

# Birgitta Karlström-Dorph

## Swedish Legation in Pretoria, 1980s

Ms Karlström Dorph was posted to the Swedish Legation in Pretoria during the 1980s. Here she tells us about support from the Swedish authorities and NGOs given to various organizations that formed part of the opposition to apartheid in South Africa and in Namibia. She also gives us the story of her personal experiences from this work and the network that she helped to establish within these countries.



Birgitta Karlström-Dorph

Bertil Högberg: Today is the 29th November, 2005, and I am sitting in the Swedish Foreign Office in Stockholm with Ambassador Birgitta Karlström Dorph. You played a very important role in the 1980s in relation to Swedish support. That is what we are going to talk about here. When were you posted to South Africa?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I came to South Africa in 1981. I first came to Africa in 1976 and was in Kenya for five, six years. Then I was in Angola for what I call a 'school year' and got to know more about South Africa and SWAPO, and the other organization UNITA, which was also in Angola and was supported by South Africa. I think it was in late 1981 that I went to Pretoria and I left in 1988. So I was in South Africa for more or less the whole of the 1980s.

Bertil Högberg: What was your role at the legation, as it was called in Pretoria in those years?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Well you know it was called a legation because our official relations were ...

Bertil Högberg: Downgraded?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Downgraded, yes. It had never been an embassy actually.

A minister led it and then there was me, I was a councillor-minister, and there was another diplomat and a secretary. That was all. There were three diplomats and our secretary from Stockholm and some local staff. The minister, the head, he was "white" and I was "black". So he had the official relations with the South African government and all the contacts which were needed in order to also do the other work, while my job was black, so I had all the black contacts and with all the others in the resistance. They were, as you know, not all black. I did all the official reporting on the resistance to Stockholm, which meant that the minister and I had different views on what was happening and that was natural. It would have been strange otherwise, as we were moving around in such different circles. But it was also very interesting for Stockholm to get these various views and then they could decide what they thought.

Bertil Högberg: You wrote separate reports?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes. It was my role to follow what was happening in a broader sense and write it down.

Bertil Högberg: Did you have any predecessor on that post?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, I did have a predecessor, Per Lindström. He had also been in Tanzania before he came to South Africa and had started

the work I think we are going to talk about today, very little, but there was something there already. I think mainly because he had by chance met Beyers Naude at a party and he had led Per into these things. I still have the book where I made notes from what Per told me, you know, all the contacts, what he knew. This was in 1981; we met for a couple of days in Pretoria when I started. I didn't have a clue what it was all about actually.

You know here in Stockholm there were so many people interested in what was happening in South Africa and I had been so involved in Kenya and what was happening there and not least in Uganda with Idi Amin. In retrospect I think that wasn't too bad because I came fresh, with new eyes, and did what I thought was right, without being led by various people here and various organizations, groups, the ministry, whatever. They did have good trust in me, my bosses. They saw that things were moving. I was given a lot of freedom and it was under those conditions I worked best.

Bertil Högberg: So the contacts that had been taken by your predecessor with Beyers Naude, had those also led to financial resources coming from Sweden to organizations inside?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I should already say that this is very far back now and a lot of things have happened to me in my work after that. In order to remember I would have to go back to files, and I could do that, but it would take some time to really see what was happening. These things lie very far back in my memory, although higher up in my heart, closer. Anyhow, yes, I do think Per had started with our scholarship programme. That was one of the most secret things we did and I don't remember what channel Per was using. I was using the Swedish Ecumenical Council for that later on. Well, I can only relate what it entailed and maybe some other resources that were distributed. The South African Institute of Race Relations, I think he also started to support that. This was very uncontroversial. But all these things could be found in the files.

Bertil Högberg: Yes. I am looking now through this report that SIDA put out in 1992, which only starts in 1985/86.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Most of the things had already started by then.

Bertil Högberg: There is another schedule here, talking about Sweden's overall assistance from 1965 and onwards, the heading only saying 'Various organizations', beginning in 1970, and maybe those figures should be in there somewhere.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I think these things should also be looked at properly. I did some calculations at that time, about how much was going in. We didn't know how much that went inside South Africa from the ANC. At least not officially, but only how much we were handling. My perception was that we were doing much more money-wise than was done from the outside by the ANC. But that could also be looked for in the archives. Tor Sellström made some attempts to calculate this.

Bertil Högberg: I think the figures at the end of the 1980s were around 150/160 million Swedish Kronor given inside South Africa.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: That's excluding the ANC?

Bertil Högberg: Yes, the ANC got almost a hundred million in the end. Did you have any real instructions to say that you should look for organizations to receive Swedish assistance?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Well, I didn't know where I would end up, but I knew that I was going to follow what was happening in the resistance in its broader sense and also see how we could distribute support inside the country.

I had a briefing here by my friend, Jan Eliasson, who was head of our political department dealing with Africa, and who is now the chairman of the UN General Assembly in New York. I remember that we had a chat in this house

before I left. I probably talked with some other people and with some people at SIDA, but not that many. I was going to seek ways of channelling support to the resistance inside the country.

Bertil Högberg: Was the money coming from SIDA, from that special grant for humanitarian assistance, the same funds that also channelled money directly to the ANC?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: Why was it that SIDA or the Swedish government couldn't channel money directly? You had to ask Swedish NGOs or other institutions to become conduits for this funding?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: SIDA was the Swedish government donor institution. So SIDA could not be represented inside the country, because officially we were not giving any aid inside South Africa. I was so to speak the SIDA representative, although I came from Foreign Affairs. SIDA could not officially fund organizations down there, it was forbidden. There had to be an organization in Sweden and an organization in South Africa that worked together, the NGOs.

There was a Fund Raising Act in South Africa, which was a very important law, and it was changed constantly as the government saw what was happening. I don't remember now what it said in detail. We had to find other ways and that is why organizations in South Africa and organizations here worked together. Officially it was their money and not the Swedish government's money. That was the whole idea behind how it was tied together.

