20 YEARS OF BUILDING PEACE

«*THE HUMAN BEING AT THE CENTER OF THE SECURITY AGENDA*»

A conversation with Adam Blackwell, Multidimensional Security Secretary of the Organization of American States

Security and Justice

Notes on the army, security, and peacebuilding in Central America

Youth

The failure of societies to respond to the needs and aspirations of young people

Our role as peacebuilders is to assist in the development of local and national capacities for peace (values and attitudes; social processes and relationships; political and social institutions) necessary to incrementally and effectively overcome the dynamics of conflict that lead to polarization and violence.

Interpeace, Strategic Position Paper

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

On November 27, 2013, we signed a memorandum of understanding with the Organization of American States (OAS) to work jointly in support of peace in Central America. José Miguel Insulza, the Secretary General of the OAS, underscored the work that Interpeace is carrying out within the framework of the violence reduction process in El Salvador. He gave assurances that the OAS is starting to undertake efforts together with Interpeace to work in the entire Central American region on processes designed to prevent violence and improve security and social inclusion. "Thanks to the work of Interpeace," Insulza concluded, "we have found spaces to work in that complement our own endeavours."

The OAS was a pioneering institution in recognizing the need to launch a wider and comprehensive peacebuilding process in El Salvador. So the OAS assumed the role of guarantor of the violence reduction process and has, since then, continued to support the process and work for its sustainability through the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security.

20 YEARS OF BUILDING PEACE

In order to discuss the concept of multidimensional security and, from that perspective, the obstacles standing in the way of the process of violence reduction in El Salvador and its future challenges, we interviewed Mr. Adam Blackwell for this second anniversary issue of our journal; Mr. Blackwell is the Secretary for Multidimensional Security of the OAS.

This interview is accompanied, in turn, by two articles that address specific areas within which the Interpeace Regional Office for Latin America has been working during the last decade: security and youth. The first is a paper on the role of the army in peacebuilding in Central America, written by Francisco Jiménez, coordinator of the Security and Justice Programme of Interpeace, which was presented this year at the International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA). The second is an article by Interpeace's Director-General, Scott M. Weber, which explains how the experience of Interpeace in the prevention of youth-related violence in Central America is relevant to other contexts and realities.

Together with the first issue, this second anniversary issue provides a more comprehensive perspective on the work that Interpeace has been carrying out in Central America during the last years from a participatory and inclusive approach, that seeks to empower local actors, that promotes dialogue and reconciliation, and that, above all, believes that it is possible to re-establish confidence in fragmented societies in order to overcome conflicts without recourse to violence.

Ana Glenda Tager
Director
Interpeace Regional Office for Latin America

Photo credit: Ryan Anson for Interpeace

NOTES ON THE
ARMY, SECURITY, AND PEACEBUILDING
IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Paper presented on May 20, 2014, at the
International Congress of the
Latin American Studies Association (LASA).

By Francisco Jiménez Irungaray*

The work involved in peacebuilding brings to light the classic paradox between theory and practice in the sense that peacebuilding requires that we interact, from a conceptual framework, within ever-changing dynamics. Theory and practice imply not only thinking followed by action but, simultaneously, thinking as one does and doing as one thinks. And I say this because within the discussion about the meaning of peace in Central America today, especially from the perspective of security, we consider matters that are not only related to crime but also to defence. Thus, we need to engage in a conceptual reflexion about the interrelationship among national security, citizen security, and public security.

This talk is a reflexion on the process that Interpeace in Central America has been furthering during more than ten years on security issues and which I will attempt to explain today. To do that from a peacebuild-

«One of the aspects that remained unchanged after the transition to democracy was the predominance of the army in all aspects related to security»

ing perspective, one must refer to the role of the army in public security. A first approach to the issue at hand must of necessity be conceptual. Central America, at odds with other regions of the world, has developed its own reflexion about the meaning of security and possesses a level of clarity about the challenges required to achieve it by means of public policies. I am not going to address this issue exhaustively. I only wish to address two very important concerns for the region:

1) The Framework Treaty on Democratic Security for Central America, signed in 1995, as one of the first experiences that adopts the concept of human security of the United Nations and applies it to the issue of security under a fundamental characteristic: it establishes the individual, that is, the citizen, and not the State, as the central concern of public policy in matters of security. This qualitative step taken in 1995 was huge: it meant moving from the classic vision of national security, especially the one established in Latin America under the influence of the National Security Doctrine which, as we all know, was extensively developed

at the School of the Americas in Panama, to a concept of security centred on the human being. This paved the way for an important debate about the role of the armed forces as a result of this paradigm change, a debate which is still unfinished with regards to their role in citizen security.

