

“Fighting corruption is an essential part of democracy”

Anne Schwöbel | Vice president of the Weltethos foundation

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In an increasingly divided world, the challenge of living together fruitfully is becoming more and more complex. Anne Schwöbel talks about the necessity of a basic foundation of common values, the importance of fighting corruption, fake news and about the dilemmas whistleblowers face.



You are the Vice President of the Weltethos Foundation, an organization that works for peace between different religions and cultures. How does Weltethos work concretely to strengthen peace and promote a fruitful coexistence between the religions?

The core task of Weltethos is the intercultural dialogue and the communication of values. Those are at the heart of peacebuilding. We need a basic foundation of common values for living together today in cultural diversity.

At present, we see a division in society; on the one hand, in an ever-increasing culturally mixed world, we have largely secular societies, and on the other hand, we see religious energies that are increasingly condensed and, unfortunately, radicalized. This leads to a growing polarization of society. To cross this divide, dialogue between religions and cultures is needed.

Thus, Weltethos focuses primarily on young people and tries to impart values and basic knowledge about the religions to them. For, alongside the family as the nucleus of ethical learning, kindergartens and schools are the central learning environment for ethical learning and for practising living together in cultural diversity. When I go into the concrete activities of Weltethos, I look at the German Foundation of Weltethos, based in Tübingen, where there is the Wordlab project, for example. This is an intercultural values project with the idea of bringing together fugitive young people with young people from Germany. Together they present themselves and their values from their respective cultural areas and develop a joint project. Other activities are poetry slam courses at schools, or anti-radicalisation workshops. When young people are asked to express their opinions on current issues, formulating an opinion is the first step towards learning tolerance.

In Switzerland we work together with the pedagogical university in St. Gallen. Within the framework of Learning Plan 21, there is a new subject ERG (Ethics, Religion and Community). We have developed a tool; an online platform that deals with different topics such as death, truth or human rights in an inter-religious way. Access to the platform is provided free of charge to teachers, where they can download content and integrate it into their school lessons in order to deal with interreligious conflict situations in a theologically sound and sensitive way.

For many years, you were managing director of the non-governmental organization Transparency International Switzerland, which is committed to fighting corruption in politics, business and administration. Many see the fight against corruption as a duty to preserve freedom and democracy. How do you see this?

For me, fighting corruption is an essential part of democracy. Corruption per se undermines the rule of law and weakens citizens' confidence in its state institutions. Corruption damages the state immensely, because it also has a far-reaching negative effect on a society. Corruption not only leads to a waste of public and private resources, but also distorts competition, encourages unethical behaviour, facilitates extortion and prepares the ground for further criminal acts. This affects not only the public sector but also the private sector.

A country in which state action is not based on decisions that comply with the law, but leads to the enrichment of individuals, is not a democratic state. That is why it is so important that democracies consistently combat all corrupt behaviour.

Switzerland is one of the world's most important trading centres for raw materials. Many companies in this sector operate in countries where corruption is a daily occurrence. What do you think should be done to reduce this problem?

This raises the question for companies whether they want to operate in countries with an increased risk of corruption. This can be a strategic business decision. In raw materials trading and other industries, this freedom of decision is not always given. It is important to consider the situation in the respective countries and to take precautions in your own company. How

preventive action can be taken and how we can protect ourselves should every entrepreneur ask himself in advance. Institutions such as Seco or the respective local chambers of commerce also offer their support in this area. Nevertheless, corruption in such countries cannot simply be eradicated.

That is why I think it is of central importance from the Swiss side that our legal system, which actually goes very far with corporate liability, also takes corrupt companies to task. Corporate liability obliges every company to take preventive measures to prevent unlawful conduct by its employees, including bribery payments to public officials abroad. If a corrupt offence is then committed, the Swiss side should apply the law consistently. Otherwise it becomes a dead letter.

So, you think the current corporate responsibility initiative makes sense?

Yes, it makes perfect sense and is also absolutely necessary. I see no counterargument against the initiative. If it's a matter of corporations based in Switzerland disregarding human rights or failing to comply with environmental standards abroad, they should be able to be held accountable here.

In addition to your many years of experience in fighting corruption, you are also a member of the Board of Directors of B. Braun Medical AG, the



leading manufacturer of medical technology products in Switzerland. Does this bring you into conflict with the views from your previous activities?

Not at all. B. Braun is committed to its legally compliant and socially responsible corporate governance. However, we consider compliance with applicable laws to be only a minimum requirement. Employees are sensitized and trained with our rules and regulations, such as the Code of Conduct and the corresponding behavioral guidelines, as well as educational programs. We live ethical values such as integrity, fairness and sustainability out of our inner conviction.

As a manufacturer of medical technology, pharmaceutical products and services worldwide, we want to protect and improve people's health. Just as important to us as a family-owned company in its 6th generation is socially responsible action for our environment and posterity.

