

Focus On: Peace Brigades International

Peace Brigades International: 21 years of promoting non-violence and protecting human rights

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is a non-governmental organisation working with communities world-wide to address conflicts in non-violent ways. Teams of volunteers are sent into areas of conflict to 'make space for peace'. They only enter countries where their international presence has been requested, and only after a thorough study of the specific conflict and the political, social and economic context in which it is occurring. After that, they assess whether PBI's presence would be effective in dissuading violence, or in persuading parties to address their difficulties non-violently.

PBI's strength lies in its teams of volunteers who work with grassroots organisations experiencing violent conflict. Over 21 years such work has assisted in bringing relief to a number of conflict zones including Sri Lanka, the Balkans, Guatemala, El Salvador and Haiti. They currently have projects in Colombia, Indonesia and Mexico and are also part of a coalition working in Chiapas, Mexico.

The way PBI works to protect human rights defenders and transform conflict non-violently varies between its different projects according to the dynamics of the particular conflict and the kind of international support requested. The tools PBI uses are:

- Protective Accompaniment
- Support networks
- Peace Education
- Observation, Analysis and Reporting

Protective Accompaniment

PBI is widely recognised for its pioneering work in developing the use of protective accompaniment to safeguard human rights defenders who are under threat. Protective

accompaniment is the provision of an escort to a threatened individual or organisation. This non-violent presence by an international volunteer as an “unarmed bodyguard” acts as a deterrent to potential aggressors. It works on the premise that those threatening or carrying out violent acts are sensitive to international condemnation or pressure: they fear the inevitable political repercussions of their violence being witnessed by a foreign observer. Protective accompaniment can take many forms. It can mean being with an individual 24 hours per day, being present in the offices of a threatened organisation, following a peaceful march or protest, or travelling with people in critical circumstances.

“The accompaniment volunteers are a living bridge between the threatened activists and the outside world, and also between their own home communities and the reality of the global struggle for human rights. [They] experience a rare privilege of standing at the side of some of the world’s most courageous and committed activists.”
Liam Mahony & Luis Enrique Eguren, (1997) “Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights”, Kumarian Press

Understandably, the effectiveness of this unusual method of human rights protection is sometimes questioned, particularly in the midst of violent conflicts such as those in Colombia where disappearances and murders are commonplace. However, throughout its 21 years, PBI’s use of protective accompaniment has generally demonstrated that an international, non-violent presence does indeed secure a peaceful space for activists struggling for peace, justice and the defense of human rights.

“The work of PBI shows that the accompaniment of people who suffer from authoritarianism, intolerance and state violence is invaluable and necessary, making the struggle for human rights more effective and the dream of democracy into a reality. PBI leaves Guatemala with the satisfaction of a mission accomplished and with great challenges ahead in other places where its presence and accompaniment are needed as a moral force and support.”
Rigoberta Menchú, Nobel peace laureate, goodwill ambassador for UNESCO, on PBI’s closing of its Guatemala Project in 1999.

Nevertheless, in order to be effective PBI’s protective ‘accompaniers’ must be backed by an international network of concerned individuals, supporting organisations, governmental and non-governmental representatives. Potential aggressors are

continually informed by PBI of the international awareness that their presence brings to threatened individuals or organisations.

Support networks

Support networks are designed to react promptly to a human rights crisis and apply specific pressure to prevent further acts of violence. PBI coordinates two such alert networks: a grass-roots network called the Emergency Response Network and a network of high-level contacts known as the PBI Support Network. The networks are comprised of PBI members and other concerned individuals, academic and religious organisations, government representatives, the UN and non-governmental bodies such as Amnesty International.

In life-threatening situations PBI will activate the most appropriate alert system. This may happen whenever one of the teams or someone they accompany is faced with death threats, abduction, arrest or assault. A case sheet is sent out with details of the violation and perpetrators, background information, the suggested wording of an appeal, and the contact details of the intended recipients. Participants are asked to immediately send faxes, emails or letters to government and military authorities in the country in which the crisis is occurring or to approach their own MPs to do it on their behalf.

Within hours of the initial incident, hundreds of faxes and emails protest the violation. The weight of this mass appeal has a significant impact on the recipients, making them aware that such violations are not occurring in isolation and the eyes of the international community are upon them. This international concern helps dissuade the perpetrators of violations from carrying out further actions and provides reassurance to those PBI accompanies.

This impact is particularly strong when those protests come from high-level networks of influential political and diplomatic authorities such as representatives of other governments or intergovernmental organisations such as the European Union. This is due to the potential upshots in terms of a country's aid, trade and political relations. There is more at stake than public condemnation. During an interview with PBI

researchers, one former Guatemalan Defence Minister explained how such high-level protests are perceived:

"You have to watch for when it reaches the level of an intergovernmental problem...because we're signers of all these covenants and treaties. So, when we get a letter from Congressman X or Senator Y, or a letter from Mr. Z of the European Parliament, something's happening because these folks are not just protesting for their own sake. They represent a lot of people."

These networks multiply the protective power of PBI's international presence, while giving thousands of citizens around the world a way to learn about the conflicts and to take effective action.

Peace Education

Over the years, PBI has learned a great deal about addressing conflicts non-violently. The organisation continues to model new ways of doing this through imparting what it knows and learning how others do it. PBI peace education provision is in response to requests from local people for support in addressing a history of structural violence and finding new and more peaceful ways to deal with their conflicts.

