



Bosques del Valle, Quezaltepeque
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Interpeace

Oficina Regional para América Latina

11 Avenida 14-75 zona 10

Guatemala, Guatemala, 01010

+502 2381 9700

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During the years 2005-2011, the municipality of Quezaltepeque in the department of La Libertad, El Salvador, had an average of 80 homicides yearly. Beginning in the early 1990s, this municipality was one of the main battlegrounds of the two main rival gangs in El Salvador. The municipality's projected population for 2014 is 56,349, which translates into a yearly rate of 141 homicides per hundred thousand inhabitants. This rate was altered drastically in March 2012 when the two principal gangs that operate in El Salvador agreed to a suspension of hostilities that, in the case of Quezaltepeque, reduced the total number of yearly homicides to 34, that is, a rate of 65 per hundred thousand inhabitants.

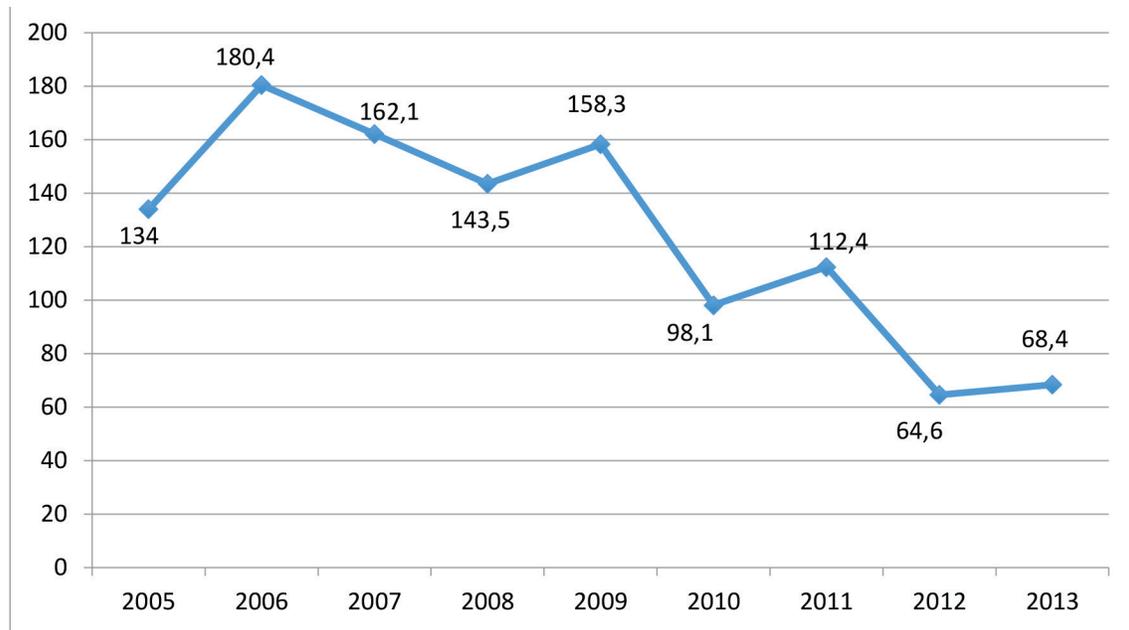
During the last decade, hard-fisted government policies had attempted without success to reduce the levels of violence that engulfed the country. In contrast, the agreement between the main gangs represented a unique opportunity for starting a wider-ranging process of violence reduction. However, its potential for change required that key local actors demonstrate an ability to appropriate its immediate results and trans-

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*form them into a real opportunity. The key role of an actor lies in the possibility that she or he might influence, in either negative or positive terms, the dynamics of the conflict. This possibility depends on a number of factors, including, among others, context, levels of legitimacy, institutional prerogatives – formal or otherwise – and individual willingness. And even though the reduction in homicides was a constant in all the country's territory, the appropriation of the process as an opportunity to reduce violence sustainably over time was undertaken differently in each place and produced, therefore, different results. The experience of Quezaltepeque as a "municipality free of violence" evidences the impact that key actors have when, from an institutional or personal perspective, they influence the direction and transformation of violence in the municipality.***

** This document brings together a range of opinions expressed by key actors in the process, that is, municipal authorities, representatives of community organizations, and, of course, members of the two principal gangs in the country (MS and Barrio 18). Its objective is to highlight the main transformations that the actors have observed, as well as the challenges, obstacles, and expectations surrounding the process.

