

Dick Urban Vestbro

Africa Groups of Sweden and early ISAK

Dick Urban Vestbro has been involved in solidarity work since 1962 when he was a student in Stockholm. When he moved to Lund in 1966 he became a member of the Lund South Africa Committee, which started to focus on the situation in the Portuguese colonies. In 1968 he left to do a research project in Tanzania, where he got in touch with the liberation movements in Southern Africa. He wrote frequently about the liberation struggle for Swedish papers and when he returned to Sweden at the end of 1969 he initiated the formation of the Africa Groups of Sweden. During the 70s he kept in frequent contact with the liberation movements MPLA, Frelimo, PAIGC and ANC, and with solidarity organisations around the world. He was one of the initiators behind the broad umbrella organisation Isolate South Africa Committee, which succeeded in uniting a large number of Swedish organisations behind the demand for sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa. When he became a professor of architecture at the Royal Institute of Technology at the end of the 1990s he became heavily involved in research on African low-income housing problems.



Madi Gray: This is an interview with Prof Dick Urban Vestbro in his office in Stockholm on August 10 2005. Dick, you have been involved in solidarity work since you were very young. How did you become involved?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Very important was when I was a student here at the Royal Institute of Technology about 1962. The 1960 Sharpeville massacre had a lot of publicity in Sweden. Afterwards there was a discussion about students getting involved in the consumer boycott and the Students' Union at the Royal Institute of Technology were not very interested at that time. It was before the period of student radicalism and there was very little political activity and if there was any, it was very conservative. So there was a proposal to have commitment from the Students' Union and a lot of resistance but finally a meeting was arranged. I was not involved, but I attended a meeting with an ANC person whose name I have forgotten. He was speaking at this student meeting and he was an excellent speaker. He made me shift from

general anti-racist thinking into wanting to do something.

Then there was a co-coordinating committee for youth organizations and I was there representing one of the organizations, I was a member of one.

Madi Gray: Are we talking about SUL, *Sveriges Ungdomsorganisationers Landsråd*, as the co-coordinating committee? Which member organization did you belong to?

Dick Urban Vestbro: It was called SSUH, an anti-alcohol organization for young people. I represented them on the co-coordinating body on the boycott issue. I wanted to do something more and I started to learn about Southern Africa. I approached the South Africa Committee in Stockholm and got in touch with those who were active. That's how it started.

My first political demonstration I think ever was standing outside a shop called *Fruktcentralen*, a special kind of fruit shop, selling exotic produce from the other side of the globe. I had a sign saying *Don't buy South African fruit*. It was a commitment starting in 1962 or maybe 1963. I also participated in my first 1 of May demonstration with a poster.

So that's how it started, it was South Africa, it was anti-racism, it was within the boycott campaign.

Madi Gray: What happened after that?

Dick Urban Vestbro: I attended a few meetings, and I got to know some of the people who were more involved than me, and I became friends with them. When I moved to Lund, at the beginning of 1966 I immediately contacted the Lund South Africa Committee and became an active member. Then I got in touch with the South Africa Bulletin, which was edited from Lund, and got to know other people who were committed. But it was still South Africa. Then we started to look at the Portuguese colonies, at the initiative of some others, including Rolf Gustafsson who is now a journalist for *Svenska Dagbladet*.

I wanted to do a research project in Southern Africa or somewhere in Africa and I ended up at the end of 1968 in Tanzania and then I was decisive in my desire to keep in touch with the liberation movements. Besides ANC, it was also important to contact ZAPU, to some extent SWAPO. Most of the other Scandinavians were collaborating with Frelimo, so I was introduced to the Frelimo people. Even more important were my contacts with MPLA. I got their information and started to write for a Swedish left wing journal called *Tidssignal*. I wrote about African issues, mainly the liberation struggle in Mozambique and South Africa and then I started to write about Angola.