Officially we at the legation had nothing to do with the ANC, or with people who were working for the ANC, or with the support the Swedish government was giving via SIDA to the ANC. That was not known outside the country and in most quarters it was unknown also inside the country. At the legation we had officially nothing to do with that. So according to my perception and my

memory there were some things already done when I started and the idea was for me to find organizations and people inside the country that could be receivers of Swedish aid. Then we also had to find organizations in Sweden that would be suitable to work together with them. As far as I know, and I don't think I'm wrong, everything that went inside the country passed my desk. Not the money, but the papers.

It was not the people inside, who we were dealing with, were not allowed to leave. So they could not go out and make their own contacts and the people we were dealing with outside, with a very few exceptions, were not allowed to come in. Therefore, everything passed my desk and now I am boasting, if I said no to a proposal it did not come alive, with just one exception. And on the other hand everything that passed me to which I said, 'Yes we should do this', was done. In this context I should mention that I did not deal very much with the trade unions, they were on my colleagues table. With all due respect for everybody who worked with all this, who I had a tremendous appreciation and admiration for, both in South Africa and in Sweden, they depended on me. I had access everywhere and I could talk to people and listen to people and so on. If you go back in the files to find a good account of what was done, the best thing is to go to the archives here at the Foreign Ministry, because everything is there. I took it out a couple of years ago when Tor Sellström wrote his book.

The people at Humanberedningen at SIDA rewrote what I had written to say this we should do and this we should not do. But it was all projects that had passed my table. What I did was to find organizations and projects, which I thought were worthwhile. There were people in Sweden who had their own contacts in one way or another, but not many were independent of the legation. They wrote to me and asked, "What do you think about this?" I checked and then I came back to them. All the SIDA money passed Humanberedningen, if you want to get an overview, go to the minutes of Humanberedningen during these years and you would find it.

Bertil Högberg: You said you identified the Swedish counterparts?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: What guided you in that?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: A very good question. In the beginning I really didn't know whom to ask in South Africa or here in Sweden. I did send requests home and I had very good counterparts at SIDA who did find organizations. They had a lot of contacts with the whole NGO movement here in Sweden. But the more I saw who was doing what, along what lines people were interested, the more I said to SIDA in Stockholm, "I think this could go via the Africa Groups and this could go via LO/TCO, while this could go via SKM in Uppsala, this could go via the women's part of the Social Democratic party, or the liberal party, or whatever." This was my experience after a couple of years when I saw what people were interested in and also how they could relate to what people were doing in South Africa. I had the privilege to come home a couple of times a year on my annual vacation, but the Foreign Ministry also gave me I think three extra trips a year. Then I went around to meet a lot of people, to get to know who was who, and to also get a feel for the people and for the organizations. During those six or seven years in South Africa, I got to know more about Sweden than at any other time, because I made a conscious effort to move around and to get to know organizations and people. I was also up at SIDA and discussed everything with them. Nothing could be discussed over the telephone from down there, we had our coded messages, but you know sometimes it is much better to sit down.

Bertil Högberg: I remember at least once or twice briefings that you had at SIDA for us in the organizations that you were dealing with.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, I did hold some meetings at SIDA.

Bertil Högberg: Some of these organizations that took part, maybe didn't have very much previous experience of Southern Africa, but others were deeply

involved. Did you see any difference between organizations that were already involved or those that were fresh, when you were there?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I don't know, but if people had been working with South Africa for some years, there was a human commitment on a personal level that maybe you didn't always find here in Stockholm. Some said, "Oh well, fine" but they didn't have that deep commitment. I don't remember seeing any big differences. I think it is a personal commitment and some of the organizations were representing a lot of people. Others were not. It was good to have both. My main aim was not to inform Swedish people about what was happening inside the country. I was happy there was such a huge commitment here, but my main aim was to get to know organizations that could be trusted to transfer resources into South Africa. That was my job, and I was the only Swede inside who did that.

In the beginning, after a couple of weeks in Pretoria I said to SIDA, "If I am going to do this job, I need a secretary, I need a driver, and, as I need to move around a lot, I need a good car." I was doing everything. I was at the office working and travelled around and within a week or two they had made a decision. We had a fantastic man called Elias at the legation, who was already driving and he became my driver. He still talks about it; now he works at the embassy down there. We went around everywhere and he was very discreet. I had two, three different secretaries after one another who did a fantastic job, and a car. That was what was needed. We could have had more people, many more. But as long as I had these things, I felt I could handle the job.

Bertil Högberg: So you took over some contacts that your predecessor had established?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Especially Beyers Naudé, he was the most important one.

And there was one more, Zwelakhe Sisulu, the son of Albertina and Walter Sisulu. Later on he edited a paper, which became very big.

Bertil Högberg: The New Nation. That was one of the few papers where the support did not go via the Africa Groups.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: But I met him at one stage, on one of my trips.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Were you inside the country? Could you come in?

Bertil Högberg: No, I was not allowed in until 1992, when I was at the end of my contract in Namibia and then I went for a visit. I had been there in 1976 and 1977, but then I was banned.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: It was like that for most people. I felt it was a huge honour but also a very heavy responsibility because I was really the only one from Sweden who constantly looked at what was happening and absolutely everything was passing my desk.

Bertil Högberg: How did you develop these contacts with these 50- 60 organizations that you had contacts with?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: There were a lot of organizations, yes. I never counted them. So many things come into my mind when I start thinking about it. I had to have some kind of philosophy or policy to do this. Who were we going to support and why? There was a huge range of organizations inside South Africa like Buthelezi's Inkatha or the Institute of Race Relations, and then you had at the other end of the scale the ones who were really ANC but never talked about it. We had the Fund Raising Act to contend with and the government knew that we were working with assistance but I still don't think, knock on wood, that the South Africa Government really knew what we were doing. I realised at an early stage that I would have to have some organizations that were uncontroversial, like Race Relations, which I have

already mentioned twice. You know, even the Americans were giving them support.

