



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

By Arnoldo Gálvez and Otto Argueta\*

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

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

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

On the basis of this outlook, the OAS was the first international organization that recognized an opportunity to in-

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

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

expressed its commitment as guarantor of the social pacification process undertaken under the truce agreement between the gangs.

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

Adam Blackwell is a Canadian diplomat. In 1985, he joined the Canadian Foreign Service and held the posts of

Consul General in Mexico and New York, where he undertook a variety of assignments and carried out work in the field. Between 2002 and 2005 he served as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary in the Dominican Republic. From 2005 to 2006, he was Director-General of Strategy and Services in the Bilateral Relations Branch of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. In 2006, Ambassador Blackwell joined the Organization of American States in Washington D.C, and became the Assistant Secretary in the Secretariat for Finance and Administration. Soon after he moved on to become acting Secretary, in the Secretariat for External Relations. Shortly afterwards he was appointed Secretary of Foreign Relations.

In July 2010, he was appointed Multidimensional Security Secretary

of the OAS. In the course of the years, Ambassador Blackwell has headed and participated in various electoral assistance and monitoring missions of the OAS. Among the decorations and honours he has received is the Grand Cross with Silver Breast Star of the Order of Merit of Duarte, Sánchez and Mella,” the most important decoration awarded by the Head of State of the Dominican Republic. In 2000, he completed the programme of executive development at Queen’s University in Kingston, Canada, and in 1995 he was awarded by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and International Trade of Canada. In addition, Blackwell is currently President of

the Council of the Global Agenda for Illegal Trafficking and Organized Crime of the World Economic Forum. He is a member of the board of directors of the Foundation for the Americas and a member of the Coordinating Technical Committee of the process for violence reduction in El Salvador.

**What are the main contributions of the concept of multidimensional security to the debate about security in Latin America?**

The first and foremost contribution has been to place the human being at the locus of the security agenda. The concept of multidimensional security has allowed us to see beyond the tradi-

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

**What unavoidable challenges does Central America pose from the perspective of multidimensional security?**

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

**How is the gang phenomenon perceived within the northern triangle of Central America from the concept of multidimensional security?**

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





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

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

**Why did the OAS think it important to become a guarantor of the truce process in El Salvador?**

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

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

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

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

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

**What are the main challenges that the OAS has faced in its role as guarantor of the process?**

One of the main challenges has been mistrust, the manner in which to establish communication about the issue and, above all, to define the steps within such an unprecedented phenomenon and where results seem so uncertain.

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**What role does the OAS play, as guarantor of the pacification process that began with the truce between gangs, with a new government in office in El Salvador?**

The OAS is willing to work with the new government in its efforts to reduce crime and violence in the country, if the government so requests.

**Does the recent spike in homicides mean the failure of the process to reduce violence in El Salvador?**

No. Regardless of the increase in violence since the process began to achieve a truce between gangs, the very spokespeople of the gangs have expressed clearly their wish to continue with the

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

**Which are the principal challenges, from the perspective of the OAS, faced by the pacification process in El Salvador?**

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

**What are the reasons for the decision by the OAS to support a process of violence reduction that involves actors defined as illegal by Salvadoran legislation?**

The main reason, under the light of my answer to the first question, is that we work under a concept of multidimensional security in which the human being is the centre of our concerns.





Photo: OAS

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

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

Of course, this process – in its general and

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

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

We are working together with Interpeace on a sub-regional initiative for the reduction of violence and peacebuilding in the northern triangle of Central America. On the other hand, we continue to evaluate the national security systems and present recommendations of how to

improve the systems and their components. We have projects for the handling and destruction of chemical precursors and we support institutional strengthening by means of special courts for drug treatment, among other initiatives we support in the region.

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

**Interpeace, Strategic Position Paper**



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