2) The second important concern that must be addressed is the impact that this paradigm change had on the region's armies from a conceptual perspective. In the case of Guatemala, at Interpeace we have established a difference, which we consider basic to all peacebuilding tasks, between "the armies" as institutions and "the military" as a group of people who have developed a professional career within the army. In order to explain this difference in greater detail, we must address a situation which is unique to the Central America region: in other regions of the world, for example in South America, the term "armed forces" refers to a balanced relationship between the navy, the air force, and the army proper. In the case of Central America, even though the distinction between the three branches exists, what

we observe in practice is the supremacy of the army over the navy and the air force. In fact, the term "armed forces" is replaced with "national army"; the first is meaningless in contrast, for example, with its use in South America. One might think that this is an irrelevant detail. However, this distinctive feature of the region determined the very character of its internal armed conflicts in view of the fact that strategy on the battlefield was derived from the army's supremacy given that the infantry is in direct contact with the population and its actions can result in human rights violations.

Having said this, we can observe that in the case of Guatemala, apart from the army's supremacy, there is another distinction involving the institutional character of the army and the concept of the military as a socially identifiable group. In Guatemala, in addition to the army as an institution, there are informal institutions, structures, or networks made up of individuals who, although no longer on active duty within the army, maintain a sort of corporate structure and common identity which, in certain ways, continues to influence

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the State's institutions, especially under the aegis of its authoritarian legacy. This makes it possible for certain military officers, upon leaving the formal-institutional sphere, to maintain a number of prerogatives derived from this authoritarian legacy and corporatist conception which, in the case of Guatemala, has allowed the intelligence structures, very active during the internal armed conflict, to remain in existence even though they are formally outside of the institution itself. Thus, there is a distinction between "the military", as a spontaneously organized group or not, which although not part of the military institution, is geared towards influencing the political

system. It is not by chance, for example, that many of them are the owners of private security companies. In the specific case of socio-environmental conflicts surrounding the exploitation of natural resources, it is not by chance either that former military officers provide security for the large mining concerns. In other words, there is sufficient evidence of a permanent network. This allows us to establish a necessary distinction with regards to actors who are involved in peacebuilding. Why is it important then to speak about the army – as an institution of the State and not as a group of individuals who are linked by their original training and professional

development but no longer members of its institutional structure – and its role in security matters with regards to peacebuilding? To answer this question I am going to refer to three key considerations:

1) The army was a fundamental actor during the armed conflict and played a determining role in the transition to democracy. If, in fact, it was the State as such that signed the peace accords, the fundamental political actor that determined the conditions under which those accords were signed was the armed forces. Even though the politicians had a lot to say, it was the active army officers who in reality de-

termined, from the perspective of the State, the course of the negotiations. In this manner they assured a level of relative autonomy for the armed forces within the political system while at the same time guaranteeing formal conditions of amnesty for themselves. This allowed them to preserve their own identity as an institution of the State with much enhanced strength. At that moment, the concept of peace was restricted because peace was understood basically to mean the absence of armed conflict. And even though the peace accords in El Salvador and Guatemala provided a structural understanding of the conflict as well as alternatives to broach and resolve it, the primary objective of the accords was not to foster structural change in the short term but to put a stop to the fighting.

2) The army is the guarantor of national sovereignty and, therefore, in charge of safekeeping the territory of the country. One of the aspects that remained unchanged after the transition to democracy was the predominance of the army in all aspects related to security. Whereas its primary function is the defence of national sovereignty

and territory in the face of foreign aggression, there is a problem in the fact that other functions are assigned to it that in a democratic context surpass the specific nature of the institution, as a result of which the distinction with other institutions charged with security becomes troublesome. However, in the current scenario, where threats to security acquire a transnational character, its function of protecting territory and guaranteeing national sovereignty take on relevance once again.

