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TRACK 6

Bridging gaps:

Interpeace and
the reduction
of violence
in El Salvador

PEACEBUILDING

**Celebrating Interpeace's
pioneering work**
Reflections on Twenty Years
of Peacebuilding

YOUTH

**«More opportunities, more
inclusion, that is the main
challenge»**

Interview with Max Loria,
former Vice-minister for
Peace of Costa Rica

“Interpeace brings together all levels of society for collaboration when formulating peacebuilding strategies. This is what distinguishes the organization from other actors in the peacebuilding field. I strongly believe that engaging all levels of society, including regional and international actors, when addressing conflict is imperative for sustainable peace”

John A. Kufuor, former president of Ghana and Chairman of Interpeace’s Governing Council



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EDITORIAL

Ana Glenda Tager

Director
Interpeace
Regional Office for Latin America

In this third and last issue of our anniversary journal, we provide a reflection on the contribution made by Interpeace to the violence reduction process in El Salvador, from the perspective of one of the fundamental components of the focus on Peacebuilding that characterizes our organization: Track 6. At Interpeace, we believe that Peacebuilding is only possible through a positive interaction among the different levels that make up society (Track 1: political elites; Track 2: civil society and local governments; and Track 3: communities and population in general), all of which, as a consequence of conflict, tend to distance themselves from each other, thereby provoking an increase in mistrust, a breakdown of social cohesion, and a lessening of the legitimacy of political institutions. As a consequence, instead of working with each of these levels or tracks independently, Interpeace seeks to bridge the gap that separates the actors in each of these levels by means of dialogue and the strengthening of the bonds of trust. On the basis of the operational focus, Interpeace implements a series of strategies aimed at consolidating peace, which it understands as a social process, sustainable and constant over time, that strengthens the capacities of national actors to transform conflicts in a non-violent manner.



In addition, in this issue we interview the former Vice-minister of Peace of Costa Rica, Mr. Max Loría, who addresses the participatory processes facilitated by Interpeace to prepare proposals for public policies for the prevention of youth-related violence in the seven Central American countries. These proposals constitute the conceptual and practical basis not only to understand the nature of the phenomenon of youth-related violence, as expressed in the voices of the various actors who participated in the wide-ranging and inclusive processes of dialogue that took place in each of the countries, but also to influence the efforts carried out in each country and regionally in support of violence prevention and the consolidation of peace.

Finally, Necla Tschirgi, professor of Practice, Human Security, and Peacebuilding at the Joan B. Kroc School for Peace at the University of San Diego and a member of the Governing Council of Interpeace, has written a reflection on the twentieth anniversary of Interpeace and its pioneering work in support of peace.



CELEBRATING INTERPEACE'S PIONEERING WORK

Reflections on Twenty Years of Peacebuilding

By: Necla Tschirgi*

As Interpeace celebrates its twentieth anniversary, it is instructive to reflect on the evolution of peacebuilding as a field of research, policy and practice in the last two decades. Having been involved in Interpeace since its early days first as the War-torn Societies Project and subsequently as WSP-International, I have been privileged to witness the organization's impressive growth at the same time as the field itself has steadily expanded and gained increasing recognition. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that during this period peacebuilding has been transformed in significant ways in light of the dramatic changes in the international security environment as well as the new contexts in which it now operates.

For the international community peacebuilding is actually a fairly novel enterprise. The word entered the international lexicon with former UN Secretary-General Boutros-Boutros Ghali's 1992 report *An Agenda for Peace*. But two years later, participants at WSP's Cartigny meeting in Switzerland agreed that the international community had only a limited understanding of how to

assist war-torn countries which needed international support. The War-torn Societies Project was developed to address this gaping hole in the international system and has played a pioneering role in helping to define the field through its innovative methodology and successive field experiences in different contexts. There is little doubt that in the last twenty years, the knowledge base of peacebuilding has grown exponentially. The academic and practitioners' literature on peacebuilding is quite large and constantly growing. There are many academic programs, several professional journals, numerous research institutes and policy and programming units which are dedicated specifically to peacebuilding. Similarly, there are a wide range of governmental and non-governmental organizations actively engaged in peacebuilding, including the new peacebuilding architecture at the United Nations. As a result, policy and practice have evolved in important ways. ¹Yet, peacebuilding remains an ongoing challenge—seriously straining our understanding, re-

1. For a fuller discussion of this, see Necla Tschirgi, "Rebuilding War-torn Societies: A Critical Review of International Approaches" in *Conflict Management and Global Governance in an Age of Awakening* edited by Chester Crocker, Pamela Aall and Fen Hampson (USIP, forthcoming).

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Photo credit: Claudio Vásquez for Interpeace

sources, tools and instruments. This is partly because it has become an all-inclusive term that means different things to different people. But more importantly, it is because peacebuilding is not a pre-packaged social engineering project but a difficult process of sustained engagement aiming to transform the complicated dynamics that generate conflict and violence in different contexts. Peacebuilding is, thus, the process and not simply the product of such engagement. Interpeace was one of the first peacebuilding organizations to articulate this explicitly in its methodology and, twenty

years later, that basic principle remains at the core of peacebuilding and Interpeace’s work. While the problems that require attention continue to change and sometimes become even more intractable, the imperative for building peace through dialogue and trust building remains equally urgent. For the international community, the alternative to peacebuilding is not disengagement; it is deepening conflicts and greater violence which threaten human security as well as global peace.

Ironically, looking back to the early 1990s, it seems that it was

easier to make the case for peacebuilding in the heady days at the end of the Cold War when there was renewed hope for a global peace dividend and a strong belief in multilateral approaches to assist conflict-prone, conflict-torn or post-conflict societies. As protracted Cold War conflicts came to an end and intra-state conflicts and complex humanitarian emergencies were catapulted to center stage in international affairs, there was increased demand for concerted international support for peacebuilding. The new peacebuilding agenda offered an opportunity for innovative multilateral action at a

time when conventional Cold War policies and instruments proved inadequate to address intra-state conflicts and civil wars. Thus, in the first decade after the Cold War, peacebuilding heralded a new era in international cooperation and multilateral assistance with a distinctly humanitarian and developmental impulse. As diverse actors working on human rights, humanitarian affairs, conflict resolution, peacekeeping or development became engaged in conflict-affected countries, there was a proliferation of activities, projects, programs and policies that collectively came to be known as peacebuilding. There was, however, no cohesive or coherent peacebuilding approach. In fact, analysts, practitioners and donors lamented the “strategy deficit” in peacebuilding.²Each organization had a distinct methodology and agenda which did not necessarily align with local needs or the contributions of other actors. As a result, peacebuilding assistance was largely supply-driven and tended to be fragmented, ad hoc, and piecemeal. Despite the mantra of local ownership,

2. See, for example, Dan Smith, “Getting Their Act Together: Toward a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding,” synthesis report of the Joint Utstein Study of Peacebuilding, Oslo: The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998.

peacebuilding assistance consisted largely of externally-driven projects and programs that were not well-grounded in local realities. It is in this context that WSP-International was able to carve out a special niche by developing a methodology to bring multiple local and international actors into a participatory process of research, analysis and dialogue to identify priorities and to search for long-term solutions.

