala: memoria del silencio). He boycotted the referendum to reform the Constitution and that opportunity was lost. How should I say? We imagined that Guatemala at that moment was going to come together under the direction of the President, a

prestigious man, who had won the elections and had directed the peace process. He would have had the support of the right and the left with a programme of reconciliation and national reordering. That was the great historic opportunity. These are the opportunities that Guatemala has lost. He did nothing. He divided the country even more when he began the privatization process. A year after having privatized telephone and electricity services, there were projects to privatize education. That's how the State began to shrink. It already was a weak State, in the sense of exercising little authority, and Arzú only reduced its size and presence. One only has to see the number of privileges he organized through the State's budget. It was he who revived trust funds; a trust fund is a concession, it is public monies that the State turns over to

be managed privately. Today 40% of public monies in Guatemala are administered by the private sector. It was within this environment that WSP was set up and functioned during 1997 and 1998.

What was the response of the actors who participated in the project, because we must assume that, upon the conclusion of the war, they had never before been part of such a large gathering with such a diversity of sectors?

It was highly valued as a first experience in bringing together diverse groups in support of a shared objective. The peace accords brought many people together. We had worked with them successfully since 1997. And I say successfully because there are the results, but putting them in practice was

not our responsibility, it was the government's task.

What is the environment today in contrast to that which you knew then?

The post-conflict environment is over. Now there are other issues on the political agenda, all of them revolving neurotically around the electoral event. Politics is as a fair, political parties are as bazaars, politicians are as circus actors. Part of the current oppressive climate can be found in the pernicious elements of brutal insecurity we are living in. Disorganized crime is worse than the organized version; young people living in slums as enemies of society represent a threat. A bit of information: in the first three months of this year there were 480 reports of extortions, which because of their frequency are also the most harmful.

What perceptions were there about peace at that moment? How did the actors who participated in the project think of peace?

That is a very complex question because society, in fact, is complex. It is important to mention that in contrast to the Salvadoran experience, the peace accords, the process of dialogue, the moment when they were agreed upon, held but little interest for the Guatemalan social sectors. The signing of the peace accords led to a great mass celebration in El Salvador, where some 100,000 citizens came together to celebrate with song, while here some 8,000 congregated in the plaza in front of the

National Palace. According to a survey commissioned by the Ebert Foundation, only 20% of the population had information about the peace accords.

Along this same line, when we talk about the construction of peace there is an immediate association with the idea of post-conflict societies. However, once we overcame that moment we realize now that we need to continue to build peace. In a context which is no longer a post-conflict one, what does the word peace bring to your mind today?

For people in the academic circle which I moved in, progressive people, peace was the observance of the Peace Accords and in that they were not mistaken. The Peace Accords include nearly all the aspects of State policy: the agrarian problem, the military, indigenous peoples, health, education. Thus, that was their response and it was a very difficult response at the same time: to say that peace is the observance of the Peace Accords, according to documents which cover all aspects of everything, is impossible. I never responded in those terms because, for me, the Peace Accords, well-written and carefully thought through as they are, were difficult to implement. Why? It is elementary: because none of the actors who signed the accords, not one of them, had the capacity to comply with them. The URNG that signed them was disorganized and the civilians from the three governments who signed the accords left their posts. Naturally, some things have been carried out

because they are within the logic of progress.

One of the questions we ask ourselves when talking about the construction of peace is: What is the common thread that can take us beyond the changes in contexts, if we assume that peace is a process and not a point of destination?

There is a common thread, since then and up to now. So that Guatemala can move forward, so that Guatemala can develop a little more, so that Guatemala can be democratic, it must have a strong democratic State. The idea of building a State runs through all our history, especially the history of the post-conflict period. But there are some more specific aspects upon which a peace policy can be supported: awareness of the horror of 150,000 dead; the issue of punishment followed by pardon and obliviousness about the past; the tasks of reconstruction and reconciliation, which are linked to the difficult problem of the incorporation of indigenous communities, and, of course, the struggle against inequalities as the foundation of peace, etc.

In other words, the answer you gave in that context about the meaning of peace is the same one that you would give today?

The same one.

