

Interventions in situations involving violent conflict and armed juvenile gangs

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Introduction

As in other stages of man's history, we are living through a dramatic period in which time appears to be accelerating and space expanding, made even more dangerous by the collapse of the hegemonic empire of the day. In this rapidly changing society, there are some groups of people that have remained at the margins of the process of evolution, they are marginalised; not only that, they are often excluded or even expelled from the system in which they live because they are not considered to be effective or profitable. When we measure success by what we have, not by what we are or what we have done, when large sections of the population do not even have the means to live with dignity, when poverty worsens to become misery, all people can do is to survive, and this challenge creates many victims and many victimisers.

For those who would like to increase their knowledge, to live in a world filled with conflict with serenity and to contribute to a better world, first we will need to unlearn many of the things we think we know.

We need to get the idea that some groups of people are better than others, and that that is just the way it is, out of our heads and out of our hearts.

Both groups, those living inside the system and those living outside, need to learn this. Because the enormous disparities that exist in the world and the inability to be able to enjoy even a tiny part of the immeasurable riches of this small planet floating in the cosmos can also be blamed on those who do nothing about it.

All of us can do something; many people have improved their surroundings greatly just because they believed they could.

As a race, we have become technologically developed, but we have not educated our hearts. As women, we have something to contribute. Our brains are better equipped to both express ourselves and to live through our feelings. If we were in the driving seat and we governed shamelessly from the point of view of this wealth, then things would change considerably. To look into someone else's eyes and to understand what they aspire to requires feeling and trust, the challenge we face is to make people's lives better.

No person who is happy, who is in love, who is content has ever made war on or attacked another person without good reason.

Our task is simple even though it may appear complex.

Everybody needs to be happy; as Negri says, in the end we should all be paid for being alive. This is the most important adventure of all. When we come to this world, we have been invited to a party. The fact is that we don't listen to our bodies and we understand them even less; our ignorance about the wonders of nature, which are merely used as a backdrop for wars of the survival of the fittest by the TV companies of the empire of the day, when the history of the evolution of animals and humans demonstrates that we have come this far because we learnt to collaborate and to trust in each other, this is the missing pillar that would allow us to live in admiration or, simply, just to live.

As the old oriental wise man said when he went out to sit on his patio, I am off travelling. How can you travel while you are sitting there? This planet is spinning through space at an infinite speed, I am a passenger on this earth who walks, thinks and loves, and together with everybody else, we can make this journey more pleasant and interesting.

Could we not talk about juvenile armed conflict and possible strategies for eliminating it in this context?

We are going to try to understand certain groups of people, of which there are thousands, who live on the margins of the system. In the clandestine corners of cities. Underground cultures in which life can both explode and implode. Both of these. Entire neighbourhoods disappeared when a road was built in Ecuador. The necessary studies on underground rivers in the area were not made; in the end the land was washed away in enormous landslides that carried away everything before them. They can also explode outwards like an enormous firework or like one of the volcanoes Ecuador is famous for. It's an impressive spectacle, the ash falling, the clouds that form and cover everything in their path. Beyond our life spans, we know that time as we measure it does not exist; in the end these explosions become the seeds for other beginnings; the Galapagos Islands with their rich diversity, are the product of just such an explosion. We could also consider the rich veins of minerals that spring from the bowels of the earth. Our aim is to make the experiences of the young people involved in armed gangs and underground groups the central focus of their history. To reverse these processes by sustaining sets of values that are often ignored.

Human life encompasses all the riches of the cosmos, no one is without use and everyone is needed, our challenge then is to invent ways of including this segment of the population, the young people who live in gangs, many of whom are violent, in the societies in which they live. Before we can do this, we will need to understand the processes involved and fearlessly confront this situation that some people have to live through everyday of their lives. This is a challenge for all of us.

And it would be a good idea to let the main players in this drama speak. For this reason, our guest teacher will be a young captain, a leader, one of the elders of these groups, a man whose life was forged in the streets and who knows their secrets.

We are putting forward the idea that it is possible to change the circumstances of these gangs by dealing with the individuals and groups that make them up on their own terms, by treating them as subjects and not as faceless problems.

We need to be aware that they were victims before they were victimisers; a useful approach would be to consider them as child soldiers. Soldiers from other wars, those outside of society, those of underground cultures, but wars in which the weapons are in the hands of people who are just beginning their lives. The weapons they possess were made by adults and sold to them. They live from the traffic in the drugs and arms they use and need, society sees them as the only villains and they in turn hide their faces, their riches and their interests; they walk like kings through the streets and cities of our countries. A society that feeds on the blood of the youngest citizens is a society that sacrifices its most sacred possessions to the gods of money, prestige and power in exchange for the lives of those who are prisoners to this tragedy.