But in retrospect it is clear that the conflicts of the 1990s as well as the international security context were significantly different in nature. Aside from a few exceptions, major countries did not consider intra-state or regional conflicts of that era as posing a direct threat to their own security. Instead, these conflicts were seen as products of local pathologies—largely exogenous to the international system despite their various spillover effects. Despite policy statements on the indivisibility of peace in the post-Cold War era, peacebuilding was approached as a collective enterprise to address problems in zones of conflict at the periphery. Accordingly, the tools of peacebuilding were largely country-specific. With the terrorist attacks on

“While the problems that require attention continue to change and sometimes become even more intractable, the imperative for building peace through dialogue and trust building remains equally urgent”



Photo credit: Claudio Vásquez for Interpeace

the United States on September 11, 2001 the direct links between peacebuilding in the periphery and international peace and security gained heightened attention.

The global war on terror and US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq represented dramatic departures from the multilateral approaches to peace and security that had been gaining ground with the end of the Cold War. After 9/11, state-centric national security doctrines have re-emerged alongside multilateral approaches that are designed to address human security, conflict prevention and peace-

building. Insecurity in distant places is no longer seen as confined to zones of conflict. Instead it has become clear that conflict in the periphery could reach to the very core of the international system via non-state actors, terrorist and criminal networks, failed and failing states. The transnational nature of these threats has inevitably led peacebuilders to shift their focus on local level dynamics and to re-tool themselves to operate in a decidedly more complex security environment. Thus, in many conflict-affected countries ranging from Afghanistan to Yemen, peacebuilding efforts now co-exist

with statebuilding, counter-terrorism and stabilization operations which are often accompanied by military force, thereby causing serious tensions between those strategies at multiple levels. Peacebuilders are constantly challenged to tailor their approaches in order to be effective in this new international environment.

Interestingly, while peacebuilding has come under serious pressure at the international level due to changing security concerns, it has made important headway into other arenas where its methods are in increasing demand. In specific, it

is noteworthy to see the application of peacebuilding tools to deal with a range of problems in urban settings. Whether in the pacification process in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the gang truce in El Salvador or the simmering tensions between new immigrants and residents in a Stockholm neighborhood, the experiences of twenty years of international peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies offer important insights that are increasingly being put to good use. While the challenges in such settings are significantly different, the lessons of peacebuilding are equally relevant. These lessons are simultaneously very simple and very difficult. First, peacebuilding requires a commitment to solving problems through peaceful means. Second, peacebuilding requires a long-term vision and sustained engagement. Third, process matters greatly, and without a credible, legitimate and inclusive process, there can be little progress toward sustainable peace. Finally, peacebuilding can be practiced at all levels where violence, conflict, and distrust inhibit communication, dialogue and consensus building. The reality, of course, is that these principles are not self-implementing. Peacebuilding requires peacebuilders who do not only understand the importance of these basic principles but have the knowledge, tools, resources and capacity to play the necessary catalytic role in difficult contexts. In the last twenty years Interpeace has not only helped to pioneer the field of peacebuilding, but it has established itself as a courageous peacebuilder in many difficult contexts.

“process matters greatly, and without a credible, legitimate and inclusive process, there can be little progress toward sustainable peace”

*Necla Tschirgi, Professor of Practice, Human Security & Peacebuilding
Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego
Interpeace Governing Council

“Inclusivity requires us to fight the temptation of quick-fix solutions and of surrounding ourselves with like-minded allies. It requires us to challenge our assumptions and to ask: Who else should be involved? Who might be impacted by this issue and how can we get them involved in the decision so that they feel a sense of ownership? These are some of the questions that Interpeace staff and partners ask themselves every day as they seek to build lasting peace”

Scott M. Weber, Director-General of Interpeace



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Bridging gaps:

Interpeace and the reduction of violence in El Salvador

By Otto Argueta, Learning Officer & Arnoldo Gálvez, Communications Officer
Interpeace Regional Office for Latin America

Interpeace is a Peacebuilding organization that after twenty years of experience in different countries in the world focuses on strengthening local empowerment for processes of social change and promoting trust among actors polarized by conflict in order to achieve long-term commitments. Interpeace considers that this can be achieved by the involvement of all relevant social groups (government, political elites, civil society, and the population at large) in order to transform conflict. Instead of a final destination in time, Interpeace perceives peace as a continuous process of changing attitudes towards social conflict that allows for a strengthening of capacities by actors to manage conflict in non-violent forms through dialogue, participation, and a search for consensus.

In contrast to traditional outlooks held by the international community where society is divided into “tracks” that experience intervention singly (Track 1, political elites; Track 2, civil society; and Track 3, communities and grassroots), Interpeace proposes that the systemic nature of society requires interventions aimed at generating synergies and supporting interac-

tions among different tracks. Interpeace’s focus can be defined as the search, via participatory processes of dialogue, for bridges among the State, organized civil society, and the community at large. Interpeace understands that it is necessary to assist political elites and the government in understanding the needs and demands of communities and that these, in turn, acquire a better understanding and commitment towards political elites and governments, but it is fundamental for Peacebuilding to strengthen the links and commitments of those social groups in the middle of both social extremes.

The approach proposed by Interpeace, called Track 6, thus consists of the integration of the three social tracks in order to strengthen the interactions among them. This integration will depend in large measure on processes of social change that take into account social cohesion, the empowerment of key actors in the process, and the legitimacy of political and social institutions as fundamental elements for social interaction among the different tracks.

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strategic horizon which contains opportunities for generating positive political conditions for dialogue and the search for consensus. This means support for confidence-building measures, since it is these that will allow for polarized actors to find legitimate mechanisms to avoid the use of violence in conflict situations.

This article seeks to reflect on the contribution by Interpeace to the process of violence reduction in El Salvador from the perspective of one of the fundamental elements of the focus on Peacebuilding that characterizes our organization: Track 6. Under this operational outlook, Interpeace implements a

number of strategies aimed at consolidating peace in El Salvador, which is understood as a social process, constant and sustainable, that strengthens the capacities of national actors to transform conflict in non-violent forms.

Violence reduction for peacebuilding in El Salvador

Interpeace’s outlook as previously described singled out violence reduction as a determining factor for Peacebuilding in El Salvador. De-

CADES of violence have undermined the limited positive outcomes brought on by the peace accords signed in 1992. This violence, especially ascribed to youth gangs, has multiple causes and a variety of actors have influenced its reproduction, directly or indirectly.