But how can we talk about the construction of a strong State when it seems that we suffer



from a lack of citizenship in terms of policy in the public sector?

Maybe we shouldn't speak of citizenship but of a modern and efficient bureaucracy. What happens today is that, thanks to an awful civil service law, government employees are of low quality, toothless bureaucrats recruited after every election. That's why we call them *chambones* which is a colloquial term that means incompetent, inefficient. Every four years there is a "first generation" that arrives in the public administration to show off its ignorance, to learn the tips about pseudo-technical management when they have already been appointed to the post. And when they leave, they get severance pay... We talk of a strong State as a national centre of power that is obeyed seamlessly. To build it up is the most important task.

Shortly after peace was signed, and perhaps exceptionally, there was an interest in the public sector, but today it is the private interest which predominates over the public, to such an extent that it does not seem as necessary to understand the operation of the public administration to further one's "businesses". At the same time, we can see all through history that the public interest nearly always has been subordinated to private interests.

That's how fortunes have been made everywhere. The difference is that in other countries, as opposed to ours, the social commitment

of the bourgeoisies never was forgotten. Within the logic of development, it was like that everywhere and that is how it started here: education is public. Where did they get the idea that it is private? And here it is private, nearly all of it; 80% of high school is in the hands of private education. And health, how can it be private? How can you put the healthcare of people up for sale? Health is a public concern, but here a majority of healthcare is private. These people don't know that one hundred years ago education in Latin America was public.

The very high levels of violence that Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras suffer are the product of the weakness of their States?

No, the germs of violence are in part an inheritance of the armed conflict and the repression by the Army, together with serious symptoms of impunity; also due to the poverty that afflicts the lower middle class, family disorganization, unemployment, and other facets of social ills. Violence is a result of the weakness of the State only insofar as its incapacity to guarantee the population the right to security. To the extent that the State does not guarantee that right, it is failing; violence is present everywhere and the State is unable to control it, especially since violence became a private issue: drug trafficking, organized crime in general.

At the same time, when the State represses, it is creating conditions for those repressed to answer back. For many years

here, the population was beaten up in demonstrations, in protests; that began to change more or less when the armed option of revolution made its appearance, when people began to answer back and, finally, organized guerrilla groups. In a democratic State there is no violence. Violence is a response to violence by the State.

What issues that are central today appeared back then?

A number of them, but one that already was present then, as a central problem, was the issue of indigenous peoples. Since the Peace Accords, Guatemala has been become a multiethnic and multicultural society. The recognition of rights for the Maya population takes shape in various substantive changes, for example, the recognition of collective rights. The incorporation of indigenous peoples into society is not only a struggle against discrimination but also involves multilingual education, inequalities in education and work, etc.