The declaration of the rights of children and young people signed by the United Nations expressly prohibits the presence of children and adolescents in war zones.

We need to put some pillars in place to end this war between those who are just beginning life's adventure.

We must confront the problems of conflict, violence, power and hatred; we must confront them using the experiences and the testimonies of those who work with the boys and girls that belong to armed gangs.

We need to talk about their rituals, their festivals, their symbols and their membership codes, and we need to propose solutions that can produce results, we need to explore different routes, ask the questions that need to be asked and do what needs to be done.

We also need to listen to those who have suffered violence from these gangs and generate strategies to help them: the mothers, fathers, partners, brothers and friends. We need to build bridges to heal, to understand, to pardon and to begin reconstruction.

1. Defining conflict

There are several possible approaches to defining conflict, looking at some of these will give us a basis for looking at the specific conflicts we want to cover.

In the words of Vicenç Fisas, conflict is an interactive process, the expression of a human social construction that is different from violence as we can have conflict without violence but not violence without conflict.

According to Romo Entelman, conflict is a "type or class of social relationship in which the goals of the various members are incompatible", "or in which some or all of the members perceive them to be incompatible".

Often when we ask ourselves what the word conflict means, what word we could use to replace it, what are its synonyms, the first concepts to appear are violence, hatred, fighting, dislike, failure, and if we try to describe it in colours these are always dark and gloomy. Conflicts are never seen as being an opportunity or as an inevitable experience in human life, one we need to become friends with in order to be able to view it as a challenge or an opportunity to understand, to grow and to explore unknown solutions.

William Ury, in his book *Getting to Peace*, quotes several studies by the palaeontologist Philip Tobias who discovered that *Australopithecus* and two species of humans, *Homo Erectus* and *Homo Habilis*, lived together between a million and a half and half a million years ago in South Africa, with no signs of violence between them appearing in the fossil record. Tobias' hypothesis is that they lived together peacefully for a million years.

It is cooperation that has allowed the human species to survive and to evolve without destroying itself in war. No cave paintings prior to about 10,000 years ago depict battles between humans, rather they depict animal hunts. The history of war appears to begin around 10,000 years ago, around the time we began to exterminate our own species. We can, therefore, state with certainty that confrontation does not form part of the genetic make-up of our species.

The Seville Statement adopted by UNESCO has declared this and it is important to understand it because it diverges from the programmes we see on the Animal Channel and others in which we are seduced by the certainty that in order to survive we need to attack and the strongest always wins. Fear induces us to fight or flight and, if we believe this instinct is basic to our survival, how then are we to construct a world of tolerance and understanding? Old people and children do not matter, disabled people and poor people do not matter, people who do not think like me do not matter... people who do not support the same politics as I do do not matter, people who are not the same colour

Author citation

Fisas Vicenç. *Cultura de paz y gestión de conflictos*. Icaria Antrazyt UNESCO. Barcelona April 1998, pages 29-32.

Author citation

Entelman Remo. *Teoría de los conflictos (The Theory of Conflict)*. Gedisa. Barcelona, March 2002

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Ury William. *Alcanzar la paz (Getting to Peace)*. PAIDOS, Buenos Aires, 2000

as I am, who do not speak the same language, who do not have the same religion... Then we invent intelligent bombs that kill people but leave buildings untouched. The people who invent these things are the best-educated people, they have spent many years at university and are a part of the most privileged 1% on the planet who can access higher education.

1.1. The Seville Statement

This Statement was drawn up in 1986 by an international team of specialists to mark the International Year of Peace organised by the United Nations.

The Statement stipulates that there are no natural biological obstacles preventing the absolute abolition of war and other types of institutionalised violence. It proclaims that war is a social construction and that in its place, we could construct peace.

The Statement includes an introduction, five propositions and a set of conclusions.

Each of the five propositions rejects a false idea that has been used to justify war and violence.

The Statement was adopted by the UNESCO in 1989.

The Statement is a message of hope. It states that peace is possible and that we can put an end to war. It states that we can end the suffering of children who have been left without a family or a home. It states that instead of preparing for war we could use the money for training teachers and doctors, to manufacture medicines, to print books and to build schools and hospitals.