Homicides in Quezaltepeque 2005-2013



Source: data provided by the IML, DIGESTYC and the Vice-Ministry of Security and Justice

From public prosecutor to mayor: from punishing to preventing crime

“The idea of becoming a facilitator as part of this pacification process came to me as a result of a personal conviction that violence in this country is a social problem,” states Carlos Figueroa, the mayor of Quezaltepeque. The mayor’s belief that El Salvador’s violence is a problem with social roots comes out of his experience of more than fifteen years in the judicial system in the role, first, of an official at the Supreme Court and subsequently as a prosecutor. This allowed him to come into contact with the social nature of criminal phenomena such as homicide and extortion, in addition to the way in which criminal procedures were undertaken in a country with high levels of impunity and a volume of daily homicides that overwhelms the institutional ability to solve them.**

** With regards to impunity linked to the crime of homicide, a much-discussed study carried out by the UNDP in 2007 claimed

“During my time as prosecutor there were sixteen homicides daily in the greater metropolitan area of San Salvador: Soyapango, Ilopango, Apopa, etc. The victims were both civilians as well as members of nonsocial groups. It was a terrible spiral of violence: members of the Barrio 18 gang murdered those of the MS gang and hours later the MS arrived in territory controlled by the other and did the same.”

Only by interrupting that cycle of vengeance killing could an attempt be made to deal with the social causes of violence. A cease-fire between the main gangs in March 2012 made that possible after a brokered non-aggression pact. “The basis for this was the

that out of the 1,020 homicides reported in 2005 in the municipalities of San Salvador, San Miguel, and Santa Ana, which represent 14.21% of the country’s total, only 145 were brought before a court of law. The remaining 875 cases remained filed away in the prosecutor’s office (85.79%). Of those cases that were tried in court, only 39% resulted in a sentence, which is equivalent to 3.8% of the 1,020 homicide cases that were reported while the remaining 96.1% went unsolved (World Bank, 2012: El Salvador: Estudio institucional y de gasto público en seguridad y justicia).



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willingness expressed by both parties, the Barrio 18 as well as the MS. The two came to a meeting of minds. They all agreed. The idea was: if there were to be an agreement between these two groups especially, that would be good, no? Because that is where a solution to the problem begins.”

The way forward as described by the mayor underlines the idea that the moment was a watershed that opened up opportunities to overcome the exhaustion produced by decades of hard-fisted and failed attempts to deal with violence. After being a witness and an actor within the judicial system, the mayor of Quezaltepeque recognized the potential of the opportunity to transit from hard-fisted actions – as expressed in radical repressive actions as the only means to confront crime – to a process of social peace.

Local institutional capacities and their role in the violence reduction process

The transforming potential of the violence reduction processes can only be realized in the presence of a legitimate go-between that allows for a meeting of the State with the people, including those groups which have been historically sidelined. It is here that municipal institutional capacities can become a decisive factor that guarantees the success of a process of violence reduction.

“We determined that the municipal by-laws did not give us much authority in matters of security but this public servant thought that among the municipality’s main attributes was the resolution of social demands involving citizen security, obviously from a prevention

perspective.” During many years, a variety of violence prevention programmes have been implemented in El Salvador as part of the concept of citizen security, which assumes a greater involvement of the people and those institutional authorities concerned with the security needs of individuals in their specific environments. At the same time, most violence prevention programmes have originated around a three-tiered distinction of primary prevention (which involves strengthening protection factors), secondary prevention (the reduction of risk factors), and tertiary prevention (rehabilitation, socialization, and damage compensation). However, most of these programmes have not included gangs in their design and implementation, something which is fundamental especially in contexts where these distinctions are blurry and where, quite the contrary, both the levels of prevention and the associated social groups are directly and mutually linked. Thus, the involvement and commitment of the gangs in the solution of the problem of insecurity opened up that opportunity: “In order to achieve prevention in the sphere of reinsertion, we had to work with them.”

The role of the municipal institution in a process of this nature had no precedents and, furthermore, had to be defined within the limits set down by law in security matters. For this reason, the role of the municipalities has had to be defined gradually and has depended, in great measure, on the political ability and willingness of its officeholders. “That’s when I said to myself: if they have goodwill and if the issue at hand is to mini-

mize the main problem which today at a national level is insecurity and homicides, then let’s go for it.”