There was very little attention paid to Angola and the attention that was gaining momentum was not necessarily for MPLA but rather for FNLA. The liberal party had got in touch with FNLA and one of their prominent members, Olle Wästberg, had visited FNLA liberated areas. No one wrote much about MPLA but I got a very favourable impression by asking questions of Aghostino Neto and other MPLA people. I then decided to go with them into the liberated areas. I waited three weeks in Zambia to go inside, but it didn't materialize because they never got the green light, possibly because of some kind of conflict with Zambia or maybe

internal conflict within MPLA. Nevertheless I got to know quite a lot about the Angolan situation and wrote a lot about it and collected materials to the extent that when I came back some Sida people and people from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked me for information. *This* was at the end of 1969, when I came back to Sweden, after a year keeping in touch with most of the liberation movements all that time.

Madi Gray: What did you actually go down there for?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Research on housing for my PhD, which I neglected to some extent because of my commitment to solidarity work. The MPLA became my main contact, Frelimo was very important, the ANC, to some extent SWAPO and ZAPU, but almost none of the others.

Madi Gray: Which organizations have you been working with during your years of solidarity work? You mentioned Africa Committees in Lund and Stockholm.

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, it was called the South Africa Committee at that time, and after the boycott campaign, which was successful in 1964, maybe 1965, there was a stalemate in solidarity, in the anti-apartheid movement. One reason was that it's difficult to uphold a consumer boycott, only a few activists continued, because the big political parties had other issues on their agendas. so anti-apartheid solidarity was a side-line that they could do temporarily. Another reason was the fact that while we focused on the consumption of South African goods, Swedish investments increased to sums that were a good deal higher than the amount of money that youth consumption and imports were worth. This made us very upset about the political and economic system, the way it worked. We started as anti-racists, and many of us who were more dedicated and active, became left-wing because of the anti-apartheid issue.

Madi Gray: Do you mean that what you learnt of politics and economics from your experience in the anti-apartheid movement radicalised many youths?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes. It was the South Africa Committees, about five or six mainly in the university cities. When the Vietnam movement started in 1965, it took activists from the anti-apartheid movement, so that weakened us, and Vietnam became the main international political issue from 1965 onwards. The combined factors meant that African solidarity activities went down. But between 1965 and 1969 when I came back from Tanzania, the Lund South Africa Committee survived as an editorial board. We more or less refused to abandon Southern Africa for Vietnam, and I had to combine both, but in most other parts of Sweden the South Africa committees became passive. Because of the experience from the Vietnam solidarity movement of forming activist groups instead of a big bureaucratic organization, as was the case with the consumer boycott, I was determined when I came back to try to transform the South Africa Committees and others who were interested, into Africa Groups of

a similar kind to the Vietnam Groups, and I think I succeeded. I've gone through my diaries from that time and my saved letters. I made copies of all my letters, I wrote almost a letter a day to various Swedish organizations, student unions, *folkhögskolor* (adult education schools), I was amazed by the amount, and I travelled all around Sweden to convince them. In Stockholm there had been an initiative taken by the *Utrikespolitiska föreningen* (Institute for Foreign Policy Studies) and some others who wanted to form a new organization for African solidarity in general, and I persuaded them not to call themselves *Afrofront*, but to call themselves the Stockholm Africa Group. The Uppsala South Africa Committee were already active.. It's quite interesting, forming a support group for the liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies. We managed to form about Africa Groups, in Lund, Stockholm, Uppsala, Göteborg and Arvika.

From 1970 onwards we had difficulty in expanding. One reason was that we became rather sectarian, which was a tendency of the time. Student radicalism led to very strong ideological positions and all the left was involved in many factions, each convinced that theirs was the only true one. We had very high requirements for membership that members come to meetings every week, preferably twice a week, Tuesdays and Saturdays. Saturdays there were street activities, compulsory for members. It was very difficult to join unless you were willing to devote a lot of time. Some meetings were very long and tedious, especially for people who were not used to sitting in meetings and arguing all the time.

Madi Gray: Were there also ideological differences?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Absolutely. In the five groups we had big ideological differences with the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions whom we considered to be reformist and bureaucratic and not wanting to do true solidarity. We also had strong ideological differences among ourselves, a reflection of the divisions on the left. We had a lot of pro-Chinese and pro-Soviets and Trotskyists and other groups that are now dead, but that had an influence, destructive, I would say. Sometimes it was encouraging to have heated ideological discussions, a good learning experience, but later on it prevented us from doing concrete work, that's my assessment. From the beginning it also hindered us, so we had a lot of internal conflicts.

