



## Santa Tecla: A fertile ground to reduce violence

*In Santa Tecla, prevention efforts backed by the municipality, the community, and international aid agencies created a fertile ground upon which the truce between gangs and the reduction in homicides have improved the relation between gangs, the community, the police, and the municipality.*

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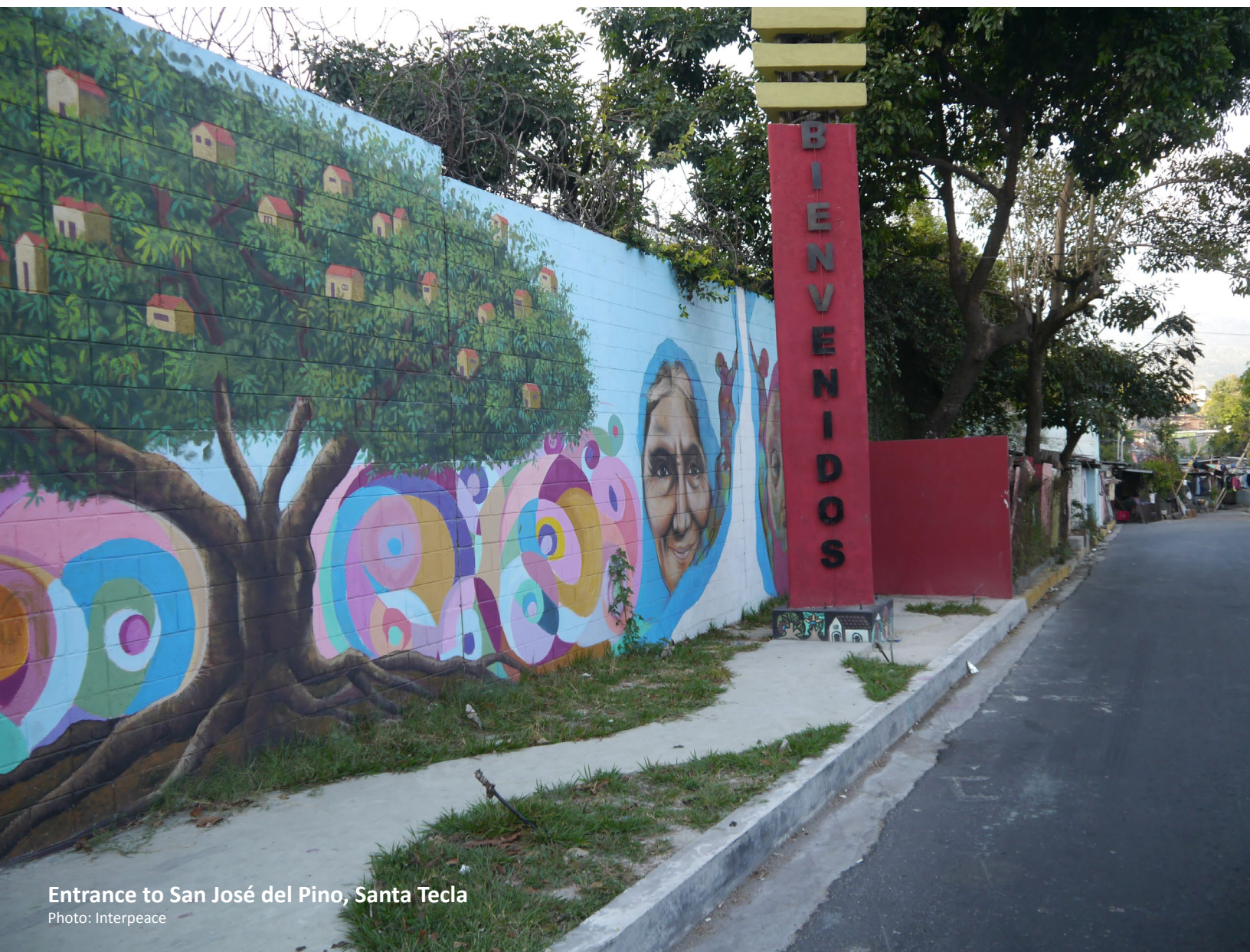


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Entrance to San José del Pino, Santa Tecla

Photo: Interpeace



*With the passage of time, the nature of violence in El Salvador has been influenced by the characteristics of each area of the country and, thus, affects the relationships among young people, the communities, and the local authorities in different forms. In similar terms, the violence reduction process that began in March 2012 has had to adapt to the specific needs and social and economic contexts of each of the municipalities in which the process has been implemented.*