Volunteers run conflict resolution workshops and other kinds of programmes with communities or groups of individuals, often in conjunction with local non-violence trainers. These sessions draw on local culture and the experiences of the participants to explore alternative ways of managing conflict and to develop appropriate techniques that they can use in their communities and workplaces.

"As a result of the workshops we have greatly expanded our ways of dealing with conflict within our community so that people negotiate conflicts instead of picking up the machetes."

Haitian workshop participant, 1997

Community leaders, social workers, members of grass roots organisations and individuals interested in non-violent social change attend the workshops and develop communication skills in areas of conflict resolution, including analysis, dialogue, mediation, negotiation and reconciliation.

“These techniques of managing conflict through participatory methods - games, exercises, drama, case histories and discussion – allow everyone to excel, to grow, to discover themselves and to understand others.”

Gracita Osias, Haitian participant in a conflict transformation workshop, 1998

The long-term success of peace education depends on strengthening the capacity of local people to understand non-violent conflict transformation and to pass these skills on to others. To this end, PBI runs “training for trainers” programmes. Themes that are explored include conflict analysis, non-violent action in the struggle against impunity, non-violent communication, participative ways to manage conflicts, and conflict prevention. Peace education initiatives help to create new hope in the communities where they are applied and provide lasting frameworks so that violent conflicts can be avoided in the future.

Observation, Analysis and Reporting

Human rights violations occurring in other countries are easily ignored and the people who try to defend themselves struggle to have their voices heard. PBI believes that a vital part of its work is to help those repressed voices reach out to people all over the world. Abuse thrives in silence, but by carrying out regular observation, analysis and reporting of conflicts and human rights situations, PBI can inform the world what is happening and encourage the international community to act.

PBI works at a grass roots level: a good position to monitor what is happening. In developing close contacts with local non-governmental organisations and local, regional and national authorities, and through working openly and objectively, PBI builds relationships that yield a great deal of valuable information. Field teams write regular reports reviewing socio-political developments and the changing state of human rights in a region, and these are disseminated throughout the national and international community.

These reports are politically non-partisan but promote the need for respect for human rights, adding a strong voice to local calls for the international community’s support for justice and humanity. And they provide a valuable source of reliable information for other non-governmental organisations and diplomatic missions. Consequently,

PBI has had its work endorsed by a wide variety of governmental and non-governmental representatives.

“...the embassy, on behalf of the Government of Canada, appreciates and admires the work which you are carrying out, not only in Barrancabermeja but in the whole country. I have no doubt at all that you are saving lives and that you’re giving critical support to Colombian NGOs who are fighting for a better and fairer Colombia. I think it is no exaggeration to say that the whole diplomatic community supports this work.”

Nicholas Coghlan, Canadian Embassy in Colombia

“I would like to pay tribute to the work of Peace Brigades International and to the bravery of their volunteers. Through their work, they are able to provide the sort of protection in Chocó Urabá and elsewhere [in Colombia] that armed forces cannot provide.”

Tony Lloyd, Minister of State, in a statement to UK Parliament, 1999.

Infrastructure

Everyday, PBI’s field projects in Colombia, Mexico and Indonesia receive logistical support from a project office and are managed by a project committee. PBI also has 21 offices representing countries throughout Europe, North America and the South Pacific. PBI UK is one such ‘country group’. This London office supports and promotes PBI by recruiting and training volunteers locally, fundraising for the projects and developing and activating the alert networks. It generates moral and political support for PBI projects and raises awareness of human rights violations in the regions where PBI works.

Like most country groups, PBI UK depends almost entirely on unpaid volunteers. The broadest level of PBI’s strategic direction is decided by the PBI General Assembly which takes place once every three years. Between these events, such decisions are handled by an International Council which is comprised of representatives from country groups and the field projects, and a number of finance, administrative, executive, communications and public relations committee representatives. All members of the International Council must be unpaid volunteers. Spread around the world, they generally only meet virtually. Paid PBI staff number only a very few and if they attend the Council, they do so on a consultative rather than decision-affecting basis.

Project volunteers

The field volunteers are people with a strong belief in non-violence, peace and the work of PBI and human rights. Because they live with other volunteers for at least a year in a conflict zone, they are capable of working under pressure and with tact and diplomacy. Maturity and a sense of humour are vital.

While no volunteer has ever been seriously injured working on a project, the work does present many challenges and is certainly not glamorous. Emma Eastwood was a British PBI volunteer on a project in Guatemala. She remembers, one day, seeing the charred remains of a small wellington boot. She was in the Guatemalan jungle, witnessing the uncovering of a mass grave. She had seen the remains of an entire village that had been massacred by death squads. But it was the wellington boot that triggered her feelings:

“This was such a personal object. We were all trying to hide our emotions. A local priest told me how he coped with the suffering and misery. He said, ‘We have to do what we are doing so that this can never happen again.’”

All volunteers are chosen and trained by PBI: they go through a rigorous selection process. Prospective PBI volunteers in Britain attend an orientation weekend to take them through self-evaluation and an exploration of their motives for getting involved. If successful, they are invited for seven to ten days of project training. They are all over 25 and fluent in the relevant language.

Tony Corbalis

To find out more about Peace Brigades International please visit:

www.peacebrigades.org.