Madi Gray: Did that also reflect on the movements you decided to support?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes,. We started to analyse the situation in Angola where there were three organizations calling themselves liberation movements, the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA. We decided not to take the stand that it was up to the Angolans to sort this out, but said we'd better examine them, so we collected all the information we could get. To do that, we kept in touch with other solidarity organizations in Europe and in North America. I've looked at my correspondence from the time and I really kept in touch with a lot of organizations. We managed to get quite a lot of good information. We also looked carefully at the Portuguese war communiqués and compared them with what the liberation movements said, and so we

found that MPLA was serious, it was anti-racist which UNITA and FNLA weren't, and it was anti-imperialist. We defined something we called an *anti-imperialist liberation movement*. Those that recognized the negative influence of NATO, which some of the movements didn't. Those movements that appealed to Black Nationalism and wanted to throw the mulattoes out of the movement, we thought that was very negative and after intensive discussion among ourselves, in all five Africa Groups, we decided not to support UNITA or FNLA but only MPLA. Encouraged, thinking that we had done the right thing, we did a similar thing with Mozambique where it was much easier, because the so-called Coremo group was very small and unimportant, so it was only Frelimo. In South Africa it was easy, we looked into PAC and decided that we could not support such an organization, which had even been founded at the United States Information Office in Johannesburg and used Black Nationalist arguments. In the case of Zimbabwe it was much more difficult and we were divided between ZAPU and ZANU and discussed it several times, and in the end we said more or less that we're not taking a stand for either of the two.

Madi Gray: You said it was more difficult to decide between ZAPU and ZANU?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, because it was obvious that ZANU led by Robert Mugabe was rather active at the same time as they took a stand for China against the Soviet Union, and there were other issues involved. ZAPU seemed to be more close to a good analysis of the situation and they worked with the ANC in South Africa but we were not sure how active they were. I felt for instance that people I met from ZAPU were very serious, but I think I was deceived because then they had very serious splits among themselves, which means that they were not as serious as they looked, I think. Concerning Namibia we recognized that it was only SWAPO which had any big popular support, but we had a little quarrel with them because it turned out that they somehow co-operated with UNITA in Angola which we didn't like, and we didn't like SWAPO's explanation. The explanation we got was that UNITA were present where SWAPO had to march through Angola into Namibia.

The main thing that created a little problem was that we were very influenced by the successes of the guerrillas in Angola and Mozambique and felt that we should give priority to those movements. Whereas with the ANC we were a bit disappointed that very little seemed to happen there and also the ANC had problems of having people trained for guerrilla warfare in neighbouring countries but we didn't see anything. We understood later that the ANC embarked on a new strategy to build up an underground network, but it was difficult to know exactly. So it took some years before we became active again in support of the ANC.

Madi Gray: And during this time you were mainly concerned with the former Portuguese colonies?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, including PAIGC in Guinea Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands, and all these three movements, MPLA, Frelimo and PAIGC had official representatives in Sweden with whom we co-operated very well, which was also very important, for us and for solidarity.

Madi Gray: For a while in the early 1970s the Stockholm Africa Group used the offices of MPLA, didn't they?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Absolutely, we shared the office, so we were very close. But then it became a problem that the small Africa Groups did not reach out to the broad public. We sold the bulletin and collected some money and we had virtually no Sida funds. I'm talking about the period from 1970 up to 1974, maybe 1975. But then in the middle of the 1970s we really felt frustrated, so we decided we should broaden our base and be less sectarian and approach others we thought could work with us, such as church organizations, humanitarian organizations, trade unions and so on. We had some serious meetings where we said that we must abandon our rather sectarian policies.

Madi Gray: When roughly was this, mid-seventies?

Dick Urban Vestbro: It must have been either 1975 or 1976. We approached some key persons within the Social Democratic party saying we wanted to work with them and form a broad committee for sanctions against South Africa, which is what the resistance movement in South Africa wanted us to do.

They were actually on their way to apply another policy, to officially abandon the consumer boycott and to establish working relations or friendly relations with legal organizations in South Africa, such as some trade unions that were approved by the South African racist government. So with the help of ANC people and specially SACTU people, whom we invited to Sweden, we were able to stop this new policy among LO and other trade unions. Very good SACTU people came here and talked to them.