*In Santa Tecla, this new development arrived at the moment when previous efforts were beginning to bear fruit, especially with regards to the progressive decline in homicides. From a total of 92 homicides in 2005 (equivalent to a homicide rate of 69.8 per 100,000 inhabitants), the efforts undertaken by the municipality helped to reduce the homicide rate in 2010 to 29 (equivalent to 22 per 100,000 inhabitants). However, the municipality of Santa Tecla was not immune to the dramatic increase in homicides that occurred during 2011 in the rest of the country. In that year, homicides in Santa Tecla totalled 55 (41.5 per 100,000 inhabitants), a number which, although significantly higher than previously, did not approach that reported in 2005.*

*As opposed to other municipalities, after years of violent conflict, in Santa Tecla the MS gang was able to gain control over its territory from other gangs. This violent dispute*



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*thereby ceased to be one the factors that influenced the increase in homicides in the municipality.*

*Within this context, the truce between gangs and the subsequent declaration of Santa Tecla as a municipality free of violence laid the basis for the continued decline in homicides. In 2013, total homicides were 17 (equivalent to 14 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants), the lowest rate reported since 2005.*

*In Santa Tecla, prevention efforts backed by the municipality, the community, and international aid agencies created a fertile ground upon which the truce between gangs and the reduction in homicides have improved the relation between gangs, the community, the police, and the municipality.<sup>1</sup>*

1. This document brings together a variety of opinions by key actors in the violence reduction process in Santa Tecla, that is, the municipal government, representatives of community organizations, and, of course, members of the MS gang. These opinions underline the principal transformations observed by them, the challenges, obstacles, and expectations surrounding the process.



Recovered park, Colonia San José del Pino, Santa Tecla  
Photo: Interpeace

## Territory, gangs, and violence

The municipality of Santa Tecla, in the department of La Libertad, is made up of 90 neighbourhoods [Translators note: “neighbourhoods” is used here as a synonym for formal housing projects.]<sup>1</sup>, 11 cantons, and 25 communities<sup>2</sup>, with a total population of 121,908 individuals, of which 89% live in urban settings (an estimate of current population is 160,000 people). Women surpass men by 10%. According to the 2007 census, unemployment in this municipality was 13%, a rate higher than that of the department itself (11.56%).

Santa Tecla witnessed the transformation of the gangs that occurred during the 1990s, when they went from groups of young people engaged in street fighting to open warfare and the subsequent control of the territory by one of them. As told by one of the facilitators of the process, a member of the gang that operates there and helped reduce the violence, “We replaced punches and stones with knives and machetes and ended up with firearms.” All of this resulted in an increase in criminal violence in the entire municipality.

With the passing of time and an increase in repression by the security forces, the gangs were sidelined and excluded from society, to the extent that relations with the community were determined by fear and violence. A facilitator in the violence reduction process and a member of the MS gang in Santa Tecla explained that the gangs began to consider society, and specifically the

1. Translators note: “neighbourhoods” is used here as a synonym for formal housing projects.

2. Translators note: “communities” refers in this case to informal settlements or slums

community, as something different and separate from the gang.

The defence of the neighbourhood, one of the pillars of gang identity, gradually acquired a double profile: on the one hand, the defence of territory in the face of aggression by other gangs and thereby preserving it as a shelter and source of income obtained by extortion; and on the other, to close off the community to incursions by the security forces. Both objectives were aided by the disordered layout of the streets and the long-term neglect of the communities and neighbourhoods by the authorities. According to one of the young facilitators, this kind of neighbourhood and community, with their narrow and concentric streets, the nocturnal darkness and overall abandonment in which they existed, provided the gang members with the means to come together and protect themselves. This individual told that one could see up to thirty or forty young people lined-up side by side sleeping in the narrow alleys of these communities while others stood guard to prevent any aggressive act. Some neighbourhoods and communities turned into shelters and centres of operation for the large groups of marginalized and persecuted youth.

After years of violent confrontation between the two dominant gangs in the country, in Santa Tecla the MS gang ended up controlling the territory, while the already precarious hold over these territories by the State was reduced to sporadic incursions by the security forces in the form of operations of repression and persecution.

Despite the territorial control exercised by only one gang, as was the case in other parts of El Salvador, Santa Tecla was one of the municipa-





lities highly affected by homicidal violence. In 2005, ninety-two homicides were reported, the equivalent of a rate 69.8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. However, in contrast to other municipalities where homicides tended to increase during the years 2005-2010, Santa Tecla reported a significant decline in total annual homicides. In 2006, a total of 63 homicides were recorded and in 2010 there were 29, equivalent to 22 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, the lowest rate reported that year for municipalities then declared free of violence.