The experience in Quezaltepeque shows that the municipal role in creating favourable conditions for the violence reduction process cannot be conceived as a function of security, understood as the reaction to crime on the part of public security forces, but as the articulation of the efforts by different actors and the maintenance of the necessary social conditions required to sustain the process. Bringing together key players and generating favourable conditions within the framework of a violence reduction process are indispensable requirements for a comprehensive prevention perspective which, as a result, distances itself from repression as the only option to deal with the causes of insecurity.

The acceptance by the municipality of a role in the violence reduction process also proves that this initiative in its jurisdiction was a need that even went beyond political party differences: the group of eleven municipalities free of violence are led by people who come from the various political parties in the country. “And so I became involved as a facilitator and had a conversation with the highest leader in our party and he said, ‘Look, your reality is different from the rest of the municipalities in the country.’ And I said, ‘That is correct, I am part of the twenty most violent municipalities in the whole country.’ Then he said to me, ‘Work on the basis of your real-



Santa María I, Quezaltepeque

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ity. In other words, see what you can do, apply your professional criteria.’ And since my criteria suggest that this is not a criminal problem but a social problem, I became involved.”

Quezaltepeque: a desire for peace in a fragile environment

The municipality of Quezaltepeque is characterized by the precarious nature of its access to basic services as well as high rates of unemployment and school dropout. In this context and with a largely young population, Quezaltepeque was fertile ground for the expansion of the two main gangs in the country, Barrio 18 and MS-13. Even though one of them exercises control over a larger part of the territory, the confrontation between them led people to consider this municipality as one of the most violent in the country.

Regardless of the mayor’s commitment to face the problem of violence as a social phenomenon and to become involved in the process of municipalities free of violence, the fragile social context that characterizes the municipality of Quezaltepeque and the absence of sufficient specific projects in the fields of prevention, reinsertion, and rehabilitation are the principal challenges that the process must overcome if it is to be sustainable.

On the other hand, one of the immediate obstacles that the municipality had to deal with involved the assassination two months after the process began of the main facilitator from one of the gangs. In addition, the facilitator of the other gang was detained by the police. These events created difficulties for the process from the beginning because one of the fundamental factors for the maintenance of peace in the territories is facilitation.

The process of the municipalities free of violence has rested on three pillars: the commitment by the local authorities, the involvement of the community, and the willingness of the gang leaders in the locality to keep the ceasefire in place. However, this system of three pillars is sustainable only if public and private resources are channelled in support of educational and productive programmes for the reinsertion and rehabilitation of young gang members. In Quezaltepeque, the difficulties faced by this last component increased the role of the mayor which, in any case, was essential for bringing together the various components of the process. Mayor Figueroa is emphatic in this respect: “And where are the contributions of the government? The national government held back. The international aid agencies also held back. I have made efforts but they are tiny. I had a pond installed where tilapia might be raised, but it has been difficult; I am also working on something with the other group, with funds that we manage, because I cannot work only with one group, I have to work with both.”

National political instability has produced a variety of effects that violence-free municipalities have had to face: a lack of resources for the mayoralties, adverse attitudes by the police, mistrust within society and some local authorities, among others. Likewise, a part of the international aid agencies abstained from supporting the process, which meant fewer possibilities of receiving additional funds to expand it. Nonetheless, in Quezaltepeque it has been possible to overcome

periods of fragility and adversity. This is an ongoing effort.

Rebuilding trust in the midst of differing perceptions

In the case of Quezaltepeque, overcoming the community’s lack of trust has been a challenge. In this regard, the mayor explains that “it is hard to break out of the pattern of fatalism. The people say that nothing can be done. Because people out there are saying that the mayor or himself has already become a ‘marero’ [gang member]. People think that nothing can be done for this country. Of course something can be done; after all, it’s a social problem. Of course, it’s going to take time. We have to reach out and explain to the population and that’s what we will do.”

The perceptions regarding the process are varied and suggest that the opinions expressed about it have to do with the kind of outcomes it has produced and the immediate needs of the social groups. The representatives of the ADESCO of the Valle del Bosque community explain that despite the obstacles they had to face – especially the lack of funds for educational and job-creating programmes – the life of the community changed since the beginning of the process: the use of parks has increased and there was no more violence as compared to the past, which has been the most important change in view of the fact that other gang activities have continued but in non-violent forms.



