



Lake Ilopango  
Photo: Interpeace

# Ilopango, One Year Later

## *Community, Gangs and Violence Reduction*

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## *Ilopango, One Year Later: Community, Gangs and Violence Reduction.*

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Con el apoyo de



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

El Proyecto de apoyo a la reducción de la violencia en El Salvador cuenta con el apoyo financiero de



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**La Selva is one of the largest communities in Ilopango and has been among the areas most affected by gang conflicts and violence.**

Photo: Interpeace

*In March 2012 the two main gangs operating in El Salvador agreed to a truce. They would stop the violence that afflicted the country. The town of Ilopango, was one of the most affected by theft, extortion and homicides. The peak of this violence, in Ilopango was reached in 2011 with 117 murders were committed, in a population of 103.862 inhabitants (this is the equivalent of 113 murders per 100 thousand inhabitants, the world average is 6.9 according to the Global Report murders of United Nations). The immediate result of the truce was the reduction of homicides across the country, and was an opportunity for a wider violence reduction process. In Ilopango, the homicide rate in 2013 dropped to 45 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, which represents a total of 47 homicides for the year. Accordingly, in January 22, 2013 Ilo-*



## Ilopango, One Year Later

### *Community, Gangs and Violence Reduction*

*pango was declared a “violence free town”, which makes it the first city to formally transform due to the momentum started by the March 2012 gang truce. This marked the beginning of a process where both municipal and community institutions, including gangs began to interact in order to find solution to the problem of violence and confrontation. A year into this process, we can see the crucial role that local power (understood as the set of institutions connected with municipal affairs) has played in favor of sustainability. However, it is the gradual transformation of the relationship between community and gangs that has begun to make a fundamental difference when compared to the past twenty years, where a bitter distrust prevailed, coupled with confrontation, repression, stigma, intolerance and violence.*



## “If this is where it all started, this is where it ought to end”

Until a year ago, Ilopango has been one of the municipalities with the highest level of criminal violence in the country. The two main gangs were engaged in a violent struggle for territorial control. Consequently, the town had been divided between the two.

In addition to the excessive use of violence, territorial control also involved extortion, theft and other forms of intimidation and led communities to drastically alter their patterns of life. This included the use of public space, the relationship with the younger generation (whether young people are gang members or not) and high levels of distrust in interpersonal relationships in general. The community was caught in the crossfire and fear forced the citizens to stay at home.

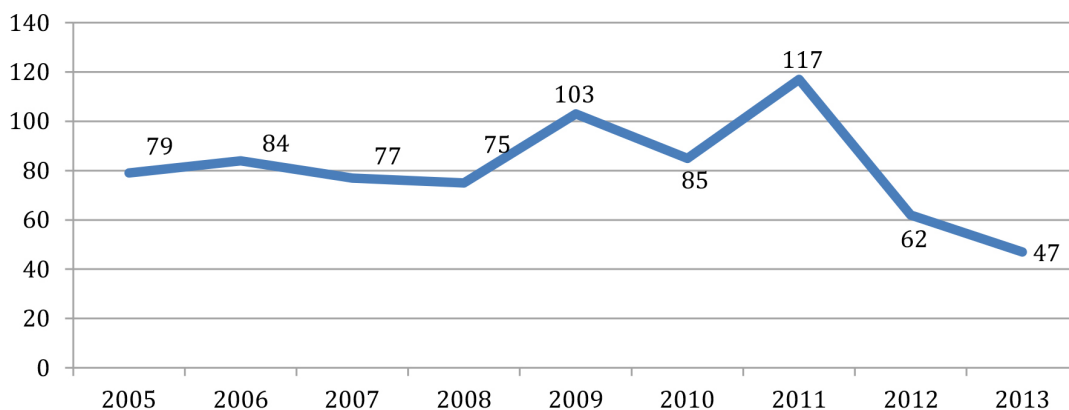
One of the young gang members, who is now a facilitator of the peace process in Ilopango, remembers that it was the first municipality divided by the turf war that existed between the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs. “The first bullet of the gang war was fired here,” he says.