3) Historically, the army has been present in all aspects of national life. From its very origins, the army of Guatemala has been the main political linchpin of the State's institutional nature, a condition that during the years of the armed conflict reached its highest levels of intensity insofar as the army's involvement. The transition to democracy and the peace accords fuelled processes of political transformation aimed at strengthening the role of civilians within the institutions of the State. Nonetheless, it is doubtless true that, in the case of Guatemala, such a context placed the army in a position as the most stable of the State's

institutions, which in turn has made it respond, more or less frequently, to a series of societal and institutional demands that surpass its functions.

When these three elements are taken into account, the concept of peace, from the perspective of Interpeace, is not only the absence of armed conflict but the strengthening of the capacities of society and the State to administer and resolve conflicts without recurring to violence and within the framework of a strong institutional framework.

Within this logic the need arises to broach the topic of security from a perspective of peacebuilding, given that nearly two decades after the signing of the peace accords the institutional capacities of the State are still weak and the threats to security have evolved. When they were signed, the peace accords did not take into account the critical variables of security which today are decisive in the region, especially with reference to delinquency, from extortion and kidnappings to contract killings, as well as criminal organizations involved in drug, weapons, and people trafficking. Even though the

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«The debate centres not so much on the legitimacy which the army might have as an instrument to confront the problem of insecurity but on its necessary use in the absence of other alternatives»

impact that these have on homicidal violence has not been demonstrated so far in precise terms, no expert analyst who works in this field would dare to affirm that organized crime is not a determining factor on the levels of violence in the region. However, it must be stated that drug trafficking is not the fundamental problem that impinges on security. For the common citizen, the main problem is associated with the constant possibility of being held up on the way to work, as well as becoming a victim of extortion and kidnappings with fatal consequences.

On the face of it, two issues stand out. In the first place, we have a State that is incapable of responding to these threats and of resolving a problem which, even though not new, in certain ways has worsened in the last fifteen or twenty years in the region. In the second place, and as a consequence of the first, a threat and a debate are evident today in Central America: if the State is obliged to make use of all the resources at its disposal to confront the problem of insecurity, the national army, once again, becomes an important actor in light of the three elements mentioned previously to which must be added the State's weakness as reflected in the inefficacy of the police. As a consequence, politicians and civil authorities turn to the army to solve this problem. The debate centres not so much on the legitimacy which the army might have as an instrument to confront the problem of insecurity but on its necessary use in the absence of other alternatives. In this sense, we must assume, in ideal terms, that the army should be the final alternative, that is, when the threat reaches an existential level, or when the threat's threshold is vital. However, in Guatemala the tendency is to turn to the army in the face of any protest of a social nature, as a result of which social phenomena become "securitized", that is, a social problem becomes a security problem.

It is at this point that the issue of security becomes fundamental for peacebuilding given that, in the absence of a sustained effort to strengthen the civilian police, politicians will continue to make use of the recourse of the military to confront the problem of insecurity, independently of the level of the threat. What does this mean? Should we take sides with classic tradition and say that the army cannot participate in the fight against insecurity, when in fact and in any number of ways it will continue to do so as a result of political decisions? Or should we promote and participate in a debate that will allow us to discuss this issue?

For this reason, Interpeace in Guatemala is encouraging a process based on a fundamental concern: How to resolve the extremes of conflict when it becomes violent? This is where the risk is highest to employ the armies in security matters. Some examples are the states of siege that, under Guatemalan legislation, were enacted for two regions in Guatemala to respond to environmental conflicts. The process supported by Interpeace seeks, therefore, to establish spaces for dialogue and debate between civil society and the armed forces in order to develop technical and methodological tools for monitoring and auditing the behaviour of the army in such circumstances. For Interpeace it is important that the results of this experience are translated into concrete lessons that further regional debate on security and peacebuilding adapted to the needs of specific contexts.

*Francisco Jiménez Irungaray. Coordinator of the Central American Security and Justice Programme.