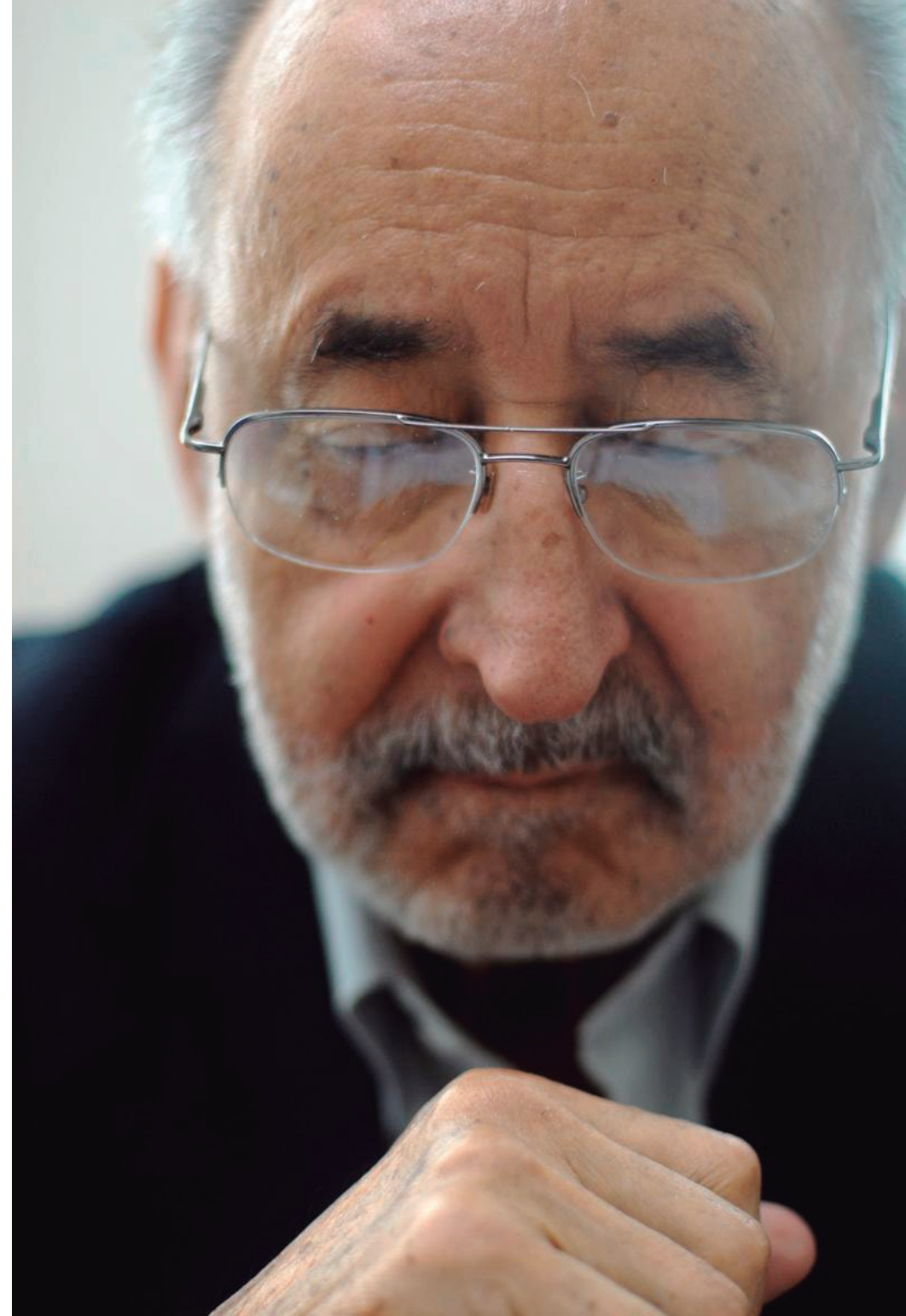
It would seem that the Army is beyond political debate, at least formally, and that, quite the contrary, it makes great efforts to continue its structure of reforms: around 80% of the Army's personnel is made up of people who had nothing to do with the armed conflict. Nonetheless, it would seem to continue to play a fundamental role in this society.

The Army continues to be an important institution that should not be overlooked and that at this mo-

ment does not need to be activated. For what reason? Because the role that the military should play is that of defence against foreign threats. In the last years, the Army has been partially incorporated as reinforcement for the containment of violence, but has had no success in this task that places it face to face with citizens who have rights.

Finally, Edelberto, what should be the focus of an organization dedicated to the construction of peace, in the current regional context?

Peace in these times has two dimensions: the material reconstruction of society and robust economic development so that everyone can have a decent job. And national reconciliation, which must be preceded by punishment for the guilty. For example, punishment for the crime of genocide. In fact, there were thousands of people murdered, disappeared, and their relatives are still waiting to know why, when, and who was responsible... It is impossible to uncover everything but there are guilty parties like Ríos Montt and a dozen other generals who are directly responsible for the wrongs they inflicted on this poor society. At the same time, peace can be constructed if there is social development; everything that contributes to democracy, contributes to peace. Therefore, it is not necessary for me to say that the democratic State is peace; instead, it is those factors that contribute to its institutional operation. Education is good for peace. A healthy population is good for peace. Young people with jobs, mothers who do not die in childbirth...



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For peacebuilding the goal must be not just to enable a society to address specific drivers or root-causes of violent conflict, but rather to strengthen the elements of social and political cohesion that will allow it to prevent conflict from escalating into polarizing and violent dynamics, transforming it from a destructive to a constructive force.

Interpeace, Strategic Position Paper