Bertil Högberg: Yes, they were radical at one stage in the 1970s, but were not really any threat to the government in the 1980s.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: No. In order to keep the balance I could be more open about my contacts with those, and talk with them on the telephone. Then we made appointments and so on. This was in order to do other things that were not open at all. I felt that that kind of balance would be wise. You never know what would have happened if you had done it in another way. But it worked, and it worked tremendously well. Sometimes I wondered why, how it was possible, that it could go so well. What did we do that was so clever? I don't know.

How did we develop those contacts? When I started out with Beyers, he was number two in the country. He was number one outside prison. Mandela was number one and he was number two. There was no question about it, forget Tutu and the others, he was number two. He had already been banned when I came there, I don't remember which year, was it 1977?

He was banned when I came and towards the end, I left in 1988, his banning was lifted, in 1984 or 1985. Anyhow, at the beginning he was only allowed to meet one person at a time and he had various houses to meet people in. It was at the house of his beloved daughter, Elize, where we met. So I brought questions to him, I asked him about development in South Africa and about various organizations. He told me to be careful and if he didn't know, he said, "I'll find out." We met very regularly. Sometimes it was every week. Without him we would never have been able to give the support we did in South Africa during those years in the 1980s.

When I left, the people said, "If you would not have been here, we wouldn't have been able to do as much as we have" and now after liberation, they still tell me "Without your work, it wouldn't have gone as quickly as it did". I think that is kind of exaggerated, but at least the aid was very much appreciated and we were on target.

So I met with Beyers, I listened to him, I got names, he went back to check.

He didn't know me, I didn't know him, I didn't understand who he was. He was deeply Christian, which I wasn't. But we developed a very special relationship and started to trust each other completely. I was his pupil and he was my teacher. He was the person who has meant most to me in my life, except for my family. From him I got names, I got people, I got ideas, but I couldn't do everything at the same time. So gradually I met people, and gradually I got to know more people and more organizations. But during those seven, eight years, I always went back to Beyers when I didn't know. He was the cornerstone, but I also always went to see for myself physically.

Bertil Högberg: To meet the different organizations?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes. You can only get to know if you see them where they are, if you get the feel of a place. I went into the townships in Cape Town, I went to various organizations down in Durban, and so on. But I did more in the Johannesburg area, because that is where I was based and it is far to go elsewhere. So I did not deal as much, for example, with Dr Ingrid le Roux in Cape Town, whose picture I saw there in the book. It was physically impossible also; I had so much to do up there.

Very often you got to know one person, maybe there was not even an organization, maybe there was a person who I thought could be a cornerstone in something. I would talk to them and say, "This is how it is, if you had money could you do something along the lines you are telling me?" That is how some of the newspapers were started and how a lot of organizations were started. Often there was an embryo of an organization, but they didn't have money.

Bertil Högberg: What sectors did you involve yourself in?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Oh, it is difficult to remember, I should have done some homework before; it is too serious for me to talk off the cuff like this. It includes media of various kinds, churches, various church organizations and individual churches. We even built churches, for example, a Lutheran Church in Bloemfontein.

Bertil Högberg: This church centre? (*showing a picture*).

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, we built that, if I remember rightly.

Bertil Högberg: It was also partly funded by the youth movement of the Lutheran Church in Sweden. One of my students was a youth leader there.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Is that so?

Bertil Högberg: It was Sekopi Malebo.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Oh, I remember that name.

Bertil Högberg: Yes, he was my student in Sigtuna and is interviewed in this series.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Okay, wonderful. Then there were the township and the Civic organizations. Very important, you know, the Soweto Civic Organization and Mamelodi Civics. Various townships had their own activities. There were youth organizations, regional or local youth organizations, and also nationwide youth organizations. Then there were women's organizations of various kinds. The UDF was founded in 1984 and became kind of a "hat" for many of these organizations. There were legal organizations, the legal aid centres, as they were called. I mean the ones who were the top lawyers of South Africa, George Bizos and others, like Arthur Chaskalson at the Legal Resources Centre. I don't know what he is doing now.

Bertil Högberg: He's a Constitutional Court judge, I think.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, these were organizations we were working with, also giving support in the political trials, so they could have a proper defence.

Bertil Högberg: You became involved in the health sector?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, health also. I remember when I first went to Alexandra Clinic and told Stockholm that we must do something in Alexandra about Aids, and Stockholm was very hesitant. I mean they didn't know much about the Alexandra Clinic. I was impressed with the doctors there. And we had art centres of various kinds in the townships, one in Alexandra, one in Soweto.

Bertil Högberg: In Cape Town?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: In Cape Town, yes. We also had some sewing organizations for women, but the thing was that they were employed, and another thing was that they were organizing around this. They had to get a feel of what was the purpose.

Bertil Högberg: They created some kind of front?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, and you had to know what was what when you dealt with these things, and how you could give support if they didn't have any work but the sewing. Maybe you wouldn't, depending on who they were and how people were surrounding them and things like that. I also remember the theatre.

Bertil Högberg: The Market Theatre?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: No, not the Market Theatre then, but opposite the Market Theatre there was an art centre where young people went. Oh yes, also publishing houses, we were giving great support to Ravan Press. They were in a small house in Johannesburg, I used to go there as well. I still have a lot of the books that they published. We tried to be in every sector, keeping an eye on this balance.

Bertil Högberg: You mentioned that there were scholarships from the beginning.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: So education was quite an important thing as well?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes. The open school was not controversial. A good guy were there at the top, like Colin Smuts, who is still active. We also had education affiliated to the Witwatersrand University, some special groups there.