After all, one has to realize that corrupt behavior harms every company. Even if an order is placed by paying a bribe, this is not a promising approach in the long term. The client receives a poor product at an inflated price. In our view, corrupt behaviour is not compatible with long-term business success.

You lived in Barcelona for a few years, where you worked for the market development of Integrity

Line, a company that, among other things, wants to strengthen the protection of whistleblowers. Whistleblowers often have the consequence that their lives and freedoms are severely restricted and they are often socially discredited, as the case of Edward Snowden shows. By what measures can people nevertheless be encouraged to reveal the truth about cases of corruption or other breaches of law in companies and to stand up for the morally correct?

Well, I have to say that my work and my experience at Transparency International Switzerland have unfortunately led me to the conclusion that I am very cautious and that whistleblowers are advised to weigh up the risks very clearly before going public with information. This is because whistleblowers are simply not sufficiently protected here in Switzerland. Unfortunately, in the beginning of march the National Council rejected the bill after 12 years, which was intended to provide better protection for whistleblowers. I have also been personally involved with whistleblowers in my work at Transparency International Switzerland and have witnessed their fate, so I am very reticent about this. I would actually ask companies to do more for whistleblowers now, because the legal situation for whistleblowers is not sufficiently protective. Every company has an interest in knowing whether there are irregularities or violations of the law within the company. Whistleblowers in the company should be encouraged to



report them as soon as possible. This requires a culture of openness. Appropriate communication channels must be established. A culture of openness for whistleblowers is of course essential.

Bradley Birkenfeld is probably one of the best-known whistleblowers in the financial sector and has received compensation - according to media reports - of over 100 million USD. What do you think of this?

I don't approve that. Of course, you can't compare the American legal system with our Swiss legal system in general. But the motivation of a whistleblower should not be pecuniary and you shouldn't encourage that as well. A whistleblower should inform about an irregularity or a violation of the law based on his inner conviction, his understanding of the law and his loyalty to his employer. Whistleblowing should not be about making money from such a situation.

Employees are often caught between loyalty to the company and a conflict of conscience in the case of visible irregularities. How do you recommend dealing with this dilemma?

Abuse is never in the best interest of the company. Therefore, it should be seen that the first thing to do is to inform the prescribed competent authority within the

company. Only when all internal channels have been exhausted and there is no reaction should the competent authorities be addressed. If there is no reaction either, the last step is to contact the public.

The dilemma, for example, when it comes to a good colleague who is unlawfully enriched, this dilemma cannot be erased. Whistleblowing remains a very personal decision that everyone must make with their own conscience.

Platforms such as Wikileaks allow the anonymous publication of secret documents, which protects whistleblowers but does not allow false information and rumours to be traced. To what extent do you see a problem with this, also with regard to the scandalizing interest of certain media?

Supporters say that citizens have a right to know everything that serves to form public opinion. I sometimes wonder at what price and how one can still form an opinion when thousands of documents are published, how can they be judged on their relevance? That is the task for which we actually have journalists. It becomes problematic when the media does not want to publish relevant material. I am thinking here of the Bradley Manning case. He was a member of the US armed forces during the Iraq war. An IT specialist who



had first contacted the Washington Post and the New York Times, and neither of them had even considered his documents, then he went to Wikileaks. It is precisely in such cases that these kinds of platforms have their justification. I just have to say, It's a double-edged sword.

A related problem today is of course increasingly the fake news. What measures do you think are important to counteract the effects of fake news?

This is not an easy question. I think everyone has to start with themselves and be prepared to pay for well-researched journalism and to look closely at sources. I'll give you a short example from Amnesty International, they do a wonderful job. On the one hand, they have staff members who go to the crisis areas on the ground and interview victims and witnesses about the situation. On the other hand, they work together with universities, where students spend hours studying satellite images of the affected areas in painstaking detail and compare the images with the statements of the people affected. Using the latest technology, the witness statements are checked for consistency with what is visible on the images. Based on these sources, Amnesty International then publishes a report on a crisis situation. In my view, this is an impressive example of serious reporting and human rights research in a more complicated world of mis- and dis-information.

So, it is also the responsibility of the reader to carefully select sources and not just letting everything sink in?

Exactly yes, I can only underline that. Particularly in the current situation with the corona crisis, caution is called for with regard to what information is circulating on the social media. I personally keep my distance and rely on information from the government and the statements of experts.



Anne Schwöbel

Anne Schwöbel graduated in law at the University of Geneva and holds an executive MBA in Media and Communication from the University of St. Gallen. As a member of the Board of Directors of B. Braun Medical AG, she is involved in the family business. B. Braun Medical AG was founded by her parents in 1973 and is Switzerland's leading manufacturer of medical technology products. For many years, she served as Managing Director of the non-governmental organization Transparency International Switzerland. Until 2017, she has lived in Barcelona for five years where she worked on the market development of Integrity Line, a Swiss risk management company that offers protected whistleblower systems. Anne Schwöbel is active in numerous mandates, is a board member of the German-Swiss Chamber of Commerce and vice president of the Weltethos foundation.