Ilopango was a place that met the conditions necessary for gangs to expand and consolidate their power. “It is for this reason,” the facilitator says, that “if this is where it all started, this is where it ought to end.”

In March 2012, a truce was agreed between the two gangs and established the foundations for broader violence-reduction processes. However, these processes could only be viable if they were implemented in the municipalities.

Consequently, on 22 January, 2013, Ilopango was declared ‘a town free from violence’ by a local covenant that led to a broad process of dialogue that gradually was replicated in ten other municipalities.

### Homicide rates in Ilopango



Source: Vice-Ministry of Security and Justice

## Local power and violence reduction

For the mayor of Ilopango, Salvador Ruano, the central government's invitation to be part of the truce process was essential for the municipality to become associated with it. This new drive was a valuable opportunity for the municipality to approach members from both gangs and build trust by promoting specific projects that help young people take steps towards their reintegration into the community.

The aim was to give an opportunity to young people for whom gang life had filled the vacuum that society had created for them over the past decades. The work of the mediators of the truce, together with the willingness of the mayor to engage in the truce process, became a unique opportunity to promote a broader process to reduce violence. According to mayor Ruano the spirit of this opportunity prevails even over the partisan affiliations of each of the mayors of the eleven municipalities that have been declared free from violence.

According to one of the young gang members who is a facilitator in the process today, the mayor of Ilopango has been a key figure, as he also comes from the region and is aware of the needs and realities of the municipality. In addition, the local government is the state authority that is closest to gang members. The mayor plays an essential role as a mediator between the central government and the interests of the municipality. He also mediates the conflicts that arise every day, and channels resources to young gang members who are looking for an opportunity to prove to the community their desire to change.



Salvador Ruano, mayor of Ilopango

Photo: Interpeace

Despite the mayor's political support for the truce process, the instability of the national political context limits his ability to provide assistance. High turnover rates in the security apparatus of the country have affected youth in general as well as the specific projects that have been promoted by the municipality, and even the mayor. In addition, the Law to Forbid Gangs, and Criminal Groups, Associations and Organizations passed in 2010 is presenting an obstacle to policies and activities that provide alternatives to the government's "iron fist" policies.

Despite that, the drop in homicide rates and the change of attitude in young gang members have shown that the process yields visible results that are appreciated by community and gang members alike.

## “More than a truce between gangs, it is a truce with the community”

One of the main improvements identified by the community is the possibility to go out into the street without the fear of getting trapped in the

crossfire, mugged or intimidated by gang members.

La Selva is one of the largest communities in Ilopango and has been among the areas most affected by gang conflicts and violence. The community and its inhabitants had such a bad reputation that it was hard for ordinary citizens to find jobs merely because of the fact that they lived in La Selva. Stigmatization and marginalization, not just of gang members, was widespread.

**«The drop in homicide rates and the change of attitude in young gang members have shown that the process yields visible results»**

Representatives of the La Selva Community Board state that this first year of peacebuilding has been positive. The change of attitude in young people is demonstrated by their interest in training workshops or farm work. The poultry farm called 'Progress for Peace' is an initiative by the city hall that seeks to engage young gang members in productive activities and enable them to be part of a community organization. In view of this, the community supports the efforts of young people and has started to believe in them.

The representatives of La Selva Board remember that the community was separated from its youth in the past, despite the fact that they lived together and saw them grow up. "The community pointed their finger at them and young people then saw the community as their enemy," explains one of the board members. Board members say the first step towards change was taken by the young gang members themselves. They started a dialogue with

the community. They shared their problems and needs and explained the reasons why they became gang members. As a result of this dialogue, extortions and intimidation disappeared, as did the shootings and the confrontations.