The Statement was written by scientists from many countries, from the North and the South and from the East and the West. It has been adopted and published by many organisations around the world including anthropological associations, ethologists (those who study the behaviour of species of animals), physiologists, psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists.

Some people maintain that violence and war will never end because they are a part of our biological nature. We are saying that this is not true. In other times, it has been claimed that slavery and race or sex-based domination form a part of human nature. Some people have even claimed to have proved this. We now know that they were wrong. Slavery has been abolished and everything is now being done to put an end to race and sex-based domination".

1.1.1. The five propositions

First proposition

It is scientifically incorrect when people say that war cannot be ended because animals make war and because people are like animals.

War is a specifically human phenomenon that is not found in other animals. The fact that war has changed so radically over the course of time clearly proves that it is a product of culture. The biological aspect of war is mainly established by the language that allows groups to become coordinated and which allows the transfer of technology and armaments...

There are cultures that have not made war for centuries and others that have lived in peace for many years after periods of frequent violence.

(The modalities of war have changed with the evolution of cultures and not with biological evolution)

Second proposition

It is scientifically incorrect when people say that war cannot be ended because it is part of human nature.

(Experiments performed using rats have shown that personality is not only the result of genetic make-up but is also determined by experience and life conditions; it is, therefore, a social and ecological factor. If this is true for rats then it is more so for humans. Human personality depends more on the surroundings than does that of rats.)

Third proposition

It is scientifically incorrect when people say that violence cannot be ended because people and animals who are violent are able to live better and have more children than others. Actually, the evidence shows that people and animals do best when they learn how to work well with each other.

(The phenomenon of domination we see in animals that live in social groups is characterised both by an ability to cooperate and aggression, something that has been seen in studies on wolves, monkeys and other anthropoids. The introduction of an extremely aggressive animal into a group tends to destroy its structure.

This is also true for humans, aggressive behaviour is manifested in a context of cooperation. This can be seen in all human societies when gathering, harvesting and hunting. Cooperation has played a particularly important role in the survival of the species.)

Fourth proposition

It is scientifically incorrect when people say that we have to be violent because of our brain. Our behaviour is modelled by our types of conditioning and our modes of socialisation. There is nothing in our neural physiology that obliges us to react with violence.

(Aggressive behaviour in humans is far more complex than in other vertebrates. It has been transformed by the action of many cultural factors: The creation of economic institutions and systems, the creation of promotional programmes aimed at the acquisition of language and handling tools, to name two principles.

We are, therefore, morally obliged to avoid simplifying phylogenetic extrapolations that can be particularly provocative and we must specify those phenomena, such as crime and war, that are not an inevitable result of the activity of our neurological apparatus.)

Fifth proposition

It is scientifically incorrect when people say that war is caused by 'instinct' or that there is a single reason for it.

Modern warfare is the end result of a journey that begins with emotional factors and sometimes instinct, and is born out of these cognitive factors. Modern warfare takes advantage of the institutionalised use of personal characteristics such as blind obedience and idealism as well as other social aptitudes such as language; finally, it requires rational approaches such as the evaluation of costs, planning and the treatment of information. The technologies used in modern warfare have considerably increased the phenomenon of violence, be it in the training of combatants or in the psychological preparation of a population for war. This expansion often means that the causes and the consequences are confused.

(The institution of war has created several new roles, each one with its respective rights and obligations. The politicians, generals, soldiers, munitions workers all perform the tasks they have been assigned, complying with their obligations with no real expression of aggressive tendencies. The same is true for the combatants in which cooperation, camaraderie, obedience and fear all play a more important role than aggression.)

In conclusion, scientists, therefore, maintain that the same species that invented war is also capable of inventing peace. This responsibility falls to all of us.

A culture of violence does not result from the behavioural instincts of humans, but rather from the actions of human beings who have been highly victimised and alienated, in turn making them more aggressive.

2. Key factors for understanding processes of violence in juvenile gangs

"We can understand violence as being the use or the threat of force or power, either openly or not, with the purpose of obtaining from one or more individuals something that they would not freely consent to, or to inflict some type of (physical, psychical, moral) injury on them; violence is, therefore, not only a certain type of action but is rather a potentiality. It does, therefore, not only refer to a type of action but also to denying action, to deny potentiality."

Fisas Vicenç. *Cultura de paz y gestión de conflictos*. Icaria Antrazyt UNESCO. Barcelona April 1998.

To say that all gang members are criminals or that all poor people are thieves is, therefore, also a form of violence or...