Bertil Högberg: We had a concern when we received documentation from you and then your successor around some of the organizations that you proposed we should support. Many were university-based or offshoots from concerned teachers and students at universities. Maybe some were not even NGOs, though some of them later became NGOs. It seemed the universities became quite important during those years, because it seems a lot of things started there. That was our impression, because many of the projects we in the Africa Groups got, had university ties, particularly in health.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Wits did have a lot of radical students who formed those groups. They organized things, which did receive support. Maybe it was because I or SIDA or you saw that it was working fine via the universities and their organizations and with the Africa Groups. There was also a lawyer connected with the university called Nicholas Fink Haysom, who was a partner in a law firm and later became chief legal advisor to President Mandela. I don't think he is doing that anymore, but he also got support for the trials and for his firm, I think connected partly to the university. We didn't have any other work in Johannesburg, though we did have in Cape Town with the University of the Western Cape. There was a very good head

of the university who had a very good name in the resistance so we did have some work with them. Durban, I don't remember.

Bertil Högberg: There was an organization called CHESS, which we supported based at the university, doing social and medical work.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: In Durban?

Bertil Högberg: Yes, there was doctor named Naidoo.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, Naidoo. I think he was a kind guy, but it is a common name.

Before I go on, one very important sector I forgot was the trade unions, where our role was huge. We were into a lot of the trade unions there. I got to know Cyril Ramaphosa and many others. But my colleague at the legation was working more on the trade unions than I was.

Bertil Högberg: Swedish support became very broad, covering many sectors?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, we tried to cover as many sectors as possible and people got to know that things were working and they could trust us. The main thing was trust, then they approached me more often and so I got more involved and once it started to roll in the right direction, it was just to try to handle it and see that things were still okay. It was when people got to know, because others got to know, that we had to be on guard that these organizations were not infiltrated and we couldn't know if they were. I had to check and check and Beyers checked. This was constantly in the contacts' minds also, because who is who?

So, did we do anything wrong? As far as I know, with one important exception that I'll tell you about, we didn't. Maybe I don't know everything, maybe we did give to organizations that were working for the government, but I don't think so.

Bertil Högberg: Did you have any routine way of checking that parties did the things that they said they were going to do?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: Because that was difficult for us sitting in Stockholm to really check on the organizations.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, that is why I went to visit organizations and talked to people all the time and tried to look and listen. I didn't have a checklist, did they do this and not that. But I went to see what do the papers look like, who is working there? I talked to the people sitting there working, I asked Beyers to check with friends and I tried to keep my nostrils extremely open all the time. I didn't come across things that smelled very badly. By then I had already discarded them.

We never talked on the telephone and when I met somebody, before we parted we agreed to see each other next month on this date at that place. It was always from person to person. I never decided how to handle things, they decided. They were the ones who knew, the ones who were hunted. I was safe in my home with the Swedish legation backing me. So they had to decide and to say, "Come to do this." That was key to the whole thing and that was why it worked.

Bertil Högberg: You said there was one exception?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes. That was Allan Boesak. The UDF was already formed. He was mainly down in Cape Town so I didn't know him that well, I didn't know him like the people up in the Johannesburg area who I got to know, but he was a prominent person in Cape Town. He became one of the patrons of the UDF and if I remember correctly he was at the top there. I remember when we were sitting in Elize's house, Beyers one day said. "There is going to be an important meeting down in Cape Town, I hope you will go," and I said, "I am not sure". "We are going to form an organization, you will

read about it in the paper tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.” I don’t remember if he called it the UDF at that time. He said already then, “I hope you will be able to give this organization support,” and when he described it to me, I said, “I am sure we could do that”. So we were the first and by far the biggest funder of the UDF, even before it was in place. I didn’t go.

I should also say that I made myself very public and attended some meetings so they should see, “Ah! There she is”. I am talking about the security police in South Africa. Other times I didn’t go at all, so as not to show interest. They always wanted me to come to the big funerals and I was very choosy about that. I did go to some, but not all; it wasn’t that necessary. It was good for the building of contacts and the trust, but I didn’t have to go to all of them. Then I was very careful with security, with my own security. I was very cautious, very particular not to get into something that could cause me harm. It would not help the situation if I were hurt.

Yes, the UDF was formed and at a very early stage I heard about Boesak from, let’s call it friends, not Beyers, he wouldn’t talk like that. I got to know him so well, so even if he said that the sun is shining today, in a way I knew what he was meaning. He would say positive things in a way that I understood that everything wasn’t okay. But we never discussed it like that. Well, maybe he did refer to Boesak once, but it was only afterwards, a couple of weeks later, that I understood that he had been commenting on Boesak. Anyhow I did hear some things from friends about Boesak and I listened more and got extremely hesitant. It must have been 1984 or 1985, I don’t remember, it is here all in the files. This was at a time that Boesak was going to Stockholm to meet our prime minister, Ingvar Carlsson, who’d invited him for discussions. Olof Palme died in 1986, so it must have been 1986 or later. Boesak was received in many places as a big man in South Africa. He was applying for a lot of support. He also wanted a bullet-proof car and I believed that wasn’t good. I’d got indications that said to me that this was not right, we should be very careful with this man. I told them here in Stockholm at SIDA and maybe the ministry. I made it very clear that we should be extremely careful with this man or maybe not do anything, or maybe only very little for his church and not make it personal. Many transfers were personal, because we trusted that

people were using the money in other ways.

I remember I was in Stockholm, in parliament on the other side of the water, and spoke to a member of parliament, I don't remember who, but an influential person. We were discussing Boesak. I don't know why I was there; maybe he had asked to see me. He said, "Birgitta, you are doing a great job down there and you have a good judgment, doing fine". I said, "Thank you very much," and he said, "There is only one thing you are doing wrong, where your judgment fails you, and that is Boesak". I said, "Well, my job is to say what I think and what I believe in. I am very sure about this. If you have another view, I have done my job as I have told you and the others that this is wrong. My job is not to persuade you, this is what I think and I feel sure about my thinking." He said, "You know I respect your integrity and whatever you said, but this is not right".