The development of local and national capacities for peace can only be effective and sustainable when done by local and national actors. Functional, peaceful societies have a series of common characteristics, but we also know that solutions cannot be imported nor imposed.

Interpeace, Strategic Position Paper

20 YEARS OF BUILDING PEACE

«THE HUMAN BEING AT THE **CENTER** OF THE SECURITY AGENDA»

Photo credit: OAS

A conversation with Adam Blackwell, Multidimensional Security Secretary of the Organization of American States

By Arnoldo Gálvez and Otto Argueta*

In 2005, the Secretary General of the Organization of American States, José Miguel Insulza, set up the Multidimensional Security Secretariat charged with evaluating, preventing, confronting, and responding to threats to security in the region. Even though the issues of security has been one of the key concerns of the OAS, it was not until 2003, during the Special Conference on Security, that the States of the hemisphere recognized that, given their complexity and diversity, the new threats to security that societies faced required an approach that no longer rested on traditional conceptions of States as the main center of the threat but should also include political, economic, social, environmental, and health-related aspects.

Photo credit: OAS

The concept of multidimensional security, and the subsequent establishment of a Secretariat that would put it into practice, represented a very important advance in the debate about security and the efforts by the States to guarantee it. Its principal contribution was to have established that the purpose and reason for being of security is the protection of human beings and, as a consequence, those actions aimed at achieving it must be of a systemic nature. In other words, they must include, simultaneously, observance of the law and the prevention of crime, assistance to the victims and rehabilitation of the perpetrators, and peace and security in the hemisphere.

On the basis of this outlook, the OAS was the first international organization that recognized an opportunity to in-itiate a greater and sustainable pacification process within the framework of the truce agreed to in March 2012 between the main gangs that operate in El Salvador. Up until then, El Salvador was considered one of the most violent countries in the world in which between 14 and 17 persons were being murdered every day. The truce made it possible to reduce this to five.

In July of that year, José Miguel Insulza visited the country to express his support for the process. Subsequently, the Secretary General of the OAS (SG/OAS) and the Government of the Republic of El Salvador, represented by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, signed an agreement under which the Government formally requested assistance in the field of citizen security and the SG/OAS expressed its commitment as guarantor of the social pacification process undertaken under the truce agreement between the gangs.

As of then, the OAS, represented by the Multidimensional Security Secretariat, has kept up its public and active involvement in support of the process to reduce violence in El Salvador.
To discuss the concept of multidimensional security and, from that perspective, the obstacles which the process of violence reduction in El Salvador has faced as well as its challenges into the future, we interviewed Mr. Adam Blackwell, Multidimensional Security Secretary of the OAS.

Adam Blackwell is a Canadian diplomat. In 1985, he joined the Canadian Foreign Service and held the posts of Consul General in Mexico and New York, where he undertook a variety of assignments and carried out work in the field. Between 2002 and 2005 he served as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary in the Dominican Republic. From 2005 to 2006, he was Director-General of Strategy and Services in the Bilateral Relations Branch of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. In 2006, Ambassador Blackwell joined the Organization of American States in Washington D.C, and became the Assistant Secretary in the Secretariat for Finance and Administration. Soon after he moved on to become acting Secretary, in the Secretariat for External Relations. Shortly afterwards he was appointed Secretary of Foreign Relations. In July 2010, he was appointed Multidimensional Security Secretary of the OAS. In the course of the years, Ambassador Blackwell has headed and participated in various electoral assistance and monitoring missions of the OAS. Among the decorations and honours he has received is the Grand Cross with Silver Breast Star of the Order of Merit of Duarte, Sánchez and Mella," the most important decoration awarded by the Head of State of the Dominican Republic. In 2000, he completed the programme of executive development at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, and in 1995 he was awarded by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and International Trade of Canada. In addition, Blackwell is currently President of the Council of the Global Agenda for Illegal Trafficking and Organized Crime of the World Economic Forum. He is a member of the board of directors of the Foundation for the Americas and a member of the Coordinating Technical Committee of the process for violence reduction in El Salvador.

