

Experiences from 20 years in Norwegian diplomacy

Aud Lise Norway at Mariehamn's City Library

On August 18th, the Åland Islands Peace Institute invited Aud Lise Norheim to speak about her experiences as a Norwegian diplomat in Mariehamn's City Library. Aud Lise Norheim can look back on 20 years in the Norwegian civil service and draw from a rich career in international diplomacy. Before taking office as the Norwegian Ambassador in Lebanon in 2008 she worked in Syria, South Africa, Italy and Bangladesh. In Mariehamn she shared her experiences with, among others, 24 young women from Scandinavia and the Caucasus who seized their chance to hear Aud Lise answer the question "How can a small country make a difference for peace?".



"How can a small country make a difference for peace?" or what is Norway's recipe for its relative success as a mediator in violent conflicts? Aud Lise Norheim sees her benefit as a Norwegian Ambassador in the fact that she can "talk to everybody". Considering the complexity of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East this is a status not shared by many. How has a small country like Norway secured its reputation as a neutral peace-maker, not only during the Oslo Process in the Middle East but also during the conflicts in South Africa, Sri Lanka and Guatemala?

According to Aud Lise Norheim it is Norway's historical and political position as well as its approach to mediation that has let Norway to play a decisive role in many peace processes. The country's modest colonial past and the fact that Norway itself is a relatively homogenous society where relative consensus exists on foreign policy, beyond party political divides, is a sturdy basis for continuous engagement. Today Norway can draw from considerable experience in development assistance and promotes strong cooperation between civil society, science and the state, the former two playing decisive roles in getting peace processes started. Being outside the EU, Norwegian diplomats can fill an independent role and secure dialogue with all conflicting parties, both insurgents and governments. According to Aud Lise a mediator does not only need to know the rules of the mediation but all conflicting parties, their interpretation of history and whether they are committed to the peace. It is crucial for any mediator to be aware of this role and seek dialogue. To prevent drifting into a monologue, a mediator needs to be reflective of his or her own culture and listen to all parties. Aud Lise pointed to the example of the controversies around the Mohammed caricatures published by a Danish newspaper in 2005. The caricatures triggered protests by Muslim communities all around the world. The accusation that the caricatures were blasphemous was met with incomprehension by many in the Western world. Symbolism might not be central to many Western cultures anymore, but this should not lead us to ignore the meaning of symbols in other cultures, Aud Lise advised. After all, only 40 years ago Monty Python's "the Life of Brian" was banned from the screens in Norway.

The majority of the audience, on Tuesday, 18th August 2009, consisted of participants of the "Living Bridges" training course organized by the Åland Islands Peace Institute in

cooperation with Yuva Humanitarian Center in Azerbaijan, Women's Resource Center in Armenia and Mälardalens Women's Lobby in Sweden. The young women participating were especially interested in Aud Lise's experiences as a female ambassador. As an ambassador, Aud Lise contemplated, everybody is treating her with the outmost respect. Although female diplomats are rare compared to their male colleagues, their status does not rank behind. Female ambassadors, Aud Lise said, are seen as "honorary men". The participants continued the training course by discussing the underlying assumptions and implications of gender roles, both in Scandinavia and the Caucasus.

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