Bertil Högberg: Was that before you got the indications from other sources down there that there could be problems around Boesak?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: No, I would never have said a thing like that if I hadn't got these indications. But these were not things to discuss with others. If I started to discuss a lot of the things that I heard down there, people might try to use it in various ways. I never knew what was happening. There are lots of things I never talked about and probably have forgotten if I don't think hard. A couple of years later things developed. I had left South Africa long before, but I heard more and more, and I think I told them again, "Be careful." Some years later this particular man called me and said, "Birgitta, you were right." And I said, "I was right, I told you. Thank you very much for calling me." "Well I am sorry," he said. "Don't be sorry," I said. "We all have different opinions and sometimes, some of us have more background than others to form their opinion." And I thought it was very good of him to call me.

Bertil Högberg: That was the parliamentarian you had met here?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes. They had given Boesak support, but I don't think he ever got the bullet-proof car, I don't know. We did give Boesak support. But it was not because of me.

Bertil Högberg: When the case blew publicly later in the 1990s, the things that were discovered and came to trial were projects from the 1990s, well after you had left South Africa.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I don't know what happened. I didn't follow it closely.

Bertil Högberg: They were all projects that had been set in motion in the previous three, four years.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I see, yes.

Bertil Högberg: Nothing from your time has been mentioned?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: You know things were not good already at that time.

Bertil Högberg: The signs were there?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, he shouldn't have got anything. I was very sure about that. So I failed 100 percent on preventing that.

Bertil Högberg: But you at least had indicated.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I said to them, "Don't do it".

Bertil Högberg: One thing that surprised us in the solidarity movement was that we were unable to report on only a few of all the projects that we supported over the years. That may have been an organization that was more or less destroyed by the government, or on occasion some organization collapsed. You could usually see that there was some interference that made

it impossible for them to report in the end. We were very surprised, as we didn't know the organizations, yet despite all these problems, so many of them were able to report on the assistance. We felt you had done a good job in selecting them. I mean, they weren't just fly-by-night things.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: As I tried to tell you, there was a lot of networking and groundwork before I decided would I be able to do something. I'd talk with Beyers again, and some other key contacts, which I got later on. I also discussed with them how they would be working with certain people in Sweden, and that we would not be involved at the Legation. I said, "It is very important that you present a paper where it says what you are supposed to do and, not least, it is very important that you also do some reporting on this." I tried to explain to them I had never worked with things like this but that it is just to go along with common sense, to write down what you have done and what money you spent on it. I added that it is very important that you do it and you can give it to me if you want to, I can see to it that it goes safely to Sweden. So lots of mail went through our diplomatic pouch, lots of it.

Bertil Högberg: And then it came to us, in double black envelopes and as registered letters, very secret.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: We had to buy a special safe and a shredder.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, and it went through our diplomatic pouch, but there is a kind of a code in the ministry that you should not send anything in the pouch if you don't know what it is. So I looked at everything that went into the pouch. Otherwise it would not be correct. As I travelled around all the time and talked to people, I was keeping an eye on what we had and what we needed and where they were now. I was very strict with them, it was not a softy thing this, "Hey, where is your report? I need it now. You won't be able to continue otherwise." I was very firm.

Bertil Högberg: Were you asked by organizations in Sweden to approach them, or did they establish direct contacts?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I think there were very few who had direct contact without the pouch. The organization in Sweden could write a letter to the organization in South Africa and I would deliver it to that organization. Then the organization would deliver a letter back. So I didn't do anything but be the post-woman. Or give it to a trusted friend who would then give it to somebody else.

Bertil Högberg: Did they also communicate with you to ask you to do certain things in contacts with a particular organization?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, if it didn't work, they would ask me especially, "Could you please see what is happening, is there something wrong with this organization, what has happened to it? Could you find out?" I tried. I went to the offices, I talked to others who went there. Many things came up in various ways. You had to be on the lookout all the time. Once I saw an article in the paper about a man who was picketing because his son, a white man, was detained by police in John Vorster Square. He was picketing to have him freed. So I thought that man looked interesting. I called him, he was head of a big firm selling cameras. Quite an affluent white South African. I called this man and I asked him if I could come up. He received me, we were talking and I got to know him and via him others. That was Max Coleman, who became an ANC parliamentarian later on. His son was very active in the resistance and his wife also, which I did not know at that time. You had to take chances, you had to not spare your legs or your arms or your head, you had to be on the watch all the time.

Bertil Högberg: Did you have any policy saying that you shouldn't be funding an organization that you supported 100 percent, that others also should contribute, or did you support 100 percent?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Well, I always thought it was good if we were not alone, it would be especially good if they themselves had some money, but very often they didn't have any. In my mind it was like that and I always asked, "Are you getting any other funds and how are you financed?" I didn't want to go too deeply into that because you didn't know what was there. There could be things I was not supposed to know. It could even be that they were getting some money directly from the ANC. It was good if I didn't know if they got money from other sources if they were not open sources, that was difficult. So if somebody looked at this afterwards to see where we were very big, I think again it was Race Relations and the South African Council of Churches where there were many funders.

Bertil Högberg: Were there other embassies working in the same way as you?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: No, not at that time, there were none. Some of the embassies were saying that they were working like that, but they were not.

Bertil Högberg: What about the other Nordic countries? Was there any cooperation among them?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: No. Later on, I don't remember when, there came a very good Norwegian. He later became the big man at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Oslo. He was possibly head of the Norwegian consulate. He was based in Cape Town. I can't remember now what his name is. He was doing a good job down in Cape Town. He was working along the same lines as we, not as much and as active, but he was doing a good job. The Finns I don't remember much, the British did some, and the Americans, they also did support some organizations. But they were not the ones we were supporting, maybe they were even supporting Inkatha, I don't know. We didn't have meetings where we discussed these things. If I came across somebody, for example the Norwegians down there, I would ask the Norwegians. The resistance worked like that, that I know what I know, I don't tell my friends,

even if they are my best friends, unless it was necessary. There were walls between the organizations, maybe even between individuals. That was a security thing. I also worked like that. I didn't ask somebody else if they were getting information. This was a fine line, because I did need to have a little perspective, and again when someone else's very valuable contacts came in, call it judgment, call it a good nose, or call it whatever. The Netherlands was also active. They have their NOVIB and other big organizations.