Madi Gray: Are you referring to the LO and TCO delegation that went to South Africa in the mid-1970s?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, they were the ones who came back and said that we needed to abandon the boycott and establish closer contact with the legal organizations that existed.

Madi Gray: Torbjörn Carlsson, Sven Fockstedt and Åke Magnusson among them?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes. But I think we were successful in the sense that we could invite some key persons from SACTU and later COSATU, who convinced them. I mean we wouldn't have been able to convince them as a little working group, but SACTU had some very good arguments and COSATU people coming here too. That is a long story about trade union solidarity, but it was quite important to widen the scope of our activities.

Then we initiated the South Africa Week, demonstrations, distribution of leaflets, and activities in many different places in the same week, usually the Sharpeville Week in March, and we became visible in the mass media. Instead of rejecting the press and TV and so on as being an instrument of the enemy, we said we will now work with them and try to get published. We

invited key people such as Ruth First and Basil Davidson the first time we had South Africa Week. It was extremely important, because they were also respected in the eyes of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Sida people and so on.

Then in 1975 the liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies were victorious and the Portuguese had to withdraw and new independent governments were formed and decided to work with us. So our friends in the liberation movements all of a sudden became members of governments and invited us as official delegations and wanted us to start recruitment of volunteers, which we did. It was a completely new activity, very different from our previous activities.

Madi Gray: But that needed funding?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, and Sida's leadership was at the beginning rather reluctant to support us because I think we were considered too left-wing. One of our members Sören Lindh, was familiar with the rules and regulations of government offices and he found out that the policy of Sida was to support Swedish voluntary organizations, non-government organizations regardless of the political orientation. So he did a very good job of telling Sida management that it was their duty to support us. Already before that time, we'd made good applications for information projects, so when we came with proposals to get money to recruit volunteers, the ground had already been prepared. The recruitment part of our activities grew rapidly, so finally we had more than 60 people employed in Southern Africa and at the end of the 1970s together with our allies in solidarity movements we became one of the biggest assisted non-governmental groups in Sweden.

So things changed rapidly but I personally became less active. I'd been extremely active, probably too active in the sense that I regarded my role as more important than that of others, In 1978 I decided that it wasn't a good thing to marry an organization and devote all my time to it. I became a normal activist, a local activist, with some activities mainly in trade union solidarity, but not on the National Committee of the Africa Groups any longer.

Madi Gray: Then you were working with trade union solidarity. Were you not also involved in the formation of ISAK, the Isolate South Africa Committee?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, I was. That was very important and as I said we made some critique of our sectarian activities and approached key persons within the trade unions and the Social Democratic Party and church organizations and invited them to form an Isolate South Africa Committee. Of course there were many involved, but I think the Africa Groups earned very a lot of respect and we were considered to be the ones having the closest relations with Southern Africa, which was true. I mean even compared to big organizations such as the Social Democratic Youth and some trade unions. They asked us for advice and we introduced visiting people to them, visitors from South Africa mainly, but also from Angola and Mozambique, who also had their own new trade unions being formed and women's organizations. So the Isolate South Africa Committee I think was a very important step

forward, because there were so many member organizations and a lot were well-established organizations and we could cooperate for several years. I think personally that it did contribute to making South Africa a big international issue again, whereas from 1965 until 1975 it had been, if not a forgotten issue, at least much less active than in 1963, and mid-1964. Then in 1976 it again became a big issue.

Madi Gray: That was after the Soweto uprising?

Madi Gray: There was another meeting a year or two later where Basil Davidson and Ruth First spoke, but I remember that meeting of October 1974 because I gave my first speech in Swedish at that meeting. I had been in the country for three or four months and Hillevi Nilsson translated the speech I wrote in English. Basil Davidson argued very appealingly not only for the former Portuguese colonies, which were already very clearly on the way to success, but also for South Africa. Esau du Plessis of the Boycott Outspan Action Group in Holland also spoke, about the boycott campaign.

Dick Urban Vestbro: You are probably right, that it was 1974. As I remember it, it was a very important decision for us to broaden our base and the invitation to Basil Davidson and Ruth First was very important for that purpose.

Madi Gray: I think you're right, that was in March 1976, in other words before the uprising, but things were already in the wind, on this second visit of Basil Davidson. And that was the first South Africa Week.