After the drastic increase of homicides in the entire country in 2011, the truce agreed upon by the gangs in March 2012 brought about an immediate decline in homicides in the municipality. In that year 23 homicides were reported, a significant reduction in comparison to the previous year. Within this context, the inclusion of Santa Tecla in the list of “municipalities free of violence” helped to accentuate the new downward trend to such an

extent that in 2013 only 17 homicides were reported, the lowest annual average since 2005-2013.

## “We didn’t take over the neighbourhoods, the State abandoned them first”

The history of some of these communities and neighbourhoods in Santa Tecla shows that the gangs set down roots wherever the presence of the State was weak, if not absent. One of the facilitators interviewed explains that the gangs in the communities in Santa Tecla originated in precarious socio-economic contexts that lacked social services, infrastructure, and assistance that should be provided, at least minimally, by the national and local governments.

This situation predates the emergence of the gangs. The neighbourhood of San José del Pino, for example, was founded in 1970 on lands dona-

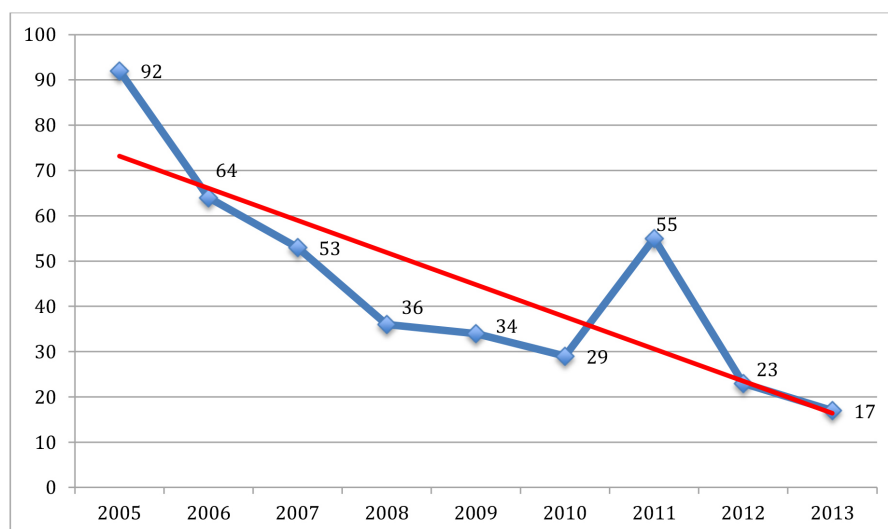
ted to the Catholic church by the owner of a coffee farm so that 520 dwellings could be built by the inhabitants themselves. The neighbourhood was conceived as an initial formal solution to the housing problem faced by low income people.

According to the members of the neighbourhood governing council, some of them residents since its origins, the first presence by the State involved installing cobblestones and streetlights on the main road leading into the neighbourhood, approximately fifteen years after its establishment. San José del Pino was made up of low income people since its inception, a situation which grew worse during the civil war, because the State carried out counterinsurgency operations in the entire country that resulted in both internal and external migratory flows. Some of those forced to migrate settled down in the outskirts of the neighbour-

hood, which gave birth to the community of San Rafael, separated from the neighbourhood of San José del Pino only by a footbridge. The community of San Rafael merged with the inhabitants of the neighbourhood as free space for their homes became scarcer, compounded by people arriving from other parts of the same municipality and of the country. The inhabitants of the community of San Rafael, as opposed to those of the San José del Pino neighbourhood, do not have title to the lands upon which their houses are built.

Although both the neighbourhood and the community lived through the transition from the violence produced by the civil war to that of the gangs, the links between them were minimal. According to the members of the governing bodies of both settlements, one of the differences that set them apart was the socio-economic levels of

Homicides in Santa Tecla, 2005-2013



Source: Data provided by the IML, DIGESTYC and the Vice-Ministry for Security and Justice.





San José del Pino, Santa Tecla

Photo: Interpeace

their inhabitants, which made it impossible to establish a collaborative relationship. While the neighbourhood of San José del Pino developed over time a minimal urban layout and basic infrastructure such as streets, parks, a community centre, and a school, among other improvements, the San Rafael community lacks all of them.

## “We were stigmatized before the gangs arrived”

Both the neighbourhood of San José del Pino and the community of San Rafael were strongly stigmatized as areas of high risk and criminal gang presence. This situation not only hastened the reduction of State-sponsored services but also increased repressive incursions by the security forces. In addition, the stigma of living in these two communities made it difficult for their inhabitants to get a job or to contract public or private services.