Fisas quotes Adela Corina who states that there are three basic expressions of violence:

- **Expressive:** this is pathological in that its purpose is to do damage.
- **Instrumental:** this attempts to achieve something and includes violence by the state.
- **Communicative:** this is used as a last resort to communicate a message.

In the course of this study, we shall cover the various expressions of violent conflict between juvenile armed gangs which are often both mixed together and in juxtaposition.

But there is one cause that is not often recognised and which is the source of much violence by action or omission. To fail to act when we could is to allow violence to happen.

2.1. Submission to authority. Stanley Milgrand's experiment

2.1.1. Submission to authority as a cause of violence (an experiment by Stanley Milgrand 1974)

An experiment was performed on various sectors of the populations of different continents using people of both sexes, of different ages and professions; the results were constant despite the different contexts. The subjects of the experiment accepted the rules of the experiment believing that they were measuring the ability of people with failing memory to remember things by being subject to punishment.

The experiment transpired as follows:

Bibliography

Sections taken from the book by Semelin Jacques, *Pour sortir de la Violence*. Les Editions ouvrières 1983, pages 49-52.

Two people are present in a psychology laboratory that organises surveys on memory and learning. One is the teacher and the other the student. A white-coated scientist explains that they are studying the effects of punishment on the learning process. He takes the student to a room where he is strapped into a seat, an electrode is then attached to his wrist: he is then told that he must learn a list of word pairs. All mistakes he makes will be punished with increasingly powerful electric shocks. The real subject of the experiment is in fact the teacher. Once the student has been strapped in, he is taken to the main room of the laboratory from where the shocks are administered. 30 levers are arranged in a row, these are labelled from light shock to dangerous shock and apply voltages ranging from 15 to 450 volts.

The teacher is then invited to test the student in the other room. When the student responds correctly, he moves on to the next set of words. The teacher is told that he must administer electric shocks starting with the weakest voltage (15 volts) and increase the power for each new mistake (30, 40, 50).

The teacher is absolutely unaware of what is going on and thinks he is participating in an experiment.

However, the student is in fact an actor and is not receiving any electric shocks.

The purpose of the experiment was to discover to what point an individual would obey the orders, even when he was asked to increase the level of punishment applied to the victim.

At what point would he reject the orders.

The conflict arose at the point the student began to show signs of suffering: at 75 volts, he started moaning; at 120, he began to complain using various statements; at 150, he begged for it to stop. As the voltage became more powerful, his protests would become more vehement and pathetic. At 140, volts he would scream in agony.

For the teacher, the experiment is not a game but a real and intense conflict: on the one hand, the suffering of the student makes him want to stop; on the other, the director of the experiment is pressing him to continue. Each time the teacher hesitates he is ordered to continue. They should disobey the authority figure, but they do not. 60% made it all the way to the end. All of them got to 300 volts, even though they were told this was a potentially lethal voltage. (The experiment was performed in Rome, Austria, South America, Germany...).

Results and interpretations of the experiment:

- Adults have a propensity to submit to an authority figure.
- When people not participating in the experiment were asked if they would stop before the end almost all said that they would; we, therefore, believe that we are not able to go to those extremes.
- The problem was that almost all of the subjects reached the danger point, a larger percentage of these were women, religious people were more prone to do so than atheists. Women have historically been more submissive than men and the believers of almost all religions have submitted themselves to beliefs that they do not understand or cannot explain. The more submissive they are the more liable they are to inflict violence.
- Normal people are able to become the agents of an atrocity merely during the normal course of their functions.
- The phrase "the experiment requires that you continue" was key in the process of disconnection with the victim. The process is two-fold, people disconnect from victims and associate themselves with the authority figure. Slowly but surely they lose responsibility.
- They do not question the experiment. Neither do they formulate questions concerning why they should obey. The experiment acquires a reality all of its own.
- The human element becomes volatile.
- At the other extreme the victim is devalued. The victim is useful for the indicators he can provide, but otherwise has no value.
- There is a disassociation between the victimiser and the victim. They do not look at the student but look at the person giving the orders, they transfer responsibility for their actions to them. "He told me to..."

Applications:

There is a need for authority that protects us and provides security.

The greater the amount of submission (this must not be confused with obedience which assumes rationality, to obey we need to understand) the greater the amount of violence.

The more autonomous we are the greater is our capacity for calmness, tolerance and understanding, the more able we are to take decisions for ourselves and also to obey.

Obedience is your duty, this is the driving force of the armed forces and of many subversive groups, armed gangs and mafias. Our political systems and the structure of our societies were all copied from the military model.