Dick Urban Vestbro: I remember we decided to show that we were not siding with any single of the left-wing political organization, so we allocated people to negotiate on their own credibility with those organizations. We tried to include both social democrats and Maoists, which was of course a very difficult task, but in the first South Africa Week we had a very big platform. We wanted the left wing organizations but we didn't want them to use our platform to fight each other. I think, even those of use who were members of left-wing organizations, were quite keen to show that we were not controlled by any political party in order to gain credibility among other organizations. I think we were successful in that, although many would label us as the instrument of one or the other left political tendency.

Madi Gray: Can you mention a few highlights; a few things that you felt were very successful?

Dick Urban Vestbro: One thing I felt was very important that we did when we were not yet a broad organization occurred when Zambia intervened in the affairs of MPLA. Zambia was an important base for MPLA because MPLA transported people and material through the country, and had an office and bases in Zambia. The Zambian Government for some reason decided to intervene, probably because they didn't like MPLA being independent of Zambian politics, and at the same time, or maybe connected to Zambian influence, the Soviet Union,

according to the information we got, decided to reduce the provision of arms to the guerrillas. That was a big crisis and MPLA leaders were arrested in Zambia. The MPLA leaders appealed to us, the Africa Groups specifically, because of our long-standing very close co-operation with them, to do something.

What we decided to do was to send a letter to Kenneth Kaunda, the president of Zambia, complaining about this although it was supposed not to be public information. Secondly we wrote an article for a Tanzanian daily newspaper, the Tanu Party official newspaper The Nationalist, knowing that Tanzania could have a strong influence on Zambian policy because they were co-operating on questions of Southern Africa. The paper published it in a prominent place. We think that Tanzania somehow contacted Zambia, and Zambia was very irritated by the letter, according to MPLA sources. Soon the MPLA leadership thanked us for our intervention that they considered very instrumental, so we felt very important although we were a small group.

Madi Gray: And this was in the mid-1970s?

Dick Urban Vestbro: It must have been just before independence, 1974 probably. Yes, I think it was before Mozambique was liberated, before the Portuguese withdrew from Mozambique, so it must have been in 1974.

Another highlight was when we had our first South Africa Week with all these organizations participating. Because it meant we had broken with our sectarian policy and gained public support. The third big highlight was when we managed to establish the Isolate South Africa Committee, which took place during 1976–1978. These are three things I remember well.

Madi Gray: Yes, they are big events and we've talked a little bit about each of them. You mentioned that initially there were some conflict areas, amongst them ideological ones within the budding Africa Groups, and in relation to the outside world were there other conflicts? Did you have any conflicts with liberation movements, did you have conflicts with other organizations, what happened later on when you were less active in the Africa Groups and started doing other kinds of work?

Dick Urban Vestbro: We had conflicts with representatives of liberation movements. Their representatives were personalities with very different tendencies, in all the countries where we were supporting a liberation movement. For instance, the Frelimo representative quit his organization to support a fraction that was crushed and had no influence, so we had no one to deal with from Frelimo because he was denounced and not replaced for some time. We had some difficulties in approaching the PAIGC representative and actually complained to the PAIGC leadership, it's a long story. With MPLA we had three different representatives that I remember very well, they were extremely different. One was coming from France, from the Radical Student Movement, he was a Trotskyist and wanted MPLA to follow his political line and wanted us to do it too, which we absolutely didn't want. But we managed somehow to

work with him until he was replaced by someone who was the other way, very open, very friendly, very active, and not sectarian at all, but then he was changed.

Madi Gray: Was that Saidi Mingas?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, and after Independence it was the Ambassador Maria de Jesus Haller, who was a special person, which created some difficulties but some very good contacts too.

With the ANC we had different experiences as you know. I can only say that when Lindiwe Mabuza came, she was such an excellent speaker and she was good in the sense that she could understand what kind of people she was dealing with. That was an advantage, because I think it's extremely difficult to work in a country like Sweden if you come from Southern Africa, to understand how much your audience understands, what kind of feelings they have. Sometimes we said that she was our best tutor of new members, which others were not. They couldn't understand our Swedish situation, in my opinion. The South African reality was too much in their heads and they couldn't address Swedish audiences in the way that was necessary.