Both the facilitators involved in the process of violence reduction and the members of the governing councils of the neighbourhood and the community agreed that the stigma went back to times before the increase in violent gang activities. According to them, their condition as poor settlements was the origin of the stigma which later, during the civil war, only intensified because these became areas of intense guerrilla activity.

The end of the war did not translate into a significant improvement in the socio-economic and infrastructural conditions of San José del Pino and San Rafael. Instead, it coincided with the arrival of approximately six gangs. The MS gang arrived at the beginning of the 1990s and ended up controlling the entire municipality. The activities of the gangs and the increase in violence during the years 2003-2009 turned San José del Pino and San Rafael into what were considered the most dangerous areas of all Santa Tecla. For the security forces and the media, San José del Pino and San Rafael were a training school for



the gangs due the high concentration of MS gang members in the area.

San José del Pino and San Rafael are examples of how stigma contributed to reinforce marginality and abandonment of these settlements. The gangs, which developed in this context, quickly turned them into closed shelters into which only repressive police incursions represented the State's presence, a situation which, in turn, not only increased the stigma but also reinforced the encirclement of the gangs within the area, a vicious circle with negative consequences for all.

## Taking on the challenge: the municipality's efforts at prevention

The prevention and reduction of violence were a challenge taken up by the municipality of Santa Tecla since 2002. From that moment on, a series of preparatory steps were initiated that resulted in a policy of social harmony and citizen security in 2005. In 2008, an Interinstitutional Council for the Prevention of Violence was created, together with a Citizen Council for Local Development and dialogue committees for social harmony. According to an official of the Municipality of Santa Tecla, these initiatives laid the ground for bringing together the municipality and the communities, especially those that during decades had not experienced the presence of the local government. The municipality initiated activities in prevention for young people and the communities, and received, in 2009, assistance from the UNDP to begin entrepreneurial training programmes for young people.

Santa Tecla quickly gained recognition for the rehabilitation and creation of public spaces such as the El Carmen promenade, the Las Delicias stadium, and the Municipal Museum, as well as cultural venues and municipal parks. These actions were reinforced with the installation of surveillance video cameras in the public spaces that had been reclaimed. As well as apportioning 37% of its budget to these types of programmes, the Municipality of Santa Tecla has also received the support of international aid organizations and public-private initiatives.

All these efforts began to have an impact in the central areas of the municipality and, at the same time, laid the groundwork to face the bigger challenge: to reclaim areas that had been historically abandoned.

## The truce and the reduction of violence

In Santa Tecla, the truce and the declaration of the municipality as "free of violence" contributed to open up those areas which, like San José del Pino and San Rafael, had been abandoned for decades and had come under the control in their entirety of the gangs.

In 2011, the police made its presence felt in San José del Pino and San Rafael by setting up police offices. Subsequently, in 2012, a project known as Young Builders was implemented with the support of the UNDP and the Salvadoran Red Cross. The project was aimed at young people between the ages of 15 and 29; a total of 60 individuals were selected to participate. However, only 19 individuals completed the training courses in two



**Orchard Project, Colonia San José del Pino, Santa Tecla**  
Photo: Interpeace



fields: eight in vegetable nurseries (green and sweet bell peppers) and ten in a programme sponsored by Fovial for road maintenance. In addition, a project run by RTI-USAID worked on recovery of neighbourhood infrastructure. The selection of the public spaces to be improved was decided by the people themselves. This project was also supported by the UNDP, the mayor's office, FUNDASAL, and the Development Bank. Up to now, six public spaces have been recovered and turned into small parks with public lighting, paint, benches, and rubbish bins.

One of the disadvantages pointed out by the facilitators who were interviewed is that the ages of the participants in the projects left out a majority of the gang members. This led to other initiatives in which the remaining gang members were included.

After the mayor of Santa Tecla, Óscar Ortiz, declared the municipality to be “free of violence” on 24 January 2013, a series of employment reinsertion and rehabilitation initiatives were begun in support of young gang members who did not participate in the previous programmes. With the assistance received, the following were set up: a chicken farm, a bicycle rental service, a car wash, a store that sells basic grains, an upholstery shop, and a bell pepper nursery. In addition, a project to grow tilapia and another to build environmentally-friendly rubbish bins were established. The young people who participated in these activities called themselves “young builders for life and peace.”

Another of the benefits obtained as a result of the truce and the accompanying process to reduce violence in San José del Pino and San Rafael was the creation of new community development associations, the so-called ADESCOs. In 2013, both communities had an ADESCO for the first time in

15 years. While these organizations were being set up, the gang remained in control of the area. This situation, compounded by acts of violence against members of the ADESCO, had produced fear and estrangement among the people, all of which contributed to a meagre interest in setting up an organization with legal standing.