What are the main contributions of the concept of multidimensional security to the debate about security in Latin America?
The first and foremost contribution has been to place the human being at the locus of the security agenda. The concept of multidimensional security has allowed us to see beyond the tradi-

«The gang phenomenon is a violent expression of social exclusion».

tional definitions of security, providing a notion of security not only of States but of people and their communities. This impels us to seek comprehensive solutions which underscore preventive measures to reduce putting at risk the rights and the security of the citizenry. The second important contribution of the concept is the advancement of outlooks based on results and evidence, on outlooks that seek to evaluate the results of any security strategy, not only of the projects themselves but of the laws, the tactics, as well as examining at depth the measures and indicators that we employ to gauge our achievements or shortcomings.

What unavoidable challenges does Central America pose from the perspective of multidimensional security?
Although it is true that the geographic situation of Central America, with access to two oceans and multiple borders as well as proximity to centres of consumption, might represent a competitive economic advantage, it nonetheless also represents a security challenge given its vulnerability in the face of narcotics trafficking, organized crime, and arms and people trafficking, among others. In addition to these, there are other threats such as the weakness of institutions and the consequences. of the civil wars that have ripped apart the social fabric, as well as social exclusion and a population of young people who have no job opportunities, to mention some.

How is the gang phenomenon perceived within the northern triangle of Central America from the concept of multidimensional security?
The gang phenomenon is a violent expression of social exclusion; this is one of the main catalysts of the phenomenon, together with the problems of migration and deportations, the lack of job opportunities, and disorganized urban growth, among others. As you can see, the factors are wide-ranging and the concept of multidimensional security seeks to find solutions that encompass the full 360 degrees of the problem, that is, holistic,

precedes that criminal activity. In those conditions, the blind application of the law or the exclusive implementation of hard-fisted policies, which could lead to the imprisonment of hundreds or even thousands of individuals, were no guarantee of the elimination or even the reduction of crime and, above all, of violence, which spreads with the same virulence in jails and other places of detention. Thus, we decided on a third option: 3) an option that allows for a proactive attitude on the part of local and national governments, that can expand their preventive actions with efficacy and achieve progressively greater control over crime in their territories, an option that underlines dialogue among actors in a process of violence reduction and that establishes the foundations of a shared responsibility and commitment by all.

It was in the face of such a scenario that a body such as the General Secretariat of the OAS decided to participate in the process initiated by Salvadoran civil society to act as a facilitator, observer, and even guarantor of the commitments that the parties agreed to. For the OAS and its General Secretariat, whose main concerns are the people and the democratic institutions which protect them, it was impossible to ignore the problem. And we knew that our duty was to reach out in support of governments

and societies that decided to address it and required our assistance. If we did not do it, what other regional body would assume that role?

What are the main challenges that the OAS has faced in its role as guarantor of the process?
One of the main challenges has been mistrust, the manner in which to establish communication about the issue and, above all, to define the steps within such an unprecedented phenomenon and where results seem so uncertain.

«There are many victims of violence among gangs who have received no care, and care for victims is precisely one of our other pillars in this comprehensive process».

What role does the OAS play, as guarantor of the pacification process that began with the truce between gangs, with a new government in office in El Salvador?
The OAS is willing to work with the new government in its efforts to reduce crime and violence in the country, if the government so requests.

Does the recent spike in homicides mean the failure of the process to reduce violence in El Salvador?
No. Regardless of the increase in violence since the process began to achieve a truce between gangs, the very spokespeople of the gangs have expressed clearly their wish to continue with the

process. And we are talking precisely about that, a process that will have high points, ups and downs, detractors, but it is a process and while there is a will to continue towards peace as a solution the process will continue to advance.

Which are the principal challenges, from the perspective of the OAS, faced by the pacification process in El Salvador?
A sustained national dialogue is needed, as well as transparency and clarity about what this pacification process involves, but above all understanding and support from the entire society. Political leadership is also required to insert the issue of a comprehensive response to the gang phenomenon into the national security policy. Perhaps another challenge is understanding and support by the international community, since this is a process which does not fit within the definitions and the standards of conventional mediation processes.