The main outcomes of this violence have been the loss of thousands of lives, the polarization of society, an increase in fear, the radicalization of groups of young people as well as the security forces, and the rupture of important social ties

both within social groups directly affected by violence and between these groups and the rest of society, especially the State.

In order to understand the magnitude of violence in the country, the damage it inflicts on social relations and, thus, the importance of lowering its incidence to allow for Peacebuilding, we must recall the nature of violence and its context in El Salvador. The following section seeks to describe the nature of the gang phenomenon and the influence exercised over it, directly

or indirectly, by a variety of social actors.

The cycles of violence in El Salvador

Violence exercised by gangs in El Salvador is the result of a long process of conflict reproduction which has not been resolved or which has been addressed fundamentally through repression by forceful means. Up until 2012, homicidal violence in El Salvador reached levels that placed it

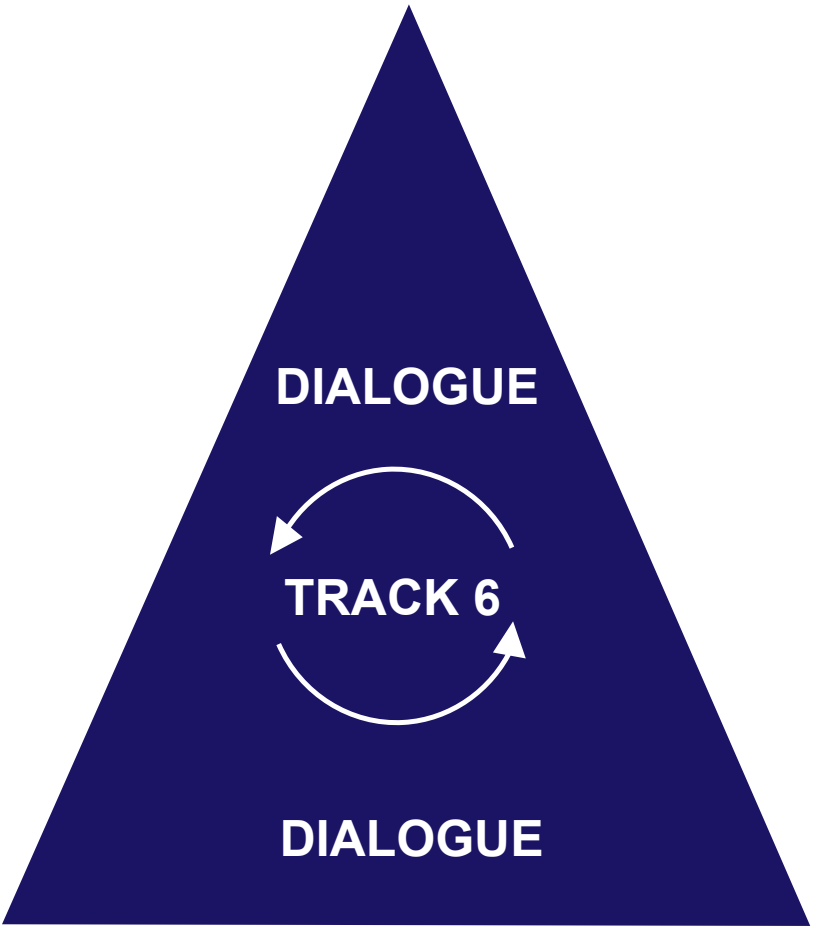
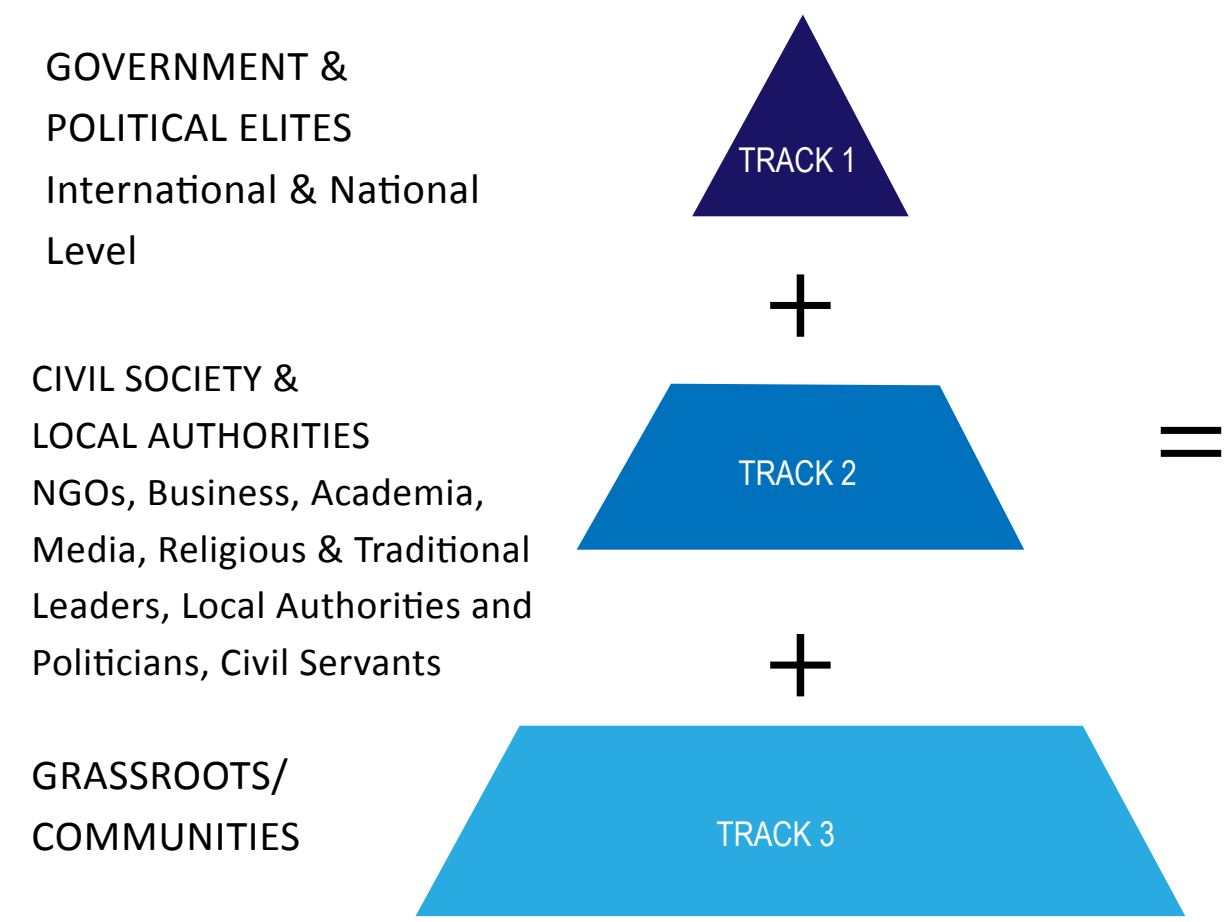
among the most violent countries in the world: in 2011, official sources reported 70.1 homicides for every one hundred thousand inhabitants.

