

ANNA ALVAZZI DEL FRATE

When research serves peace

Anna Alvazzi del Frate is the Director of Programmes at Small Arms Survey, an organization dedicated to providing expertise on small arms related issues. Her knowledge in data collection and her interest in methodological rigor enable her to contribute to building peace on a daily basis.

Sometimes in life one thing leads to another. Anna Alvazzi describes her career as a “natural flow” that she simply followed, much like a swimmer led by the current in a stream. It is her interest in research that led her to take the position of Director of Programmes at Small Arms Survey in Geneva. This organization aims to collect data, conduct research on small arms and share the information with governments to help reduce the impact of armed violence and illicit trafficking. The glass walls of her office, covered with notes, dates and information about ongoing projects, show the dedication and hard work she puts into this cause.

From competitive swimmer to peace worker

When she introduces herself, one of the first things she mentions, almost without thinking, is that she used to swim competitively and also coached children in this discipline. This experience as an athlete was the turning point in her life. During that time, she developed a curiosity for



psychology. “It was mostly the interest in social behaviors that led me to this career. The social phenomena that influenced people's behaviors fascinated me”.

Accordingly, she studied psychology and sociology in Italy, where she also obtained a PhD in criminology at the University of Bologna. With this strong academic background, Anna Alvazzi spent 20 years working for the United Nations and became an international expert in data collection and analysis. Thinking back, she recalls that the career path which led her where she is now began with the support of the Minister of Justice from the Netherlands, who decided to fund the first international victimization survey in developing countries in 1989, for which she was selected as project leader.

Let the facts speak

Her love for methodological rigor and research can be felt in her calm and collected demeanor. At Small Arms Survey, she is in charge of coordinating all research conducted. “We let the facts speak”, she simply says. The evidence-based recommendations can then be used as a basis to implement new policies in countries requesting it.

Apart from conducting surveys herself, she has trained local teams to collect data in many parts of the world. Her career has led her to Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and some Asian countries as well. Although her work is now focused on small arms, she was previously involved in research on corruption, human trafficking and organized crime, which enabled her to study different aspects that directly contribute to peace.

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Theory to practice

When asked who she aspires to, she does not hesitate: Marie-André Bertrand, her professor at the University of Montreal during an exchange semester. As her mentor in criminology, she opened her eyes to that fact that her work could contribute to research and lead to concrete results. This gave her a new perspective on what she was doing: “I found my studies much more fascinating after my interactions with her”, she adds, and motivation is needed to carry out research.

A lot of planning and negotiation is often required to be able to reach the less visible part of the targeted population. This represents a major challenge in data collection. “To access and gain the trust of certain communities, we work with the elderly. We engage community leaders to ensure that our teams are introduced to their communities”, she explains.

So how can research concretely contribute to peace? Here is an example. A few years ago, Kenyan authorities stated that they had been able to change legislation and minimize the risks related to weapons entrusted to police reservists in Kenya, especially as regards risks of accidents due to lack of adequate training, accountability, and resources, based on a study carried out by the Small Arms Survey. A concrete outcome was the result. In order to achieve this, Anna Alvazzi believes that her work needs to “be transparent, accountable and to communicate clearly. You can achieve this when your research is sound, credible and methodologically correct”.

Optimism as a pre-requisite

Does she feel discouraged sometimes? Her answer is clear and spontaneous: “No, I don’t. I am optimistic by nature. I believe in the future”, she says with a smile. Although the road ahead might not always be peaceful, she has faith in people and what they can achieve together. She concludes: “There is always a small role that everyone can play. Everyone can make a difference and contribute to change”.

Laurane Briguet