By the way, an interesting feature is that since we analysed the liberation movements and took a stand, for or against some of the liberation movements, we maybe had less difficulty with in-fighting than other solidarity movements in Sweden who attracted a lot of exiled politicians from those countries which they supported. For instance we had very few Africans in early Africa Groups. One can say perhaps that it was a very negative feature but at least we had little in-fighting, compared for example to the situation in the Chile committee, who were tormented by these fights between pro-communist parties, pro-Maoist, pro-socialist parties, because everyone wanted to use the Chile committee as a platform for their own fights from the Chilean perspective, which I also think was the case in some other solidarity organizations. We had very few Africans and of course it is easy to say that we were not recruiting them or using their force enough to recruit, because there were lots of African people in exile who were probably interested to do solidarity work in Southern Africa, but anyway that was the truth, there were very few Africans.

Madi Gray: Yes, that is true. You say that you stopped being very active within the Africa Groups towards the end of the 1970s, what did you do then?

Dick Urban Vestbro: I tried to finish my studies, which I did and I got a full-time post, and decided that I must have a private life as well, not only work for solidarity, but I did continue until around 1990 doing international work. Through the 1980s I worked with the Trade Union Committee within the Africa Groups, mainly in support of COSATU and SACTU and those trade unions that were members of COSATU, which was very interesting and a good experience. We managed to raise funds and invited representatives of those trade unions and connected them to Swedish trade unions.

Madi Gray: Which trade unions did you connect them to?

Dick Urban Vestbro: The Metalworkers Union (Metall) was very important, they still had quite a cold war kind of thinking that they could only collaborate with those unions that were members of the ICFTU, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which excluded all those that were considered to be controlled by Communists, including SACTU. But they agreed to see representatives of both SACTU and COSATU.

It was much easier to work with white-collar unions, TCO unions, they didn't have such strong ties to the cold war policy. We argued that the cold war is over and that one has to support liberation movements and their affiliated trade unions on the basis of what they actually do and not on the history from the 1950s or the 1940s, and I think we did so successfully.

Then we also had good contacts with the Municipal Workers Union (Kommunalarbetarförbundet) and they were quite progressive in Swedish policy and maybe because of that more inclined to meet progressive trade unions. Otherwise it was health workers, medical workers, nurses and so on who were active as key persons, who were really interested and later on became active in the Isolate South Africa Committee. It was very easy to work with them.

But I think the Metal Workers Union was very important, they were also close to the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, and I think they had an influence on LO policy. When the situation changed in South Africa at the beginning of the 1990s and trade unions became legal then I think it showed that we did the right thing and those unions that were recognized by the old South African government turned out to be not true representatives of the workers. They were restrictive in their policies, and the South African Apartheid government tried to show them internationally as free trade unions, but we argued with some success that they were controlled by the government or by fascist organizations.

Madi Gray: I think you were also active in another organization, a political party, doing international work.

Dick Urban Vestbro: Sure, I was in the Left Party which was earlier called the Left Party Communists, a party which became Euro-Communist at a very early stage, and I was sitting on the international committee of this party and introduced many of the political issues from Southern Africa into the party. I think the Africa Groups actually had a strong influence on the policy of the Left Party instead of the other way round, which some people suspected.

Because there were new things with the liberation of Portuguese colonies, underground work, the Soweto uprisings and so on in South Africa, and Africa Groups were up-to-date on developments, so the party leadership listened to us. I also assisted in writing proposals for the Left Party in parliament, of course they were seldom accepted because we were usually in opposition to the government, but sometimes they had an influence in the sense that they were later accepted as policy issues. So yes, I was active in the party as well.

When I became a City Councillor in 1991, there was so much paperwork to be done, it wasn't possible to combine full-time work, City Council work and solidarity work to a large extent I

had to stop. And after 11 years of City Council work I am now trying to catch up, since 2002, which is quite enjoyable in the sense that I realize that some old knowledge is valuable, but also that so many new things are happening.