This situation is only the tip of the iceberg. The problem of violence in the country is expressed at a number of levels that must be explained in order for Peacebuilding to proceed.

The most visible expression of the problem of violence in El Salvador is the confrontation between

various gangs (or maras in the local slang, such as “Mara Salvatrucha”, “Barrio 18”, “La Máquina”, and “Mirada Locos”). This confrontation, as analyzed in a number of studies, has been propelled by a war for control of territories and the construction of identities built upon the differences with other groups. What began in the 1980s as street fights with sticks and stones ended up in an open and declared war in the majority of urban centres in the country.

In order to acquire a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, we must identify the causes for the radicalization of violence among these groups. Among the main factors associated with the extremes of violence reached by gang violence we can mention the easy access to firearms, an increase in the cycles of revenge and hatred, a higher profit margin for illicit activities, and a predominance of repressive policies instead of those involving the prevention of violence. Simultaneously, the organizational and operational structures of the gangs were transformed due to massive imprisonments of gang leaders and their members and increased police repression as well as the impact on the gangs as a result



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of massive deportations of gang members from the United States.

All of this happened in a social context that during the first decade of this century was still inimical to long-term peace, including circumstances inherited from the civil war as well as a long history of social exclusion and inequality and the limited political reforms in the post-war years.

In El Salvador, violence has been a constant that at a number of moments in its history has reached extreme levels. Whether it originates in the State in order to repress

a social revolt, as was the case of the massacre of peasants in 1932, or undertaken by security forces or insurgent groups, as occurred during the civil war, we can deduce that violence has become imbedded in the aggregate of social relations. Society after the peace accords lacked the necessary mechanisms to transform the patterns of violence inherited from decades past and the subsequent increase in violence among gangs.

In the midst of the crossfire between gangs and between these and the security forces, Salvadoran society sought protection through a number of means. In the case of those communities where gang members live, the solution was seclusion and locked-up homes as well as the exclusion of gang members. For those social sectors that live beyond the confines of gang violence, the solution was private security, the use of firearms, and the closing of public spaces.

In addition, various governments concentrated their actions on only fighting the criminal dimension of the gang phenomenon and disregarding other social and economic aspects associated with the problem. The anti-gang policies,

known as the “hard fist” (mano dura), increased the stigmatization and criminalization of young people who ended up being identified as gang members if they happened to share social origins and places of residence. Along similar lines, the use of the Army was increased in public security activities and judicial procedures were modified to make it easier to criminally prosecute people associated with gangs. In this context, electoral campaigning focused on public safety issues, duly amplified by the media.

Other social actors, such as the private business sector, demanded that the government implement radical measures to counter the impact of extorsions that the gangs were imposing on businesses, companies, and industries. The negative impact that violence exerts on the climate for investment, both national and international, was emphasized. Organized civil society, outside of some brave attempts to intervene in the problem, was losing ground for action due to the radicalization of gangs and the legal restrictions that impeded any type of contact with gang members, real or presumed.

At the international level a variety of positions were expressed regarding the phenomenon. On the one hand, the gangs – the Mara Salvatrucha in particular – were considered part of transnational criminal organizations, which justified providing international support for specialized police units to combat gangs in the country. On the other, interventions by international cooperation agencies sought to influence different social strata (political elites and decision-makers, civil society, grassroots communities) but in piecemeal fashion, without considering the complex and precarious interplay among them. As a result, technical assistance was provided, on the one hand, to government officials for devising policies and programmes for prevention of violence. On the other, support was provided to civil society organizations through programmes of primary and secondary prevention, in other words, to address risk factors associated with violence but without involving active gang members. It was hoped that the impact of both levels of intervention would spill over to the rest of society that did not participate, as well non-participating organizations of civil

society and the political and technical decision-making elite.

The situation in 2011 was that of a polarized society, in which social interactions among the State, civil society, and the population at large were characterized by the use of violence, polarizing rhetoric, and expectations for solutions via extreme measures. The gangs went from a form of youthful association to become well-structured and disciplined social organizations, prepared to exercise violence and generate income through illicit operations as well as to provide social protection for their members in the face of attacks from rival gangs and the security forces and exclusion from the work force and any basic public service.

An opportunity for peace

An opportunity to break the cycles described above was essential to initiate processes of social change that might re-establish positive interactions for Peacebuilding.

In March 2012, in the midst of a confused and polarized context, a pact between gangs known as “the truce” (la tregua) was made

«Various governments concentrated their actions on only fighting the criminal dimension of the gang phenomenon and disregarding other social and economic aspects associated with the problem»

known publicly. This event led to two immediate effects: on the one hand, a deep-seated rejection by a variety of social and political sectors due to mistrust and a lack of transparency regarding the role of the State in negotiating the truce; and on the other, a decline of about sixty percent in the homicide rate in the country.

During 2012, the position of the various social groups regarding the truce assumed various forms. On the one side were the opponents representing mostly political parties, the private sector, the media, and some civil society organizations and academic institutions



Interpeace and the Organization of American States (OAS) signed a memorandum of understanding to work together to promote peace and security in Central America
Photo credit: OEA



Salvador Ruano, mayor of Ilopango, one of the 11 violence-free municipalities
Photo credit: Interpeace



Meeting with members of La Selva community, Santa Tecla
Photo credit: Interpeace

Interpeace's focus can be defined as the search, via participatory processes of dialogue, for bridges among the State, organized civil society, and the community at large

TRACK 6

as well as some international organisms; on the other side, the gangs and their mediators were engaged in keeping down the homicides and extending the pacts while at the same time strengthening their position in the public's eye in the face of their numerous detractors.

The political confrontation generated by the truce among gangs was the result both of its exceptional and controversial nature as well as the persistent lack of legitimacy, trust, and social cohesion in the country. Even though there had been previous attempts by the gangs to present their demands to the political elite, the appropriate conditions for these to translate into tangible results had not existed. The truce brought home to the public the deep social roots of the problem of the gangs in the country.

The truce not only evidenced the failure of repression as the only means to confront the problem. It also shed light on the limited results of the numerous prevention projects implemented in El Salvador that were conceived as an alternative to the logic of the strong-fisted approach and, thus,

would lower the homicide rate; that these prevention projects did not measure up to expectations was due, among other reasons, to the absence, in both their conception as well as their implementation, of those actors who find themselves in the very centre of the cycles of violence.

The truce, as a conjunctural action in the midst of confronted political actors, could not be the solution to a problem whose roots are intertwined with larger structural problems of Salvadoran society. However, from a perspective of Peacebuilding, the truce constituted an opportunity to initiate the long and complex path to social change.

