

«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.

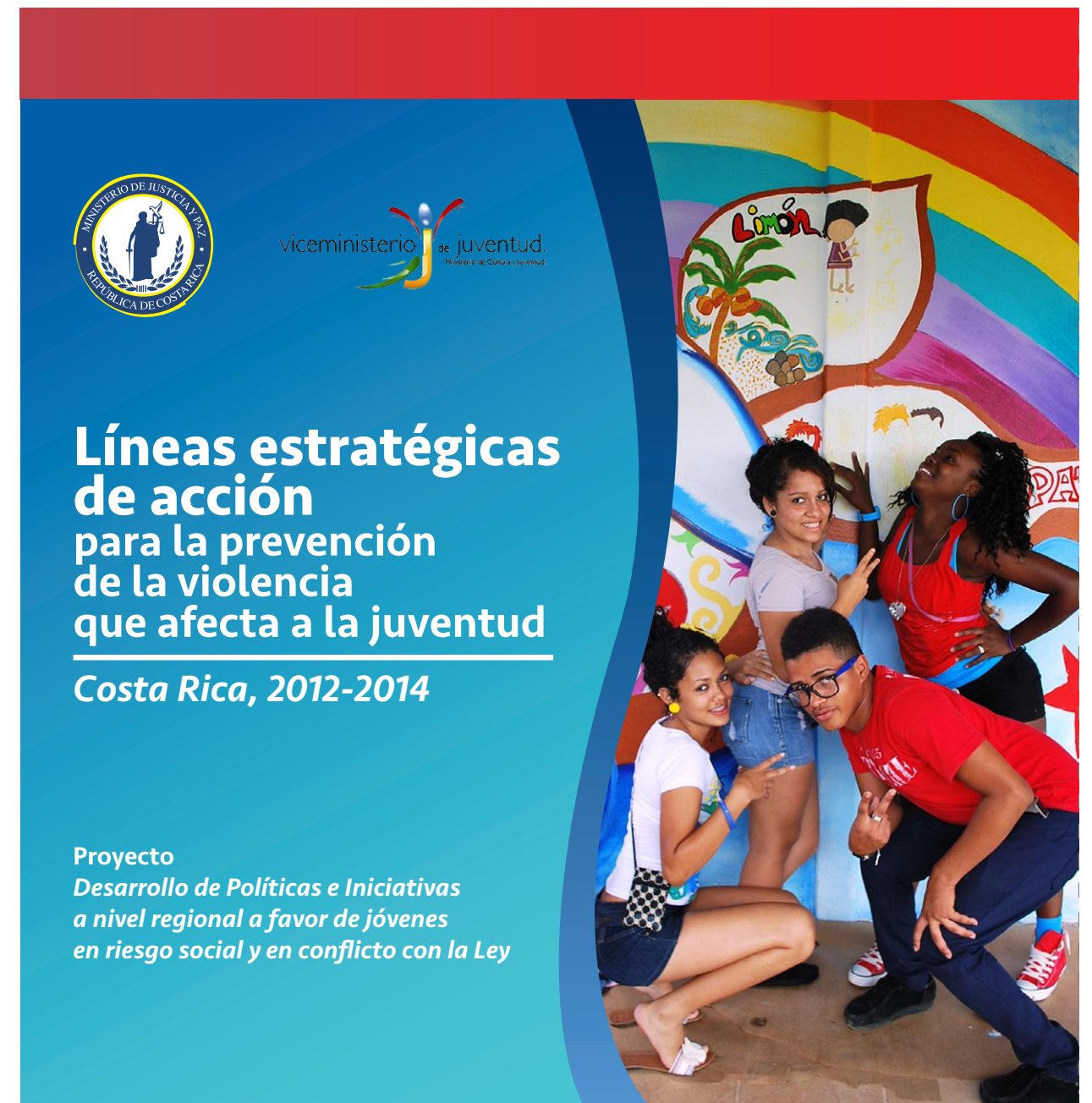
«The principal challenges we have to overcome to improve the conditions of our young people are education and work»

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.