Many negative things also happen. We were driven so much by the hope that the liberation of Southern Africa, the victory of the liberation movements would really mean a completely new policy, democratic, socialist of some kind, no collaboration with the World Bank, independent policies, popular participation and so on, and no corruption, but all these things didn't take place. One reason being of course that the enemies of the liberation movements from different countries, including South Africa before it was democratised, funded sabotage groups in Angola and Mozambique, also there was international support to the terrorists, big terrorist organizations, especially in Angola, and other interventions. My perception is that it wasn't only the terrorist organizations that made these countries fail to move in the direction we expected.

We exaggerated popular support and the democratic institutions in the liberated areas, and we underestimated the strength of the new elite in their fight for their own benefit and the temptation of corruption. I also think that the leaders of the liberation movements, like ourselves, were influenced too much by current theories about the possibility of socialist development without having capitalist development. According to my views big investments and collectivisation and national state enterprise solutions failed more or less everywhere. In Tanzania, Nyerere's socialism absolutely failed; the big projects of Frelimo failed; in Angola there was a war going on for such a long time it's difficult to say what will happen. So there has been a lot of corruption and a lot of destructive economic policies, which cannot only be blamed on international support to terrorists and the terrorists themselves. In that sense it was very discouraging and many activists when they saw this left the solidarity organizations. But I didn't do that because I felt that although we were supporting liberation movements, our sort of genuine support was for the people, and if the government started to do bad things we shouldn't continue to support these governments, but support independent organizations, non-governmental organizations, people's efforts, even if it isn't in the form of conventional organizations. In Angola we started at an early stage to support women's organizations, which I think are very important. I knew from many African countries and also other poor countries, and perhaps also the rich countries that women are less corruptible than men and they can do very important work.

The Africa Groups nowadays have lost much their anti-imperialist orientation, yet I think that world policy has not made anti-imperialism less important.

Madi Gray: Maybe they call it something else, like anti-globalisation? Or a just world, with democracy, human rights and independent governance.

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, they may call it that. I don't follow everything that is being done but I read the press and the publications I get as a passive member of the Africa Groups. A lot is based on a sort of humanitarian support and many of the articles could just as well have been published in any newspaper, and I think we don't need activist groups, unless they are critical

of mainstream thinking. There is so much prejudice about Africa and African development, I think we need strong critical alternative information, I would like to see that come back. So that was one of the good things, although we were sectarian in the seventies, we were really convinced that we needed to find alternative information and couldn't rely on the normal mass media.

Also the recruitment of volunteers requires a quite a far-reaching level of cooperation with government institutions in these countries and that means that one has to tone down the critique of those governments when they deserve critique for oppressive measures. That contradiction existed already from the beginning, although at the beginning we really thought that these governments would be different. Now it turns out that those governments formed by MPLA, PAIGC and Frelimo, all work with the World Bank, and all comply with IMF's structural adjustment policies. The only country I know which is sort of independent is Botswana, which we always regarded as a little neo-colonial country, but Botswana is doing well.

Madi Gray: Yes, Botswana has a number of factors going for it, amongst other things mineral wealth and a small population.

Dick Urban Vestbro: I think one lesson from this fairly long experience is that all these ideologies we had were good for discussions, but we took them in a too doctrinaire way, as being the truth against the others who were wrong, and I think we were not open enough to new development. It is absolutely necessary, each country is unique and each country has to have its own development. The problem is that almost these countries are so dependent on trade, loan payments, structural adjustment policies, and international aid. A lot of countries in Southern Africa are dependent on aid and I am very sceptical to aid, I think there has been no proof that aid has helped economic development. It can help with public health and promote education, which indirectly can promote economic development and I think many of these countries, Tanzania, Uganda, Lesotho and, probably, Mozambique and Ethiopia became experts in satisfying the donors and the donors are very different. These countries have become experts at knowing what the donors require, it means that these governments if they want to develop their own countries they can't do it because they can't have one policy of their own.

Madi Gray: Because they have so many donors, is that what you're saying?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes, if they were really tough, they would say, "We establish our own policies which are suitable for our conditions". I think there is no country in the world which has developed without protecting its own industry, to build up their own industry, so the idea of free trade must be abandoned when it doesn't suit the poor countries, it can be resumed when they are rich, which will take some time, that's the experience from South East Asia. They would have to say, "Now this is our policy, you are invited to contribute with this and this and this, and if you don't want to do that, then goodbye".