Interpeace and its contribution to violence reduction in El Salvador

The reduction in homicides that resulted from the 2012 truce meant an opportunity to initiate a wider process of violence reduction in the country. It was also an opportunity to make public, in the voice of their own protagonists, the social roots of the gang phenomenon and their willingness to

become a part of the solution to the problem.

From the perspective of Interpeace's Peacebuilding, the inclusion of the gangs as part of the solution to the problem of violence and, consequently, their participation in dialogues, does not mean a rejection of the strengthening of the rule of law. On the contrary, a fundamental factor in Peacebuilding is the strengthening of the enforcement of the law to generate legitimacy and reduce impunity in the administration of justice, as long as innocence or guilt is determined by due process and an unrestricted commitment to Human Rights, independently of the social or group identity of the individual.

In order to be sustainable, the process of violence reduction must involve the largest number of social actors possible and begin to break down, slowly but surely, the cycles of violence and estrangement among government, civil society, and community.

As part of the "Project to Support the Reduction of Violence in El Salvador", financed by the European Union, Interpeace defined a strategy that involves different

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levels of intervention. The perspective employed by Interpeace assumed that the viability of the violence reduction process in El Salvador depended on the capacity of diverse social actors to generate links and synergies between the political decisions taken at a national level and the deep social roots of the gang phenomenon in the country.

Interpeace’ strategy also assumed that violence reduction, as one of the central processes for Peacebuilding in the country, could not only limit its scope to one group of actors. On the contrary, the multi-causal and contextual nature of

violence requires comprehensive strategies that address the problem from different social levels.

In this sense, the Interpeace approach of Track 6 in El Salvador assumed that as part of the operation framework it was necessary to consider the government authorities as part of Track 1, especially those involved with public security. Also included in this track were the different international organizations and aid agencies. As part of Track 2, Interpeace identified the strategic contribution of the private sector, civil society organizations, and municipal authorities to the violence reduction process. Finally, Track 3 is made up of the gangs as represented by their national and local leaders as well as the communities where they live. Even though gangs originate in and are part of the community, the violence they exercise in them has led to an ever greater estrangement between the gangs and the rest of the non-gang community, thereby creating horizontal divisions that have aggravated the dynamics of fear and violence that have characterized Salvadoran society during the last decades. The distinction is important given that gangs represent a specific sector of the popu-

lation that, for different reasons, has found in its group identity an element that differentiates it from the rest of society. At the same time, from a perspective of Peacebuilding, gangs gave proof of a willingness to change, even though they are part of the problem of violence in the country, and become thereby part of the solution to the problem.

The Interpeace Track 6 focus therefore identified opportunities to shorten the distances that separate the actors at each social level and contribute through participation and dialogue to generate synergies to reduce violence in the country.

Government and civil society: bridging the gap between Tracks 1 and 2

One of the effects of decades of violence in El Salvador was the estrangement among social actors. In this sense, the truce, even though it brought down the incidence of homicides in the country, did not lower the level of political confrontation that it caused when it was announced.

In this context, one of the fundamental aspects of Interpeace’s work in the country aims to foster various processes which will close the gaps that separate estranged actors by building bridges of dialogue and communication to create synergies and provide legitimacy for the violence reduction process. For this reason, one of Interpeace’s strategic objectives was support of initiatives that proposed dialogues at a national level to address the issue of violence reduction.

Regardless of the importance of dialogue as a means of shortening the distance and lowering the confrontation among political and social actors on the issue of gangs, the different proposals for dialogue that have been put forward in El Salvador have been constrained fundamentally due to the perception by various actors of a lack of legitimacy and clarity regarding the objectives of those who convene. In addition, some proposals for dialogue lost support when they were perceived as part of the electoral campaign of one or another political party.

For Interpeace, the strategic character of a dialogue in the Salva-

doran context assumes that the participation of the government and the political elite is based on a clear definition of the importance of listening to the voices of social actors – in this case the gangs – who can make a contribution to violence reduction in the country and who require conditions of a structural nature such as access to employment, education, and productive opportunities, all of which involve a wider social effort that includes other key sectors such as private business and civil society.

However, the strategic character of dialogue is also subject to another central element of Interpeace’s perspective on Peacebuilding: empowering local actors. This means that a process of dialogue is sustainable and will generate expected results in terms of strengthening confidence among actors, if the very same actors who identify the need for dialogue demonstrate the necessary will to carry through with it.

During the years 2013-2014, political conditions in El Salvador have not been conducive to foster a process of dialogue at a national scale. Even though some ac-

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tors accept the importance of including the gangs in the dialogue, there is also an implied risk due to the lack of clarity by the government, the actions of the media which is adverse, the existence of laws that restrict direct work with gangs, and State institutions that openly oppose any work that involves the gangs.

This has caused repercussions in civil society and the private sector, with some exceptions, and has limited their participation in the process of violence reduction; this also reflects an estrangement between these two sectors and the government that has resulted in low levels of mutual trust.



The strategy and outlook of Interpeace recognizes that the processes of social change are not linear and require an understanding of the social and political context in order to identify the adequate opportunities and moments to encourage the processes. After recognizing that necessary conditions do not exist at this moment for a dialogue, Interpeace implemented a series of discussions to lay the political groundwork by bringing together different sectors of society to hear their perspective on the problems of insecurity

and violence in the country and the solutions that the sectors consider to be the most adequate.

This is the first step in a process that must still overcome different stages but that has a strategic objective, namely to find the mechanisms that will bring together actors who have been separated until now.

Civil society and the private sector: bridging the gap between Tracks 2 and 3

Violence reduction in El Salvador requires comprehensive actions that address both the immediate causes of the phenomenon of the gangs as well as the causes of a structural character that permeate society. In this sense, Interpeace's approach considers that the participation of key actors of the so-

cioeconomic dimension of society is fundamental, such as the private sector and the rest of civil society. That is why Interpeace's work is focused on the relation between these sectors (Track 2) and between these and the rest of society, specifically the gangs (Track 3).

In this manner and with the aim in mind to facilitate the participation of the Salvadoran private sector in the violence reduction process, Interpeace has supported the institutional strengthening of the "Fundación Humanitaria" (Humanitarian Foundation), which was set up in 2013 to bring together representative individuals from the private sector and thereby provide joint support for productive initiatives that look to the rehabilitation and reinsertion of populations linked to gangs. At the same time, the participation of the private sector, as a generator of productive and job-related opportunities for the population at large, is fundamental to reverse the precarious conditions that define the social and economic context in which gangs find their reason for being. At this level, Interpeace seeks to close the gap that violence created between the private sector (Track 2) and the community, in-

cluding the gangs (Track 3), which translates into the exclusion of large social groups from the job market thereby leading some sectors of society to find means to generate income in the illegal economy.