Decentralisation and the autonomous policies of many countries are attempting to replace this hierarchical system and to make politics more participatory with joint responsibility.

For this reason, we see more young assassins who kill to order, but they consider that the person ordering it is responsible. They are only doing a job, someone else is paying for it. People contract them and then behave as if they are respectable citizens.

Victim stigmatisation is part of the culture of violence, the blame is placed on the delinquent juveniles, on street children, on beggars, prostitutes; it is said that they are the causes of violence and not a consequence.

Violence produces feelings of defencelessness, insecurity and fear.

As with all cultures, violence is practiced by society, it occurs socially and, therefore, can also be prevented socially.

They are not the problem, they are people who have problems.

Violent cultures are also fearful cultures.

2.2. Power and violence

The opposite to violence would appear to be non-violence. In the Western world we have still not managed to invent a term to describe what we are invoking when talking about non-violence. This means that we do not have much experience with this reality. Words are always born from experience and not vice versa. If we want to affirm something by rejecting its opposite, all we are doing is stating what we reject. By rejecting something we are evoking it, we make it present, we give it life and feed it. The best thing would be to starve it, to feed other concepts that refer to specific examples in life.

One of these convictions is the idea that violence confers power, it is the exercising of power.

It is power that connects conflict with violence in the collective imagination. We generally believe that the person exercising the most violence has the most power and that the one is somehow a result of the other.

We would like to propose that the opposite is true.

Violence is exercised where there is a lack of power.

The wall erected by the Israelis on the border with Palestine was erected out of fear and an absence of real power, throughout history all walls have been erected for this reason.

What is power really?

"Power comes from the Latin word "posse" which means to be able. The personal development of each individual can be described as the gradual acquisition of a feeling of being more capable"

However, Kenny Carlos states in one of his papers that violence is able to destroy power, but that it cannot create it.

Power does not come from giving orders, rather is born out of consensus, of group-approval of a proposition, a process, an alternative, a particular measure.

It resides in the group, it allows the group to act together and will exist as long as the group exists.

Institutions are maintained by this type of implicit or explicit support, when nothing is done to question it, change it or contradict it.

In this sense, power depends on the number of people in the group, their conviction and the truth of a cause.

However, violence can be exercised by a single person, it relies on tools and weapons and not always on the numbers involved.

The extreme form of power is all against one. Popular revolutions and demonstrations are, often unconsciously, based on this principle. Ghandi's movement based its success on this conviction and this force.

The extreme form of violence is one against all. The pilot who dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima acted alone, he submitted himself to authority in order to execute an order coming from the president of a country, one man who killed millions.

Power depends on the support of a group and its force lies in organisation.

Violence depends on instruments and tools, it does not need a majority.

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Kenney Carlos, *Hablando de Hanna Arendt*

Violence and power are not entirely separate, but they are not the same thing.

Tools of violence are of absolutely no use if orders are not obeyed. This is the case with some Israeli pilots that have refused to obey orders given to them by their military commanders to selectively assassinate Palestinians. Any killing is just that, a crime in which there are no mitigating circumstances that lessen responsibility or the level of tragedy involved.

To be effective, violence depends on the power sustaining it, not the other way around.

An opponent who is poorly-equipped but well organised can be more powerful than one who uses arms to inflict violence. One clear example of this was the failure of the US army in Vietnam.

Power does not always triumph over violence, but violence can never create power.

"Domination by pure violence only comes into play where power is being lost".

In this sense, the opposite of violence is not non-violence, but power.

Entelman defines power as "the set of resources of any type that each actor possesses or believes they possess in order to achieve their goal". These include threats, combined proposals, influencing those things that are accepted, persuasion, possible alliances with third parties, the power of conviction, moral authority or prestige over an adversary.

In this sense, there is a:

- **power over people**; this is exercised by someone who gives orders by virtue of the position they hold, (this is not the same as authority). Authority (is not supported by a consensus, it is similar to a duty of obedience and that which we looked at in Stanley Milgrand's experiment). This type of power is often exercised by politicians and the military. It is often used by teachers in the classroom or by fathers within the family, this type of power does not require reasons or feelings unless people are being manipulated in the name of patriotism and duty. We are playing the submission game once again. This appeals to order and to orders.
- **A power with**, the power of consensus, of groups. This is the power of the organisation that is backed up by a collective sensibility. Each person feels they are a part of it because they have participated in the decision-making process, they respect the agreements created as they have expressed themselves through them.