I also tried to find other channels that were involved so SIDA could also channel money via them. For example, in London we had the International Defence and Aid Fund. A lot of money would go via IDAF. It went via Horst Kleinschmidt, who was a very good friend of Beyers. I still don't know all they did, but Horst was handling money I believe. From the beginning I said, also at a very early stage, I didn't want to have to do with anything that was illegal. I had contact with good lawyers, among them one who later became the Minister of Justice, I think. I went to these people when it was time to see what was happening with this Fund Raising Act.

Bertil Högberg: I remember that Fund Raising Act. In South Africa we got them to draw up a new type of contract for the media organizations. It basically said that we were buying information from them. We were not giving them support, but we bought some information. It was also in the contract that they should send us everything they printed. That was a way of getting around the act.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: These were the kinds of things where these people were important because they knew how to do this, so you don't do anything illegal. During my years there, I don't think I mentioned the ANC once. I never asked anybody anything that could touch on the ANC as an organization, although I felt that many of these people were ANC people. I remember when they had this international Children's Conference up in Harare. Beyers went there to talk; he was allowed to for some strange reason, and he came back with information, which seemed to be from the ANC.

I never went to Lusaka. I went to Botswana once, but that was because my

friend was ambassador there and I never looked into what was happening or met anybody there. I never went to Harare or to Lesotho. Stockholm didn't say, "Don't deal with the ANC," I decided that for myself, I didn't discuss it with anybody. I had so much to do anyway and I decided I wouldn't go to these places. I could have met people but other people would know that I met them; maybe it would be interesting for me, but it might hurt the work I was doing, so it was better not take that chance, so I didn't. I remember Sechaba, the ANC magazine. Beyers was expecting me to hand it over to him, as it had been done before apparently from the legation. When I understood after a couple of weeks how things were and that it was absolutely forbidden, I said to Beyers, "Sorry, this is illegal, I have this paper here, I am not going to give it to you. You are not getting this from me. I'll not do something if it's illegal," and he understood completely and said, "Fine, it is good that you don't do that". I did one illegal thing and that is a long story. I decided I wanted to meet Winnie Mandela, who was down in Brandfort, and I talked to Ayob, who I knew well by then, her lawyer or Mandela's lawyer. I said, "Please could you tell Winnie that I am coming down if it is possible". He found out and we decided on a time. Elias and I took the car, we drove down, it took some hours. I wasn't sure that she would know that I was going to come, you could never be sure. So we went to this little township outside Brandfort, to the police post outside at the entrance, but there was no policeman. I was a bit worried because I wanted to say to the police, "Here I am from the Swedish legation. I am here to see Winnie Mandela." I had to do some things very openly. But there was no policeman, so we went in and asked for Winnie and everybody said they knew where she was. I got out of the car and there was a little fence and a little house and out came a young woman, barefoot with a little dress. I went to the gate and she was standing there and I was standing here and I said, "Well, I come from the Swedish legation," and I looked at how she looked at me and I said, "I wonder if your mother is at home?" She looked at me and she said, "I am the mother". It was Winnie, but I thought it was her daughter. So that was very flattering for her. She looked like a young girl and she said, "Come in." There she was, trying on dresses, and we were chatting for a long time, Winnie and I, about a lot of things. This was before everything

happened with her. So we got a fantastic contact and we talked about work and everything and it ended up that I gave her a book I had in the car about Mandela. That was the only illegal thing I did during those years. I think she still remembers it. A lot of things have happened around her that we could talk about, but when I went to Beyers' funeral she was at the church and she shouted out loud when she saw me, although everybody was trying to avoid her. So, the issue was to be as legal as possible in that illegal society. I can see that you understand what I am saying.

Bertil Högberg: Can you mention any other highlights from your time?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I would have to say, there were so many things happening every day. To get to know Beyers was the long highlight. He was a very admirable man with an incredible sense of humour. I remember all those meetings all the time discussing and listening and all the humour. And we had a person on death row in Pretoria at the prison, Robert McBride. I got to know his fiancé. She used to come up to me at the legation office after she had seen him. She was a white woman from an affluent white family. He had put a bomb down in Durban. She came to me one day and told me that they had got married in the prison and I was so amazed. Later on he became a South African ambassador, I think in Australia, they never killed him. Now he's working at the Foreign Ministry.

Once, across the street where the Dutch had their embassy, Klaas de Jonge, an anti-apartheid assistance guy from Holland managed to get in. He was on the run from the police and sought refuge there. He was there for many months, we saw him, and the posters on the windows and so on.

Then there was the Delmas treason trial in Pretoria, which I used to go and visit. It was good to show yourself sometimes. The judiciary tried to be legal and in a way they were, at least in their own minds. I went out to Delmas to see the defendants and talk to them there. I talked to Popo Molefe, Moss Chikane and Mosiuoa 'Terror' Lekota, who became the Minister of Defence. Another highlight was a huge party held in Audrey Coleman's house when I left. I think there has never been a party like that, not before I know for sure,

and I don't think after, because everybody was there. I gave a speech and they made speeches and, it was fantastic. It was a surprise party, I didn't know about it.

They said, "Bring your children with you," but I didn't, because I kept my family outside. I had five children and my husband died of cancer during these years in South Africa, but I kept my personal life very apart. My husband didn't really know what I was doing. He came out with me once when he already had cancer, he died there, and he was amazed to see the people there and the women who came from outside Pretoria.