Support for the Humanitarian Foundation also aims to strengthen the interaction between the private sector and the rest of Salvadoran civil society with a view in mind to generate synergies that result in comprehensive actions in support of the violence reduction process. In this sense, Interpeace has supported efforts by the Pastoral Initiative for Life and Peace (Iniciativa Pastoral por la Vida y la Paz), which was created by representatives of evangelical and catholic churches to promote a broad-based participation of civil society in support of the violence reduction process. This includes the participation of the Humanitarian Foundation as part of the effort to bring together the private sector and civil society in general.

Even though both the process of institutional strengthening of the Humanitarian Foundation and support for the Pastoral Initiative for Life and Peace have been part of the strategy implemented by Inter-

peace to contribute to the violence reduction process in El Salvador, different factors have limited a more active participation by the private sector, on the one hand, and increased that of the Pastoral Initiative for Life and Peace, on the other. High levels of mistrust still persist among the actors of civil society and between these and the government authorities. From the perspective of Interpeace, this situation represents one of the challenges that the violence reduction process must overcome.

Municipality, community, and gangs: bridging the gap between Tracks 2 and 3

Interpeace's strategy has also identified the need to assist in a number of initiatives that bring together local authorities (Track 2), the gangs, and the community (Track 3). Work at these two levels has two fundamental implications. In the first place, it seeks to strengthen the interaction between municipal authorities and the rest of society. Municipal authorities can make an important contribution to the processes of social change in view of the fact

«Violence reduction in El Salvador requires comprehensive actions that address both the immediate causes of the phenomenon of the gangs as well as the causes of a structural character that permeate society»

that they are placed closer to the immediate needs of the people and can, with greater diligence, establish bridges of communication and cooperation with active social groups in the municipality.

In the second place, Interpeace considers that the restitution of the social fabric and confidence-building between gangs and the community is basic for Peacebuilding. This means that at the horizontal level in Track 3 (community) there was a need to develop mechanisms that would allow for communication and cooperation between the community and the willingness to change as expressed by the gangs.

Subsequently, Interpeace’s strategy focused on two aspects. On the one hand, support for the creation and operation of a network of community facilitators within the framework of the violence reduction process, and on the other, support for the work undertaken in the eleven municipalities declared free of violence.

The objective of the network of community facilitators is to contribute to the prevention and reduction of violence by mediating and facilitating in the resolution of conflicts between gangs and between these and the community. The network is made up of a group of young people committed to the violence reduction process. At a horizontal level, the network has served as a bridge to bring the gangs closer to the community. Members of the network began to participate in communal activities through the various forms of social organization that exist in the communities, among them committees, associations, and sports groups. This allowed for the members of the gangs to express their willingness to change by cooperating in community activities such as cleaning up a park, painting walls, and participating in social

and recreational activities. The principal effect of this was to provoke a change in perception about the attitudes of the gangs in the community in addition to providing legitimacy to the changes that made possible an improvement in community living.

In 2013, the violence reduction process was applied in the territories where the gangs interact daily with the community. Under this initiative, the authorities in eleven municipalities that had declared themselves “free of violence” publicly recognized their commitment to contribute to the pacification efforts launched by the gangs and to seek ways in which to support educational, economic, and social activities that would strengthen the change in attitude expressed by the gangs in their territories.

In El Salvador, municipal authority is autonomous and mayors are duly elected. Due to the excessive centralization of the State in El Salvador, municipal authorities have always maintained much closer links with people in their jurisdiction than the national government. For this reason, the commitment of the eleven municipalities “free of violence” repre-

sented a step forwards in the strengthening of the violence reduction process insofar as they laid the foundation of one the pillars of the Interpeace approach to Peacebuilding: empowering local actors of the process of social change, which leads in turn to a process that is participatory and transparent because of the involvement of society.

During the first phase of this process, the then ministerial authorities offered to support the mayors who expressed their commitment to the violence reduction process. However, due to the frequent changes of heart at the national executive level regarding the process, the support expected by the mayors never arrived. The continuity of the process then depended on the willingness of the mayors to devise creative means to support it.

From Interpeace’s perspective, support for the various initiatives to strengthen the communication and coordination links among the mayors of the eleven municipalities “free of violence” means strengthening the cohesion of local actors, which in turn must be complemented by an improved interaction with civil society and

the private sector, which is one the challenges of the process.

The strengthening of the collaborative relationship between the municipal authorities (Track 2) and the community including the gangs (Track 3) has generated positive results that, albeit modest, demonstrate the possibility of transforming the fragile social interactions at the communal level. In some municipalities one can observe how gang members have had the opportunity to demonstrate their willingness to change by engaging in productive activities that allow for job-related and social rehabilitation and reinsertion. This leads to a better perception about the gangs from community members and, at the same time, translates into improved legitimacy and confidence by the community towards the local authorities.

All this is possible thanks to the interactions among the different levels of society that enable actors to bridge a gap which, in other contexts, would not have allowed them to start a process for the establishment of collaborative relations based on trust. However, these interactions are still fragile due, fundamentally, to a scarcity

«Support for the Humanitarian Foundation also aims to strengthen the interaction between the private sector and the rest of Salvadoran civil society with a view in mind to generate synergies that result in comprehensive actions in support of the violence reduction process»

of financial resources in the municipalities, on the one hand, and to political mistrust and the restrictions of anti-gang legislation that limit the actors’ willingness to participate more fully in the violence reduction process, on the other.

In recognition of the importance to overcome these limitations and continue the process of strengthening interactions and cooperation among the various levels of society, Interpeace has begun a process to support the eleven municipali-



ties “free of violence” by means of the project “Comprehensive initiatives for the prevention of violence in the municipalities free of violence in El Salvador” which aims to strengthen the capacities of local actors around issues of Peacebuilding and conflict transformation. At the same time, Interpeace seeks to provide technical support to local governments for the creation of job opportunities and entrepreneurship for young people at high social risk. Finally, the project looks to contribute to increasing the capacities of local

authorities by improving the coordination among the eleven municipalities based on participatory processes that are part of the violence reduction process.

Concluding remarks

The social change associated with violence reduction in El Salvador has demonstrated the need to integrate the various social levels through a widely-based participation of all actors relevant to the problem of violence, including the gangs. The willingness to

transform expressed by the gangs is just the beginning of a long process that, in order to remain sustainable, requires the involvement of all of society. As outlined in Interpeace’s focus, this efforts must include a strengthening of the horizontal collaborative links among the three levels of society (Tracks 1, 2, and 3) in order to strengthen the vertical interactions among them and thereby achieve the ideal integration resulting in Track 6 (Track 1 + Track 2 + Track 3 = Track 6).

This hope involves a number of challenges:

At a horizontal level of Track 1, Peacebuilding requires from the State a greater degree of clarity regarding its role in the face of the necessary paradigm change when the voice of the gangs is included in the violence reduction process. Along similar lines, the participation of the international community requires an improved level of comprehension of the complexities involved in the inclusion of illegal actors in the processes of violence prevention and reduction in contexts where the illegality of those actors can only be explained in terms of the deep social roots of the phenomena of violence and criminality. This also requires better coordination such that the activities supported by international aid agencies are properly integrated in the various levels of prevention in order to achieve the greatest impact.