Madi Gray: Do you still have relationships with people that you've had contact with, over all these years?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Not really. I kept in touch with Silvino da Luz from Cape Verde Islands. I was the only Swedish representative at the Independence Day of Cape Verde and that was very much thanks to him. We established contact during the liberation struggle and he became first the Minister of Defence and then the Minister of Foreign Affairs and then they had free elections which his party lost, so he has been in opposition, and he has been sending me Christmas cards and I've been sending him Christmas cards until maybe five, six, seven years ago, but that was anyway a long time after independence in 1974. In Mozambique I have not kept in touch with anyone, in Angola I have not kept in touch either. In South Africa I have been in touch a couple of times with Abdul Minty, and Howard Varney of the Legal Advice Centre. Then I made new contacts in South Africa, especially Eldridge Jerry an ANC City Councillor in Port Elizabeth who I meet every time I'm there, which has been about six times. He's the only City Councillor who is living in an informal settlement, and he is an extraordinary person.

Madi Gray: I've got two more questions for you I think. What did visits both here and in Southern Africa mean to you and your organizations? And what do you believe that the support of yourself and the organizations you were working with has meant to the people in Southern Africa?

Dick Urban Vestbro: The visits of people from Sweden were very important. It is quite difficult to understand, even if we see pictures, films, TV programmes, all kinds of things, its very different from being with the real people, eating with them, walking with them, being in their housing situation, everything. Only seeing, experiencing the reality with all one's senses makes a big difference and to become friends with people. It is usually very easy to become friends in the countries of Southern Africa, that's my experience, and that kind of friendship could survive even political difficulties. You can be a personal friend and continue your contact and pay visits even if you don't like the policies of that country or the organization you supported earlier.

It's very important to visit and quite a number of the activists did go to Southern Africa. Before the independence of Mozambique and Angola several activists went into the liberated areas, especially of Angola, and came home with very strong commitments and a lot of good information and pictures. After independence we had study groups going and seeing a lot of things and writing books. Then we had the volunteers who worked for two years and maybe continued for a number of contracts, and they became friends forever, and probably it influenced their thinking about the world and their professional orientation, all kinds of things. I never worked for a long time in Southern Africa, I just paid shorter visits and stayed in Tanzania one year, but I could see the difference by making one week or two week visits. A very important influence is a little difficult to assess from the Swedish perspective. We had

a tendency, all of us, especially when student radicalism was still strong in the 1970s, to exaggerate our importance. So I think the assessment of our importance should be based on analysis done by groups in Southern Africa

I also think the instrument of sanctions and consumer boycotts has been discussed a lot, whether it is a useful instrument, and we also discussed it from the moral point of view and books have been written about it. Some people argue for instance that the imposed boycott of Zimbabwe actually strengthened this regime for a number of years, and that it wasn't successful at all. So I think one should be selective, one should take decisions about sanctions only if there is strong popular support by a strong movement inside. I think in Chile the decision was the opposite, that it would be better to encourage contact. There are many people in Sweden, who look upon it as a moral issue, I don't like this country, so I won't buy their goods, and that's up to them, its okay, but it's not a political decision I think. Political decisions should be well based, so in the case of South Africa it was very clear that ANC and the Mass Democratic Movement wanted it, and I think they were right, it had a big effect. Sanctions contributed to making the time of the apartheid regime shorter, I think so.

Madi Gray: One of the things we haven't touched on is relation with the Nordic countries; did you work together with the Nordic countries at all?

Dick Urban Vestbro: Yes we had close contacts in the 1970s, and later also with Norway, Denmark and Finland and we worked well together. I can't remember if we organized specific Nordic Conferences but we organized European Conferences and International Conferences. We ourselves were the hosts for a quite important international solidarity conference in Lund in 1972 and then we attended conferences in Holland, Britain, Italy and so on, where all of these Nordic organizations participated.

I was invited to Norway several times to speak about what I had experienced in 1969 and also to tell them about our analysis of PAC for instance. Because the Maoist movement was quite strong. The pro-Chinese movement was stronger in Norway than in many other countries, so they had the tendency to support PAC, which described itself as anti-Soviet. So we had good relations with the Norwegians.

The Finnish groups were related to the World Peace Committee and also to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Students Union. We had very good relations with them. So there was Nordic co-operation and we exchanged information all the time.