An example of these activities is the control over the two entry points to the community. In the past, the neighbours used to pay a private security firm for this service but it was not able to renew the contract. This service was then undertaken by gang members in order to defend their territory from attacks by the other gang. Once the municipality had been declared free of violence, this function was redefined in order to continue providing security against thefts and other crimes committed by people from outside the community. Gang members who live in the community have said that this function would not be necessary if the police were dedicated to providing protection. But instead of doing this, they add, the police only come into the community to persecute young people for no justifiable reason. This example highlights the role that gangs assumed in some communities when the state stopped providing basic services such as security and substituted them with police actions that prioritized repression as the only option.

Representatives of the community of San María I in Quezaltepeque say that even though they have also had to confront police repression, those things which the young gang members offered at the beginning of the process have been upheld. While recognizing the profound distrust generated by decades of violence, the announcement of a cease-fire between them was replicated in the communities. In the case of the community of Santa María I, a meeting was held with inhabitants and young gang members who brought a message of the changes that were taking place. Members of the community ADESCO said that the meeting was an important step to bridge the gap between the community and the gang because even if the leaders of the gang in the Santa María I community were born, live, and belong to families in the community, the formal declaration of a willingness to change was made in the name of the gang as a group.

Rebuilding confidence is a process that involves more than expressions of goodwill; it needs to be nourished with results. Nonetheless, in a fragmented society where violence affects social groups in different ways, the benefits of violence reduction are, therefore, not perceived in the same manner. The mayor of Quezaltepeque describes it thus: “If I go out into the street, the people will say: this process is not working. They will make fun of it... The problem is that many people are not affected by homicides and therefore this is no solution in their opinion.”

The lesson of Quezaltepeque: the challenge is a matter for the nation as a whole

The experience in Quezaltepeque shows that, regardless of the adversities, the commitment of the key actors makes it possible to transform dynamics of violence that are deeply ingrained in the social fabric. The willingness of municipal authorities, gangs, and communities has caused the wheels of change to start turning to overcome those obstacles created by differentiated perspectives about the results of the violence reduction process.

“The crux of the matter for us mayors is not political. We want to try to solve the problem. The stubborn small group of eleven who remain [in the process of the eleven municipalities free of violence] see this as a national problem. That’s why we still

persist. Now then, the reality of one of us is different from that of another. But that is our purpose: to come together, to persist,” the mayor of Quezaltepeque explains.

The different realities of the municipalities free of violence requires that solutions be found that are appropriate for each context and the nature of the problem, as well as greater coordination at a national level and a multi-causal perspective on the problem. The fact that the mayor of Quezaltepeque was acquainted with a variety of institutional environments in the public sphere allowed him to identify these needs: “We must be consistent with the idea that this situation of insecurity cannot be overcome just by talking about it. The country is made up of three branches of government, and the judicial branch does not think in the same way as we do in the executive and the legislators think along other lines. Can we say that it is going to be resolved through repression? One single branch of government cannot resolve the problem, much less so in the case of a problem which is as heavy as this social problem.”

Quezaltepeque is the expression of an even greater challenge: to come to understand that violence is a social problem that involves the nation as a whole. The community must be the place where the nation’s concern is grounded. Any attempt to influence a change in social relations also implies a change in the way in which the problem is understood by the



Santa María I, Quezaltepeque

Photo: Interpeace

institutional actors. This means stopping the spiral of violence which, in the final count, involves us all. “One day in July [2013] the boys went astray and began to beat each other up, so I called them in and told them: ‘Look, if this process is not for the mayor, please support it for your people, for your community, for the people who saw you grow up.’”

So the call goes out from Quezaltepeque to the whole nation: all the social actors must become involved – business people, politicians, churches, and international aid agencies – in a collective effort so that the commitment of the primary actors – municipalities, communities, and gangs – continues to grow and strengthen.

Violence reduction and peacebuilding

The reproduction of violence over time ends up acquiring a systemic character. For this reason, solutions must identify entry points which, given the will of key actors involved in the conflict, allow for processes of change. For Interpeace, support for such actors is a crucial requirement in peace-building processes, especially when they emerge from the very context of the conflict and who are, therefore, endowed with the necessary legitimacy to transform it. Interpeace has recorded the experience of the eleven municipalities declared free of violence in 2013 and seeks to communicate the lessons learned as well as the challenges that the violence reduction process in El Salvador still faces.