At the level of Track 2, a greater opening and support for civil society is required in the face of the challenge represented by the involvement of illegal actors, in this case the gangs, in processes of violence reduction. This challenge reaffirms the need for a broadly-based and

honest dialogue which includes all relevant social actors involved in the problem of violence that will allow for concrete agreements and solutions regarding the role of gangs in the reduction of violence.

This also implies a need for an active participation by the private sector through the creation of job opportunities and productive ventures to overcome the socio-economic challenges involved in violence reduction. The private sector, civil society, and the government must face these challenges jointly, especially within a context of economic frailty which the country is experiencing.

At the level of Track 3, one of the principal challenges is the strengthening of the initiatives undertaken in the eleven municipalities free of violence in order ensure the sustainability of the violence reduction process in the country. While consolidating that which has been achieved up to this moment, it will be necessary for other municipalities to join the effort in order to extend the violence reduction process to additional local contexts.

For the gangs committed to the violence reduction process, the

challenge consists in recognizing the fact that even though the truce resulted in a ceasefire among them, they must now address the implications that the division of territories has for the communities and for society at large. This will be a first step in the formal process of reconciliation among the gangs and between them and the communities affected by violence.

This takes us to a key challenge involved in the sustainability of the violence reduction process: how the voice of the victims of violence will be taken into account. A response to the voice of the victims of violence among gangs implies defining paths for action along the three social levels we have described.

The perspective of Interpeace’s Track 6 assumes that once work has advanced in each of the three tracks it will then be possible to continue and intensify the efforts to bridge the gaps among different social levels and propose, in comprehensive terms, a country-wide agenda that includes solutions of a national character to overcome the immediate causes of violence as well as the structural deficits that underlie the social contexts in which violence propagates.



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, violence and destruction.

Interpeace, Strategic Position Paper.



«More opportunities, more inclusion, that is the main challenge»

Interview with the former Vice-minister for Peace of Costa Rica, with reference to the participatory processes facilitated by Interpeace that put together proposals for public policies to prevent youth-related violence in the seven Central American countries.

Por: Otto Argueta y Arnoldo Gálvez

Youth not only make up the majority of Central America's population but are also the segment most affected by the violence that runs rife in the region. Each year thousands of young people are victims of violence or are involved in violent acts for any number of reasons. The experience of Interpeace in Guatemala, which began to work immediately after the end of the civil war in that country, allowed it to establish that the problem of violence linked to youth in Central America should be approached from the comprehensive outlook that is central to the ideal of peace-building. As a consequence, Interpeace implemented a project called "Public Policies for the Prevention of Youth Violence" (Poljuve for its initials in Spanish), aimed at working with the governments and societies of the "northern triangle" of Central America – Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador – to prevent violence by promoting the integral development of young people. The project was implemented under the perspective used by

Interpeace, based on the IAP (investigation action participation) methodology, which allowed for wide-ranging and inclusive dialogue processes that ended with public policy proposals for the prevention of youth-related violence that were submitted to the authorities in the three countries. Following this experience, Interpeace set up the "Central American Youth Programme"

«Public policies are best devised when they are part of processes of citizen participation»

with the idea in mind of promoting change that would reduce the gaps that separate the interests of young people, the rest of society, and the State, within a context in which violence and its negative impacts on youth are a factor that undermines the wider processes of peace-building. Thus, the strategic objective of the Youth Programme has been to strengthen the capacity of young people, society in general, and the State to face jointly both violence and the negative impact that conflicts have on

young people in the Central American region.

In 2011 and 2012, Interpeace worked together with the General Secretariat of the Central American Integration System (SG-SICA), the Secretariat of the Social Integration of Central America (SISCA), and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA/El Salvador) in developing

proposals for public policies aimed at prevention in Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama. This initiative was undertaken as part of the project "Development of regional policies and initiatives in support of young people at social risk and in conflict with the law", which was funded by the Italian Cooperation Agency and, in the case of Costa Rica, by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

In the seven countries in which the Interpeace Youth Pro-

gramme opened up spaces for consultation and dialogue on the social prevention of violence, a markedly participatory methodology was employed in which the opinions of all key groups and sectors linked to the problem and its solutions were taken into account. In other words, the various proposals were the product of the participation of young people, representatives of organized civil society, and officials from State institutions, as well as representatives of the international community, academia, and experts and specialists in the field. More than 129 representatives of youth organizations in the region expressed their opinions and shared their experiences with regards to violence, as well as their proposals to prevent it. At the same time, the wide-ranging consultations and dialogues, together with the results from participatory investigations, took into account the perspective of both the State and civil society.

To get to know what this process meant for the region, and especially for Costa Rica, we talked to the former Minister

for Peace of Costa Rica, Max Loría, one of the individuals who participated with great enthusiasm in this process and whose contribution was a key input in devising the “Strategic Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence that affects Youth, Costa Rica 2012-2014”, a proposal that was adopted by the Vice-minister for Peace himself, as well as by the Vice-minister for Youth of Costa Rica.