Within a context of productive activities, neighbourhood associations, and the willingness of the gangs to support the process, a space for dialogue was created in 2013 with the participation of representatives of the mayor's office and the national government, the “young builders for life and peace,” and representatives of the ADESCO as a mechanism to improve their relations and establish contacts with the private sector in the area to improve the streets, carry out health programmes in coordination with the Ministry of Health, and other types of activities and improvements of infrastructure.

Coinciding with the beginning of the truce among gangs and the process of reduction of violence, one homicide was reported in 2012, while in 2013 not one was reported. In addition, during these two years there was a reduction of 60% in cases of extortion reported to the authorities.

## Community policing in San José del Pino and San Rafael

The efforts that began in 2002 in Santa Tecla, the beneficial results obtained ten years later as a result of the truce, and the declaration of a municipality free of violence in 2013 have been the foundations upon which the community policing programme in San José del Pino and San Rafael have yielded fruits.





**Borderline between San José del Pino and San Rafael, Santa Tecla**  
Photo: Interpeace



The control exercised by one sole gang in the municipality made for a very aggressive defence of its territory. The entry by the police was not easy and was accompanied by violent incidents. Years before, two council people of the ADESCO had been murdered together with a police officer. This led to a forceful occupation of the neighbourhood and the community. Between 2010 and 2012, reactive actions described as clean-up operations were carried out, which involved an extremely high use of violence by the police force.

It was not until January 2012 that a community policing programme was set up both in the neighbourhood and the community. Initially a force of 23 police officers was involved in the programme, but this was reduced to 18 in 2013.

The community policing programme operates under a temporary scheme, as explained by the officer in charge, which covers an area of three square kilometres of the neighbourhood of San José del Pino and the San Rafael community with a population of approximately 3,000 inhabitants. At this moment, he explains, 18 officers patrol this territory. Officer Martínez also says that community policing began by identifying, together with the inhabitants, the risk factors in the area, among which the most evident were surface sewage waters, the uncontrolled proliferation of rubbish heaps, and the lack of street lighting and parks.

Through a series of joint initiatives with local inhabitants, the community police also strengthened collaborative ties with young members of the gangs, with whom a number of activities were carried out, including insecticide spraying,

park clean-ups, painting of walls, sports activities, and cultural events.

This model of community policing is also being carried out in the country in Matasano, the Comasagua, Santa Mónica, and La Sabana neighbourhoods and the municipality of Quezaltepeque, but its resources are limited because it is not part of the institutional organization of the Police.

## The challenges

While the challenges are many, in Santa Tecla there are many factors that have coincided positively to allow the violence reduction process to continue to bear fruit. The work initiated by the mayor's office demonstrated that the role of the municipal government in violence prevention, even during the war between gangs and the subsequent control exercised by one of them, laid the basis for a reduction in homicides. The truce and the inclusion of the municipality in the list of those free of violence helped to avoid a complete reversal of the gains achieved up to that moment in the face of the rise in homicides in 2011. In addition, an opportunity emerged to re-enter areas that had been historically abandoned and which continued to be side-lined by municipal initiatives.

The experience of Santa Tecla demonstrates that the sustainability of the violence reduction process requires an empowerment of local communities. This includes a willing commitment by the gangs, a strong commitment by the private sector in support of productive activities, the cooperation by the community, and the help of national and municipal governments.



**Fish farm initiative, San José del Pino, Santa Tecla.**

Photo: Interpeace

One of the outstanding factors in the Santa Tecla experience is the existence of a community policing programme that has demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of the involvement of the security forces in communal processes from a participatory perspective and not only by repressive measures. This was possible thanks to multiple factors, among them the process supported by the mayor's office and the characteristics of the gang phenomenon in the municipality that allowed for the implementation by the security forces of the philosophy of community policing.

Both the support of the municipal government and the continual operation of the community policing programme require their institutionalization in order to sustain the process. Santa Tecla demonstrates that reversing the consequences of decades of abandonment and violence is a matter of taking decisions and assuring continuity of efforts.

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Violence and crime is currently one of the main obstacles for social peacebuilding in societies that recently overcome large periods of internal armed conflicts. Besides from being the main driving factor for the lost of thousands of human lives, in the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) violent crimes also distorts the social fabric and the legitimacy of political institutions. In El Salvador, Interpeace supports the efforts of national actors in reducing violence and crime through the generation of knowledge and the dissemination of lessons learned about the process of violence reduction in the municipalities know as “free of violence”.