A young member of MS 13, who today facilitates the process, says that displaying they had changed was essential for the gang members. One young gang member was to clean schools and neighboring streets of graffiti. To do so he had to promise to stop recruiting new members in schools and the community in general. Before the truce process started, gang members charged \$0.50 per student to be able to go to school safely and spend the day in the classroom. But today this form of extortion has stopped in Ilopango and gang members are even encouraging each other to enroll in school. Gangs sponsor those who do not have money to study. They have also strengthened communication ties with teachers. Teachers can inform gang leaders if their members are misbehaving in class. Gangs now, allow free passage of students attending school through the territory. Teachers, who formerly felt intimidated by gangs, have been gradually building relationships with them.

Opening up channels of communication and the building of trust have brought gang members and the Ilopango community closer together. In La Selva, a community in the Ilopango municipality, over 50% of families have some connection with gangs, and the divide between gang members and the community, destroyed family and community bonds. Today, young members of gangs participate in community meetings, people talk to them and support them, despite the persecution and police repression that still persists. La Selva Board members now understand and respect young people's decisions to be gang members. What is



The trade sector at the lake has been one of the top beneficiaries of the peacebuilding process.

Photo: Interpeace

essential to them is the change of attitude towards the community. Young people also receive support by religious leaders and other organizations in the community. It is for these reasons that in La Selva people see the truce as a truce between the community and the gangs and not just a truce between the two major gangs.

This new context has reinforced the links between the community and gang members, even in the face of state repression. For the Board of Directors of La Selva, the community was the first victim of the “iron fisted” approach when police presence became permanent. Although police presence has diminished, repression continues. According to the community, this repression is excessive and unjustified since young gang members have changed. It is now necessary to promote rapprochement with them and to provide them with opportunities.

The experience in La Selva has extended to other communities in the municipality. The Board of Directors of La Selva opened up opportunities for

youth. They involve them in community discussions and sports activities, and support their efforts in the poultry farm project. While poverty is common to all communities in the Ilopango municipality it is the main problem. The improved relationship with gangs led this community to encourage the boards of other communities to also promote a dialogue with gang members. The message has been to promote dialogue, build trust and discover ways in which gang members can contribute to matters of community interest (for example, in celebrations, through money contributions for funerals, sports activities and security).

## The lake, tourism and violence reduction

The Ilopango Lake is a very valuable natural resource for the municipality. However trade, one of the most important sources of income for the citizens of the communities surrounding the lake, has



faced many obstacles. On the one hand, various natural disasters have affected the infrastructure in the region. On the other hand, representatives of the commercial sector remember that murders, extortion, robberies and intimidation created fear and anguish. This had a negative impact not only on community life but on tourism as well.

### ***«Gang members are even encouraging each other to enroll in school»***

The trade sector at the lake has been one of the top beneficiaries of the peacebuilding process. This was made evident by the attempts of young people to join commercial life in the area by selling different seasonal products such as grapes, cheese and apples. In addition, young people help the community through other services such as cleaning or surveillance to prevent theft and other crimes.

Despite the fact that doubts and mistrust prevail on the part of some persons that trade in the area, this has not translated into lack of support for the process. In December 2013, the merchants of the area organized a lunch event for gang members and approximately 90 young people participated. The objective of the event was to show appreciation for the change in young people's attitudes and at the same time encourage them to continue with the process they have started which is of such great benefit to the community.