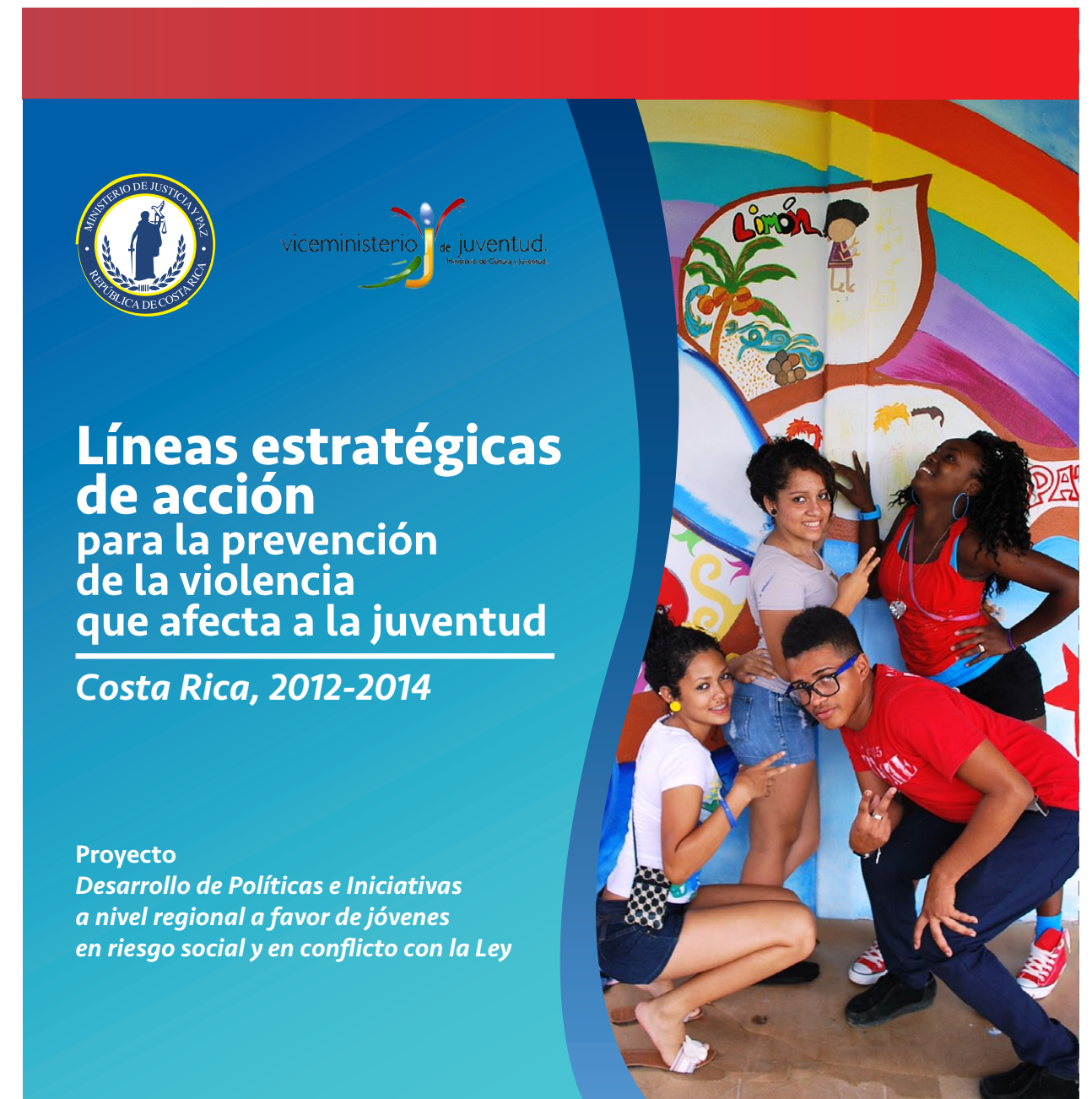
«The principal challenges we have to overcome to improve the conditions of our young people are education and work»

Max Loría Ramírez is a political scientist who graduated from the University of Costa Rica. He earned a post-graduate degree in security and defence policies at the National Defence University in Washington, D.C. He currently works as Director of the Project for Prevention of Violence and Security at the Foundation for Peace and Democracy (FUNPADEM). He has ample experience in fields related to citizen security, the prevention of violence, and the pro-

motion of social peace. More specifically, he has undertaken research on the prevention of violence with firearms, police training, and, more generally, public policies on security and the prevention of violence.

As part of his work, he has served as a well-regarded consultant to organizations such as the United Nations, the Arias Foundation for Peace,

the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the Foundation for Society and Gender. He has been assigned important responsibilities in public office in areas such as police training and prevention of armed violence. He held the post of Vice-minister of Justice and Peace in the Chinchilla Miranda administration, where he developed the National Plan for the Prevention of Violence and the Promotion of Social Peace, that focused on the development of opportunities for



young people and furthering the Culture of Peace.

Why was it important for the Vice-ministry of Peace, which you presided over, to become involved in a participatory process such as

the one that was facilitated by Interpeace?

Because public policies are best devised when they are part of processes of citizen participation. Specifically, what we did for Interpeace led to the participation of many groups

of organized young people, of related institutions, and civil society in general.

In what context was the “Strategic Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence which affects Youth” pre-

sented? In other words, why did Costa Rica need this document?

In Costa Rica the levels of juvenile violence have been on the rise. We don't have "maras" but we do have gangs. Young people are the principal perpetrators and victims of violence. Intervention by concerned institutions was not properly coordinated and we needed to articulate their operation. Most public policies were devised without the participation of the very young people they were aimed at. All of these problems began to be solved on the basis of the document that was produced.

How is the situation of youth in Central America perceived in Costa Rica and what problems affect them mainly?

We must never forget that young people are our greatest pride. A vast majority are good-willed individuals who are studying or working to raise a family. Undoubtedly, there is a problem of juvenile violence that affects a small minority but we should face

in a democratic manner, albeit with determination.

What are the challenges in both Costa Rica as well as at a regional level involved in overcoming the problems which young people face?

Undoubtedly, we must provide more opportunities, more inclusion. The principal challenges we have to overcome to improve the conditions of our young people are education and work. The key is to really be able to involve youth in the development of our societies. Have there been previous experiences of participatory processes for devising public policies? In this context, what was the value added for these experiences prior to the process facilitated by Interpeace? In Costa Rica there have been prior experiences. For example, the formulation of the State's policy on Citizen Security and Social Peace (POL-SEPAZ) was achieved under participatory methodology. The process with Interpeace was characterized especially by the participation of youth organizations in the country.

From the Vice-ministry of Peace, how did you relate to similar experiences – those widely participatory processes for devising proposals for public policies for the prevention of youth-related violence – that were taking place in Nicaragua, Belize, and Panama?

We got to know the final documents and we participated in regional activities where we were informed about the progress in their preparation.

How do you perceive, from the perspective of a Costa Rican, the importance of regional institutions in dealing with violence-related issues, justice, and peace in the region?

Regional institutions are very important to address problems that have a same characteristic. Organized crime, for example, cannot be confronted if not jointly by all the countries in the region, and even outside of it. SICA has a good amount of space in which to improve in this regard, by especially encouraging much more forcefully



those policies that aim to prevent violence.

How does a society like that of Costa Rica identify the need to have an institution at the executive level that is involved in issues related to peace?

The history of Costa Rica has always been linked to peace, beginning with the organization of the State and a peaceful independence movement, followed by the abolition of the death penalty, the abolition of the army, the declaration of perpetual neutrality in the face of conflicts among other countries, a Nobel

Peace Prize and support for the World Treaty against the Arms Trade, and even the inclusion of peace as a human right in our legislation.

The Vice-ministry for Peace is just a step along this road that our country has been traveling during all of its history. The issue is so important that we decided to set up an institution dedicated to non-violence and the promotion of the most noble of all objectives: peace.

In your opinion, which have been the main contributions of that institution

that might serve as reference points for the construction of peace in the region?

Devising a National Plan for the Prevention of Violence and the Promotion of Social Peace, with clearly stated components against juvenile violence, military violence, in support of a culture of peace.

Trust is the glue that holds relationships, societies, and economies together. Trust is the first thing that breaks down during violent conflict, and often the last one to be repaired once violence stopped. Yet, it cannot be imposed, imported or bought. Trust is built incrementally through collective engagement and commitment to a common vision.



Photo credit: Sandra Sebastián for Interpeace