What are the reasons for the decision by the OAS to support a process of violence reduction that involves actors defined as illegal by Salvadoran legislation?
The main reason, under the light of my answer to the first question, is that we work under a concept of multidimensional security in which the human being is the centre of our concerns.

comprehensive, and integral solutions. I also mentioned previously that one of the contributions of the concept of multidimensional security to the issues of security in the Americas is the use of an approach based on results. In this sense, we must understand that the solution to the problem of insecurity, in any case, is not necessarily more security, more police, more soldiers, and harsher laws, but more intelligent and more efficient investments in security based, of course, on strong, transparent, and collaborative institutions which are adapted to specific needs and capacities associated with each problem and security system. In the case of the gang phenomenon, our proposed focus under the concept of multidimensional security has always been a more comprehensive strategy, which takes into account prevention,

rehabilitation, reinsertion, the unblocking of judicial proceedings, and the improvement of conditions within the penal system, based on a national dialogue.

Why did the OAS think it important to become a guarantor of the truce process in El Salvador?
In principal, we were encouraged by an objective which is a priority under our statutes as the Secretariat of Multidimensional Security, namely, to contribute to the reduction of the criminal violence which affects so many of the countries of our continent, but we placed even greater emphasis on the Central American region after El Salvador and Honduras were declared the countries with the highest homicide rates in the world. A short while later and at the request of the authorities of

this country, we undertook an exhaustive diagnosis of the national system of citizen security in which we underlined one of the priorities that needed addressing: the penal system and the gang phenomenon. With regards to the last, we began to discuss different possible scenarios and we analyzed potential courses of action before deciding on one of them. We identified three options: 1) ignore the problem, which we deemed unacceptable; 2) insist on the application of the law, which is obviously correct but might turn out to be counterproductive if not applied intelligently and taking into account all characteristics and aspects of the phenomenon that that is to be resolved. And we could not ignore the fact that criminal activity in Central America takes place in a context of a social phenomenon that extends beyond and

Photo: OAS

Processes and institutions that sustain peace in a society can only prevail if they are anchored in internal dynamics: owned by internal actors and perceived as the result of their own efforts.

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And in this sense, we must understand that criminals are individuals before being criminals, with families, mothers, fathers, who have been excluded, who have not had opportunities, who have been victims in turn of a culture of violence, of deportations. But above all, the other side of the coin we must never forget is that in this entire pacification process there are many victims of violence among gangs who have received no care, and care for victims is precisely one of our other pillars in this comprehensive process.

Is the Salvadoran experience replicable in other countries and under what conditions?

Of course, this process – in its general and comprehensive terms – can be applied in any country. We are aiming for it to become a sub-regional process, and hope that countries such as Guatemala and Honduras, with their own specific problems of gangs and prison overcrowding, decide to adopt comprehensive and sustainable outlooks.

What are the contributions made by the OAS to peacebuilding in the northern triangle of Central America?

We are working together with Interpeace on a sub-regional initiative for the reduction of violence and peacebuilding in the northern triangle of Central America. On the other hand, we continue to evaluate the national security systems and present recommendations of how to improve the systems and their components. We have projects for the handling and destruction of chemical precursors and we support institutional strengthening by means of special courts for drug treatment, among other initiatives we support in the region.

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Photo credit: Sandra Sebastián for Interpeace

THE FAILURE OF SOCIETIES TO RESPOND TO THE NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

By Scott M. Weber
Director-General of Interpeace

From youth gangs in Central America, to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and off the Horn of Africa, to martial arts groups in Timor-Leste, to demonstrations turned violent in European capitals, youth violence comes in many different forms and affects many different regions of the world. What all of these and other cases of youth violence have in common is that they find their roots in a lack of opportunity and a feeling of socio-economic as well as political exclusion.

«Repressive law enforcement has contributed to perpetuating the vicious cycle of youth exclusion and violence».

Governments are struggling, and to a large extend failing, to respond to the needs and aspirations of their youth, the vast majority of whom are seeking little more than a productive place in society from which they can derive status, dignity and confidence in their future.