A highlight was also, although it was a very sad occasion, the funeral of my husband. We held it in a small church in Pretoria and they all came, everybody. The church was filled and I hadn't asked anybody to come. You know funerals were very special too, and even three or four people from the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs came. It was amazing. And they were amazed, because this kind of meeting was banned, but this was a funeral, so they all came. I was standing there next to my husband's coffin and thanking everybody for coming and it was the most amazing thing. I gave a speech in front of all these people who were such incredible speakers and I was thinking, here I am standing talking to the new South Africa. I remember that my heart beat fast. It was my husband's funeral, a very special occasion. Then they all came to my house, I have pictures of that. Winnie came with her football team, but Beyers was not there, he stayed outside. It was Father Smangalisu Mkhathshwa, who is now the mayor of Pretoria, who conducted the service. I think I asked somebody at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I didn't see them often, but I wanted us to sing a beautiful song at the end of the funeral and they asked me which one? And I decided that it was Nkosi Sikelele. I had, however, to ask my friends not to clench their fists in the air. That would not have been appropriate. So what did they do – they clenched their fists behind their backs.

Bertil Högberg: Who took over from you?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: It was Anders Melander; he is the Swedish ambassador in South Africa now.

Bertil Högberg: Were there any controversies that you became involved in, inside South Africa or with Stockholm?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Well there was the issue of Inkatha. As far as I remember, we had earlier on supported Inkatha and Buthelezi. That was at another time, when things looked different. I never went into it, to learn what we'd done and why it was so, but there was nobody in Stockholm pressing me to do something with Inkatha. Still I don't know, the developments down there, in KwaZulu, trying to follow those to see what was really going on. Would we be able to support something down there and what could that be? It wasn't easy. I can't remember now if we did anything or what it was. It was lying in the background because we did have a history there, we did have relations at one stage. As far as I remember, a former head of SIDA, Ernst Michanek, had contact with them, but that was another time.

Another thing was the Black Consciousness Movement. What did it look like and what should we do there? There were discussions, to say the least, between various groups inside South Africa and for an outsider to really understand what was going on, was very difficult. Biko was a hero for everybody, it would seem.

Bertil Högberg: Did you give them support?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Not as far as I know, but there may have been groups that were non-political, whatever that was, but that was more on the black side. Depending on what it was, it had to be checked, because our role was not to support a particular political group. Our role was to support the ones who were against apartheid. So I didn't wear any political spectacles. When I think about it, I was trying to see what there was in other camps that we could support.

Then people were extremely interested in social systems and in Sweden and I

remember requesting from home as much as possible in English so I could hand it out there. I could have done a lot more on those issues, but I was not the one who was suitable to do that, apart from when I felt that it would enhance my job. I was trying to see the broader features as much as possible.

Bertil Högberg: Do you know if any of the organizations that were supported got problems from the authorities because of the Swedish support?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: What is a chicken and what is an egg? Many of the organizations and the people who were involved in these organizations did have problems. If it was because the authorities thought they were getting money from us, to be truthful, I don't know. They were raided, they were infiltrated, something happened to some of their offices and so on, but I never got the feeling that it was only because of the Swedish assistance.

Bertil Högberg: Many of the organizations in South Africa that we had contact with did not understand the need for this secrecy. And the whole secrecy thing was problematic for us as well.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: You mean here in Sweden?

Bertil Högberg: Yes, for us in the Africa Groups it was a problem because officially we were collecting money only for the ANC. So we could not be seen to be having any contacts with these organizations because then in a way it could be misinterpreted as though they were linked to the ANC.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Absolutely.

Bertil Högberg: While some church organizations, they could say that it is our money, although the money came from you. They could still maintain that they were supporting this and that structure. But in the Africa Groups we were in a fix. We were very hesitant in the beginning to go into this at all. We were actually really bullied by SIDA saying, "You should do it because you know

the set-up, otherwise we'll have to ask an organization that is not really familiar with South Africa." After some hesitation we went along with it. But it became a bit of a problem that everything should be secret. Was everyone in agreement around that strategy of secrecy within SIDA and the Foreign Office?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Well here, in SIDA and the Foreign Office, I really don't know.

Bertil Högberg: I had problems in Harare when I was meeting one of the organizations, Agenda Press Service, Howard Barrell, who later became editor of the Mail & Guardian. It must have come from you that we should support them. They were based in Harare.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, I remember.

Bertil Högberg: I met him in Harare and apparently the embassy was informed about the whole issue. They saw no need to keep it secret. So they had been talking about it and even informed the Zimbabwean Foreign Ministry. I was approached by the ministry and had to go up there and explain why we were going to support them and I couldn't say it was SIDA money. I was also approached by other agents when I was in Harare. The embassy had been spreading information all around and the ambassador was saying, "This whole secrecy thing is bullshit."

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Who was the ambassador, I'd like to ask?

Bertil Högberg: I don't remember, this was in 1985. That was an extreme version, South Africa would know everything he said anyway. But it created problems with the Zimbabwean authorities, for me and for the Africa Groups.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: In South Africa I was guided by what my contacts thought. If they wanted to have it like this, which they did, that was what I

worked for. I was convinced that it was the only way to do it. But I do understand that there must have been a lot of problems, especially great for organizations like yours that had members who were very involved with the struggle and who I guess wanted to know what was happening, especially as you supported the ANC and then the others. It is so easy to be suspicious and I understand that it must have been very difficult for you.

Bertil Högberg: Four people in the organization knew about what we were doing, so that was also a problem. How did we handle this funding so it didn't appear in our books?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, I can understand. When we start to talk like this, I remember things better. I remember the Africa Groups, there were some very active and understanding people in the organization, who knew what was happening. I also know that there were some problems, I think in SIDA, some people were locking things up, and suspicion here and there, but it was not like that in South Africa.

I haven't talked about the scholarships, though I mentioned that my predecessor, Per Lindström, had started these scholarships and there were a few when I came. This was one of the most secret things we did. Because it was money to individuals, we called it scholarships, but it was to get bread and butter for them. They had to have food in order to live and some money for petrol. It was not for buying guns or anything like that. On that list was the whole resistance, the top leadership. They became many, I think we had up to 150 at the end or maybe even more, but it was key that these people were the right ones because it was done very secretly and it worked very well. Nothing was brought into the open even in prison, where they were tortured so they would talk, because that was also an issue if they were taken in, which some were.

