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We need to re-invent hope: The legacy of Paulo Freire

by Luis Orellana, CIAZO, El Salvador

I still have not forgotten the impact that Paulo Freire's death had on me. I was travelling back from Guatemala, where I had participated in the first Latin American REFLECT workshop, when I read the small note in the newspaper (curiously enough, in the entertainment section), saying that Paulo Freire, 'the famous educator', had died.

I still have not forgotten the impact. There are people who we think will never leave us. Freire was one of these people, someone who managed to blur the frontiers that normally separate life from death. At that moment, among other things, I thought that Freire would have been slightly annoyed to see that the press and many other people, continued to call him an educator when he always saw himself as a politician. He once said to Carlos Nuñez: "I am first and foremost a politician and an educator second".

"I do not believe that any educator should feel undervalued by this judgement, rather this reaffirms the essential political nature of education in whatever sphere: it is society that creates and influences schools, we should not give schools more credit than they actually warrant. However, despite the fact that education is not magic, it continues to be indispensable in the fight for peace and liberation. The act of educating and learning is essentially political and pedagogical – in that order".

In 1992 Freire accepted CIAZO's invitation to visit El Salvador and our projects. All the people who, in one way or another, took part in this visit will never forget the poetry of his words and the wisdom that could only come from an intellectual who is wholly committed to the interests and dreams of the excluded. Only someone with great humanism could say to us: "There is nothing more pedagogical than for a people to take their own history in their hands", celebrating El Salvador's peace process and qualifying it as something new in Latin America's history, which is used to struggles that always have winners and losers. He recognised that the peace is not perfect, or finished as yet, but nevertheless valuable, and that it was only possible with the effort, and bloodshed of thousands of children, women and men – dreamers and non-conformists.

And present in this fight was Paulo Freire, inspiring and orienting a series of emerging experiences in the middle of repression and madness. He witnessed how 'popular teachers', with more love than technical knowledge, took over the education of children and marginalised adults. Throughout this time they gave them access to education, health and a dignified life. It is because of this that he told us that he could identify with these practices and that he felt part of our struggle. He was struck by how our people have such a huge capacity to give life, friendship, love and also have the courage to love. He hoped that we would never lose this capacity to love the world and men and women.

The Paulo Freire that we knew in El Salvador was also a man who was highly self-critical. He could recognise the subjectivism in his earlier writings and every time he was interviewed he commented that: "I have criticised myself, and have often been more severe on myself than my critics have been. In my early works I made very few references to the political nature of education. Moreover, I made no reference to social class, or to class struggle. I believe that the reason for this was that I was incapable of clarifying the process of conscientisation or how you could do this in practice."

In 1985 he said: "I was self-critical when I realised that I believed that merely having a critical perception of reality automatically signalled its transformation – this is idealism".

This was Freire, a person who was continually evolving and moving, always making a new reading of the world, with its changes, its transformations, incorporating at each stage marks of his experiences. He was a man capable of living in the modern age, reaffirming his convictions without anti historical dogmatism.

This was the Freire who on his return to Brazil, after many years in exile, suggested that everybody needed to re-invent conscientisation or in any case to

stop talking about conscientisation. He publicly recognised the limitations of literacy and education as tools for social transformation.

The 1980s ended: the Sandinistas lost the elections, peace accords were signed in El Salvador, in Eastern Europe the 'socialist' regimes collapsed and neo-liberalism triumphantly announced the end of these ideologies and history.

In response Freire re-adopted the banner of hope, which provided the title for one of his last books: *Pedagogy of Hope*. In this book he called for an understanding of the new realities and a rejection of conservative neo-liberalism, criticising marxist dogmatism and calling for an 'up front' and open socialism.

He confirmed the above during his visit to our country when he said to us: "don't stop talking about revolution, this is not how to do it... It is necessary to take risks, democracy is a risk and democracy must be advanced. Not liberal democracy, but radical democracy, that, as yet, does not exist anywhere in the world and has not been invented."

Without a doubt the contribution of Paulo Freire marked the start of an explosion within the field of education, questioning, energetically, the in vogue paradigms of the 60s and 70s.

This was Freire: the educator, the politician, but above all a human being who, without wanting to, has become a myth. In 1989 he confessed that he was 68 years old and still felt in love, defining himself as a man who could not understand life without love and without searching for knowledge.

This was the academic, the companion, who invited us to re-invent hope: "although it is not enough it is necessary, though hope alone cannot win the struggle, yet without it the struggle is hesitant and weakened. We need critical hope, like a fish needs uncontaminated water."