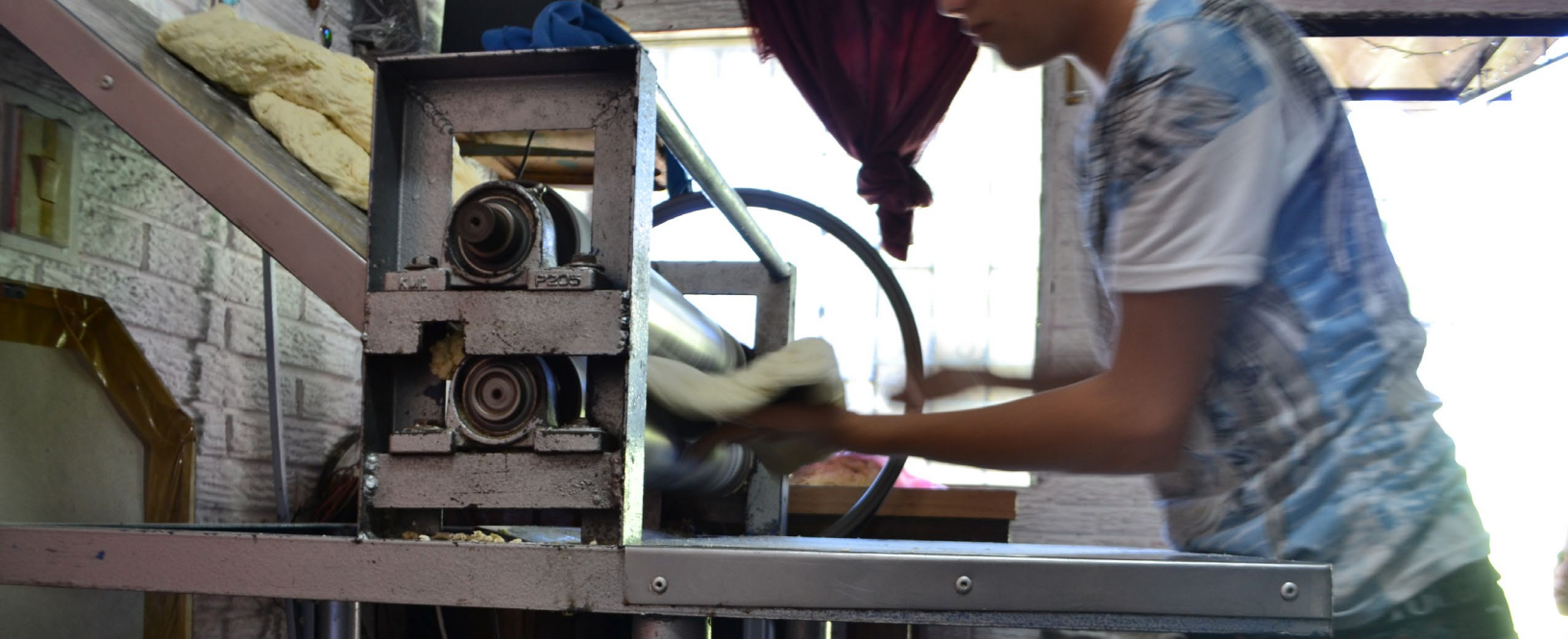
For the community of Lake Ilopango, the peacebuilding process has been a process of learning about the causes that led to the change in gang members. Representatives of the trade sector recognize that abandoned children often look for protection and a sense of family in gangs. Like-

wise, it has been necessary to accept the fact that these youth, who were distanced from community life, are members of their very own families. For that reason, the Board of Directors of the trade sector insists on opening up channels of communication between young people and the adults who still have doubts about the process.

## **Public work, the farm and the bakery**

Two of the main projects promoted as part of the peacebuilding process, are the poultry farm called 'Progress for Peace' and a bakery which, just like the farm, is an opportunity for young gang members to become reintegrated into society through productive activities. These projects were designed, implemented and led by members of the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs and were supported by the municipality of Ilopango. In addition to offering work opportunities for young people, both projects became a mechanism to build mutual trust between gang members and the community.

While the economic benefits of those initiatives have been very small, representatives of the communities agree that buying products made by these young persons is a gesture of support and a display of mutual trust. However, it is clear that trust and a change in attitude will not be enough if work opportunities are not created for a large number of young persons associated with gangs. Young gang members also expect to benefit from the peacebuilding process and want to have alternatives to their former way of creating income, that is, through extortion, theft and other criminal activities.



Seeing young gang members learn how to bake bread and sell it has been proof of their commitment.