Youth is the segment of society that is most dramatically affected by violence globally – both as victims and perpetrators. More than half of all homicide victims and perpetrators globally are under the age of 30, and, in addition to being young, are overwhelmingly male.[1]

It is difficult to estimate the true depth and scale of the impact of youth violence. Indeed it is intertwined with a host of other problems including the breakdown of health and welfare services, decreases in rates of employment and productivity, pressures on state budgets and a fraying of the social fabric at the level of the fami-

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1. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2014). Global Study on Homicide 2013.

ly, the community or the nation as a whole. A U.S. study estimated that the cost to society of one youth turning to a life of crime and violence amounts to several million dollars – including actual costs and foregone economic contribution.[2]

Learning from the Central American experience

In South and Central America the homicide rate of male victims between 15 and 29 years of age is more than four times the global average for that age group.[3] These exceptionally high rates of youth violence are largely owed to the existence of youth gangs and organized crime.

"Iron fist" security and policing approaches – known as mano dura – have been employed to stem the tide of youth violence in Central America since the early 2000s, but have proven largely unsuccessful. Mano dura has included measures such as making the membership in gangs a criminal offense, loosening the requirements for evidence of a crime, and harsh prison sentences. It has also led to indiscriminate mass arrests of alleged and real gang members by the military and police, often violating their rights.

While mano dura responded to public demand for a crackdown on the youth

2. Cohen & Piquero. (2008). New Evidence on the monetary value of saving a high risk youth. Journal of Quantitative Criminiology, 25, pp. 25-49.
3. UNODC. (2014). Global Study on Homicide 2013.

gangs – heightened by sensationalist media coverage – and was met with widespread public support, it has not to date achieved a significant reduction of violence. Rather than addressing the causes that drive youth into gangs and organized crime, repressive law enforcement has contributed to perpetuating the vicious cycle of youth exclusion and violence.

This dynamic is particularly strong in situations where the security forces act arbitrarily, dehumanize youth, and employ humiliating or even extra-judicial methods that increase the sense of injustice perpetrated against youth by the state. Furthermore, the conditions in over-crowded prisons as well as the group dynamics in the prisons have enhanced the internal cohesion of the gangs. Taking away young people's dignity has only driven them deeper into gangs and organized crime where they have found opportunities to make a living for themselves and their families as well as to gain status and dignity.

Homicide rates in one Central American country, El Salvador, have plummeted over the last two years due in large parts to a truce between the two main youth gangs, an initiative conceived as part of a comprehensive and locally rooted strategy to reduce crime and violence. While only reluctantly accepted and later supported by the Salvadoran government, the truce and the associated negotiations

to eliminate violence from communities through agreements between the local authorities and the local gangs brought down homicide rates by 60% since its start in March 2012.

Despite these gains, the truce remains fragile and its resilience is perpetually tested in a highly contested political environment and in the absence of alternative economic opportunities. In a country in which 9% of the population depends on gang activity for its sustenance, extortion and other illegal income generating activities remain the mainstay of the gangs. Generating legitimate alternative sources of income for these young people and their

families must be given urgent and committed attention for the sustainability of youth violence reduction.

It is important to learn lessons from some of the contexts that have already experienced extreme forms of youth violence, such as Central America, to inform effective approaches to prevent the seeds of the phenomenon from growing into high levels of youth violence in other countries and regions. From 2007, Central American governments started to shift towards more holistic anti-gang approaches sometimes referred to as mano amiga or mano extendida (the friendly hand or the extended hand). However, the

newly adopted violence prevention policies across the region, the development of which Interpeace has supported, remain to be comprehensively applied.

The risk of youth violence increasing around the world in the years to come

Youth violence and the growth of gangs have been endemic in Central America. The root causes of this kind of violence, however, are present in a multitude of societies around the world and have in some cases led to other forms of youth violence. One reason to raise the alarm bell and urge

«When youth are included and supported in society, they can realize their productive potential and become constructive citizens».

the development of responses now is that a number of countries exhibit the conditions and early risk factors for youth violence including:

• Unemployment and under-employment resulting from a lack of economic development and economic instability

• Limited access to and/or poor quality education

• Weak and corrupt institutions at different levels and in different sectors (notably law enforcement)

• Weakened community ties and social fabric, often evidenced by stress on the basic family unit

• Experience of armed conflict and/or domestic violence

• Easy access to weapons

• Media stigmatization of youth

• Ossified political structures, including within political parties, thus closing official channels for the expression of youth priorities and preventing the rise of younger political leadership

These factors are conducive to youth feeling marginalized, deprived of opportunities, status and dignity as well as longing for social structure their communities are unable to provide.