Bertil Högberg: How was the money distributed? Was it put in a bank account or ... ?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Well that is a special issue, how did the money go? I said from the beginning, "I am not going to travel to the frontline states. I'll only go to Stockholm." I went to London once to some meeting. I said, "I am not going to do anything that I know is illegal. I might do things which I don't know are illegal, but things I know are illegal I won't touch. No ANC, even for Beyers Naude." Luckily, he completely agreed, said it was fine. I said, "I am not going to hand over one rand or one crown, no money will go through my hands. I am not going to deal with money." I am not going to get into that as I have nothing to say about money being carried over the borders in bags or whatever, which I heard had happened before. I don't know; I didn't look into it. To tell you the truth, in many cases I still don't know how the money went. It went through individuals in England, in America, Sweden, through various organizations, individual banks also in South Africa. There were people in the banks who knew that something had to be done, and in their capacity of being top bank people they could help out. I met one or two later on, who I didn't know were key people at that time. The International Defence and Aid Fund in London sent money for trials and maybe some money went directly from the churches to the South African Council of Churches.

As long as it wasn't illegal, it was good to show that we were doing this. I didn't handle one rand. I remember once somebody said that they needed some money to take some person who was hunted, to get him across the border. That was not a possibility. I had to work it like that otherwise you couldn't know where it might have ended. No guns, or anything like that. I got a question once or twice, but afterwards they knew not to even ask me.

Bertil Högberg: Did you have any contacts in Namibia?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Oh yes, we were also covering Namibia and my boss didn't go there very often. He must have been there once or twice, I don't know. So Namibia was also my desk. I went many times to Windhoek and made contacts with the Council of Churches and with Dr Shejavali.

Bertil Högberg: Dr Shejavali is also interviewed in this series.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes. I also had contact with the SWAPO people. Nico Bessinger was an information person there. SWAPO was not as forbidden as the ANC was in South Africa.

Bertil Högberg: They were officially allowed.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, so I met these people there. I went up to the Martin Luther High School. I rented a car in Windhoek and drove up there, and went down to Gibeon, to visit the old man who was number two in Namibia, the Vice-President.

Bertil Högberg: Oh, you mean Hendrik Witbooi?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, I went down to see Witbooi.

Bertil Högberg: At the school?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, and there were these other schools, there were three schools, including Hoachanas and Berseba.

Bertil Högberg: I took over support to those projects when I started working in Namibia.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: There were three schools in the south, which I visited to see where they were, out in the middle of nowhere. I had some great people from SWAPO with me, the one had a gun and the other one had just himself. We had very good trips there once or twice. I never went to look at the Finnish churches in the north because that was also dangerous with the bombs and all that.

Bertil Högberg: You needed a permit to go to the area up north.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: I wasn't allowed.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I don't remember if I even applied. I thought we had enough with those schools. I started school projects with the Council of Churches. We did a lot with the schools in the north and south.

There was a hotel in Windhoek called the Kalahari Sands. I met an interesting person at the cafe one morning. We started to talk about the San, or Bushmen. He said he was on his way up to the north, not to Caprivi but south of that, to a Bushman community that he knew quite well. So I asked if I could come along. I did. He is a world famous expert on the Bushmen, Robert Gordon, an American. He lived with the Bushmen for a long time and his father and mother did so, too. There is a long story behind him. That trip resulted in my going to Nico Bessinger and saying to him, "You people at SWAPO must look at the Bushmen and see what we can do about it, because something has to be done." He was extremely hesitant. I said, "Please go and have a look and discuss it with your organization." They did and eventually something started with the Bushmen. Sten Rylander, who was active many years later, continued that when he became ambassador.

Then I went to the coast, but I don't remember if we did anything there.

Bertil Högberg: Did you have contact with the Namibian?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Oh yes, we gave Gwen Lister support.

Bertil Högberg: We became the channel.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, you were the channel, I remember quite well. She was already quite controversial at that time.

Bertil Högberg: And Namibia 435, Brian O'Linn.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, I remember. We also had David Smuts, the lawyer.

Bertil Högberg: He was the one with the Legal Assistance Centre?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, we also gave them support.

Bertil Högberg: Did they sometimes come to you from Namibia?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: No not often. But I remember Bob Kandetu. We became friends and he is now a big man in Namibia.

Bertil Högberg: So you had to go there?

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: I went up there and I also got to know others, like Ottilie and Kenneth Abrahams, and Moses Katjuongua, who was prime minister for a while, but he was not the right guy. He had a Swedish passport, so for a time we had two prime ministers in the world with a Swedish passport.

Bertil Högberg: I took that up when we had the People's Parliament Against Apartheid in February 1986. The parliament took a resolution and put pressure on the Swedish government. They then took away his Swedish citizenship.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Very good. I was trying to pressure him to give me the passport. But I really did not succeed, though you did, congratulations! So I got an extensive contact network eventually also in Namibia, but it was not at all as wide as in South Africa because I couldn't, it was a matter of time.

Bertil Högberg: I have covered the questions I prepared, though there is a lot we could continue to talk about. I hope that you get time to write something about this when you are retired.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Yes, you know I want to, and maybe I will, but at least I will talk on a tape for my children. I'll tell them stories from many places in Africa, also Ethiopia, so I will put that on tape but I don't know if I will ever write anything down.

I always say that Tor Sellström produced three great books called "Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa". Still, somebody should do a thesis on the Swedish work inside South Africa, and I am not only talking about what the government did, I am talking about everything.

Bertil Högberg: One of the aims of this oral history project we are now doing, as we can't cover everything, is at least to create an interest among academic circles to go more deeply into this. The issue of Swedish support is something that South African academics could look into. The material is available and much is in English.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: But not all, I mean, everything we wrote there is in Swedish. But it is wonderful that you are doing this.

Bertil Högberg: Thank you very much.

Birgitta Karlström Dorph: Well it is. As you hear, it is a great pleasure to think about this again.