Photo: Interpeace

Both the representatives of the Board of La Selva as well as the representatives of the trade sector of Lake Ilopango recognize that the desire of young persons to promote the poultry farm is valuable. On the one hand, young people lack sufficient resources, and on the other hand, it was necessary to overcome the mistrust created by the stigma associated with gangs, in addition to police harassment and the indifference of other social sectors. For communities, the projects persist only as a result of the commitment of the young people since support has diminished over the last few months.

***«The bakery has the potential to transform how the community perceives the gangs»***

The bakery located in the Barrio 18 gang territory in Ilopango has been relocated three times due to the destruction resulting from police harassment. Seeing young gang members learn how to bake bread and sell it has been proof of their commitment and has displayed to the community that their efforts to transform their relationship with society are genuine. While the project is small and faces huge needs, the scarce economic benefits that it produces are distributed among the young persons involved in it, which contributes to their persistence and motivation. The bakery has the potential to transform how the community perceives the gangs.

In addition to the projects listed above, the municipality of Ilopango gives gang members an employment opportunity as road workers. One of those streets is in Las Cabañas, a territory where

MS-13 dominates, and the other street is in Colonia Trinidad, a Barrio 18 territory. Both street repair projects have given young gang members the opportunity to find temporary employment.

This type of project shows that violence reduction is a process that requires the participation of every stakeholder in the community. On the one hand, the municipality is an essential player that has resources to promote initiatives involving young gang members and at the same time meet the specific needs of the community. On the other hand, the change of attitude on the part of gangs has shown that it can strengthen trust that is needed for these projects to be feasible. Finally, the community is not only receptive to efforts by the young people, but also provides active support to their efforts and creates opportunities for them to become a part of community life to reduce the barriers that have been built up by decades of confrontation and violence.

## The challenges

One of the main challenges identified by communities, local authorities and gang members during the first year of work has been to reduce the stigma that young people are facing. For one of the young gang members who facilitate the process, discrimination is “like having been born with a taint” that blocks any attempt for change in their attitude and yearning for social and economic improvement. The persons interviewed in the community recognize that stigma and discrimination is a problem for all the persons in the communities who have been affected by the violent past of the gangs. Discrimination becomes visible when, for example, work is denied to persons for the mere fact that they come from these communities.



They have said that even the social security refuses to provide them services in those communities.

This situation becomes worse due to the misinformation created by the media in the country. The media does not report the current changes that are happening in the violence free municipalities and often misinterprets the data it receives. This way they are creating negative perceptions about the truce process and the attitudes of young gang members. One of the challenges faced by the peacebuilding process is to provide the media with high-quality information.

While trust between the community and gangs has improved substantially during the first year of the peacebuilding process, it is still necessary to overcome the territorial differences that persist among the groups. One of the goals is to see the two gangs working together as it would further strengthen the trust and peace. Communities need to overcome the conflicts and results of violence that are the result of the gang's desire for territorial control.

Finally, there is a need to make resources available so that income-generating activities for young people can be initiated. In addition police harass-

ment against youth needs to end. According to the interviewees, police agents abuse young persons and community members when they try to protect themselves from attacks and from excessive repression. There are many stories that tell of the sense of helplessness and anguish suffered by mothers and relatives when they try to defend youth from police abuse. In the opinion of many people, police agents lack the necessary skills to approach the community. Some of the interviewees remember that during the war, in the 80s, civilians were respected, but today they aren't respected by the police.

One year is not a lot of time when compared to decades of intolerance and repression of young people. Gangs, communities and local authorities have started a process in Ilopango that requires various forms of support and the participation of every social actor. Like Ilopango, other municipalities have joined this effort and also present their own changes and challenges. The Ilopango example shows us that the efforts of the community, the gangs and the local authorities bear fruit. It is therefore necessary for this effort to become known and to be replicated in other regions. This contribution will be essential to the sustainability of violence reduction processes.



**The municipality of Ilopango gives gang members an employment opportunity as road workers.**

Foto: Interpeace