In his Ted Talk on "the link between unemployment and terrorism", Somali-born Mohamed Ali refers to the issue of youth during their critical transition from adolescent to adulthood being in a state of "waithood" in the absence of jobs and a purpose in life. This state with its marked lack of opportunity and hope makes young people vulnerable to the recruitment by radical violent groups (such as Al-Shabaab in the example that Mohamed Ali cites). He describes waithood as a gateway to youth violence.

In many countries, notably on the African continent but in other parts of the world as well, the already high percentage of youth will dramatically increase in the next years due to high population growth rates. Almost half of the world's population is under 24 and the majority of those youth live in less developed countries.[4] What is more, many countries that experience high population growth also suffer from a lack of economic opportunities and weak governance, which are precisely the circumstances under which youth violence has flourished in other places. Even in the European Union one in three young people between the ages

4. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. (2011). Reducing the Involvement of Youth in Armed Violence. A Programming Note.

of 18 and 24 is at risk of poverty and social exclusion.[5]

We therefore see a dangerous mix of risk factors and conducive circumstances that could lead to a further increase of youth violence around the world in the years ahead. It may not reach such dramatic levels as in Central America in many places, but any society that is unable to offer youth a place in society where they feel included and respected, should be weary of the potential of youth violence. The Central American example foreshadows what could happen elsewhere.

Understand and act now

The potential growth of youth violence is serious but not inevitable. To prevent its further rise we must think less of protecting ourselves and more about prevention. It will require a concerted focus on the myriad of interconnected societal problems that need to be addressed and that are at the core of the phenomenon. When youth are included and supported in society, they can realize their productive potential and become constructive citizens.

The lack of understanding of the phenomenon of youth violence remains the biggest challenge. International efforts to identify effective strategies for youth violence prevention that are inspired by lessons learned, address the root causes of the phenomenon, and that can

5. European Commission. Youth Social Exclusion and Lessons from Youth Work.

Photo credit: Arnoldo Gálvez for Interpeace

unlock the potential of youth as positive change agents, are both important and urgent.

One element of youth violence prevention is adapting governance systems so that they can engage with and for this critical constituency in meaningful ways. Additionally, collaboration between civil society, the private sector, local government, and community groups is required to address the different factors that lead to youth violence. The key to youth finding a productive and satisfying place in society is empowering and engaging young people in the political process as well as in economic and social life. Our future depends on young people feeling they have one.

*Scott Weber was appointed as Director-General in 2005 by the then-Chairman (2000-2009) of the Interpeace Governing Council, 2008 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former President Martti Ahtisaari. In recognition of his record of professional accomplishments, his commitment to society and his potential to contribute to shaping the future of the world through his inspiring leadership, Scott was selected as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2009. Each year the Forum recognizes "the 200 most distinguished young leaders below the age of 40 from around the world."

Interpeace's work has also been personally highlighted by H.E. President Bill Clinton at the 2006 and 2007 Clinton Global Initiative meetings as an innovative approach to conflict prevention.

In 2010 Scott was nominated by the Governing Council, chaired by former President of Ghana, John A. Kufuor, for a second 5-year term as Director-General.

Scott began his career in the United Nations, first in disaster reduction and then in political affairs. Scott is a member of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO), The Chatham House (UK), the Steering Committee of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. He is also a member of the Advisory Boards of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) and the Center for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF). He holds a Bachelor's degree in International Relations, Economics and Russian from Georgetown University. Scott is French and American.

Peacebuilding must be strategic and aim for systemic change. The scope of the societal and political transformations necessary to underpin peace is vast and the route to achieve them uncertain. Working for such long-term processes requires aiming for concrete changes that have the potential to unleash larger processes of transformation, to the point that whole "systems" in society are positively transformed.

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Strategic Position Paper**

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