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Page 125 of Entelman, *Teoría del conflicto*

- **And a power from**, this power is born from within, it is backed up by enormous moral authority and life experience. This was the power of Gandhi, of Jesus, of the Dalai Lama, and many other male and female leaders whose presence is respected, admired and imitated. While it is true that these first examples are all men, we should also consider some of the women who have possessed it.

To unite power with and power from is the great challenge. Power that liberates the person exercising it makes them more of a person, more humble and tolerant at the same time as more dignified and free.

2.3. Love, power and violence

In the chapter on indifference and impotence, psychosocial roots of the sacred potential of violence by José María Fernández Martos, the author studies how the average human being enjoys violence. He looks at which newspapers sell more copies, which TV programmes and films are most popular.

He asks if there is some type of violence that touches the divine.

He states that many religious initiation rites have a violent component, whose aim is not to cause injury but rather to "reach the overwhelming and ecstatic state of rage". We can add other factors to the sacred potential of violence. "the everyday bored man living in the technological era feels, just for a moment, that he really exists. Experiencing ecstasy expands and deepens the awareness of existence. For a moment, the person is sure of their existence and their awareness: I kill and I hate, then I exist". They need to destroy precisely those individuals who in living have not exercised their capacity to positively express their creativity. By destroying, they transcend the state of things, they demonstrate their power. Fernández Martos maintains the hypothesis that:

- 1) The search for Love and the gaining of power through the development of one's capabilities are the most profound goals of the human being.
- 2) The relationship between this pair of forces is a difficult one in human beings and can easily be transformed into indifference, envy and violence.
- 3) Hindering the exercise, the achievement of these two profound aspirations of the human being, increases violence because people do not find meaning in their existence. ***The person who cannot create will destroy.*** The best thing we can do to reduce the potential for violence that is flooding the world is ***to permit and assist these two inspirational forces to be developed in each human being and in the groups and institutions they create.***

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Cristianos en una sociedad violenta; Chapter 4, Pages 63 to 87, Punto Límite Sal Terrea. Santander 1980

In the subject we are dealing with here, violent conflict and armed gangs, it is important to analyse the link between violence, love and power.

To create life is to transcend it, but destroying it is another way of escaping the feeling of total passivity. By destroying, we are exercising a power of vengeance. It is fed by impotence and apathy. Today's societies are filled with impotent people, individuals tend to fight against rules when they feel incapable of achieving the average goals set out by a society: success, prestige, money, financial security, assets.

Many people kill from a fear of dying themselves.

In order to give a broader context to a problem that afflicts both rich and poor societies, at least in the Western world, we need to have a wider vision of its socio-economic contexts to gain a polyfacetic view of this complex phenomenon and to give it its true importance, however this also allows us to understand where the most serious delinquency exists and which are the concealed weapons of those who illegally hold power.

3. Social problems as the cause of conflicts and violence

"I don't trust a society that has allowed me to get rich in the way that it has"

George Soros, Multi-millionaire
President of Soros Fund Management and the Open Society Institute

3.1. Inequality in figures

- The three richest multi-millionaires in the world own assets that exceed the GDP of the 48 poorest countries (with 600 million people).
- The 225 richest people in the world have accumulated riches equivalent to those owned by the 2,500 million poorest people in the world.
- In 1960, the difference in income between the fifth wealthiest section and the fifth poorest section was 30 - 1. In 1997 it was 74 - 1. Currently it is 80 - 1.
- 20% of the world population controls 86% of world GDP.
- Of the 25 largest corporations (those with a capitalisation over 86,000 million dollars), more than 70% reside in the US, 26% are European and 4% are Japanese. The poorest countries only have 26 corporations in the top 500 (5%).
- In 1970, 80% of capital movements in the world were for production purposes, only 20% were speculative. Today the percentages have reversed, 80% of the 3 trillion dollars circulating round the world every day do not create jobs, nor education, nor wealth.
- More than 80 countries now have a lower income than they did a decade ago.
- The cost of a computer is now equivalent to eight years of salary for a Bangladeshi and one month's salary for the average American.
- The industrialised countries own 97% of all patents.
- **Water and water treatment:**
 - 1,300 million people do not have access to clean water.
 - 2,600 million people have no access to water treatment.

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Sources: PNLID, FAO, UNICEF, Worldwatch OIT Report, quoted by José Carlos García Fajardo in his book *Manual del Voluntario*.

- 9,000 million dollars would be enough to provide everyone with water and water treatment.
- **Housing:** 1,000 million people live without adequate housing.
- **Basic health care and nutrition:**
 - There are 841 million malnourished people.
 - Health; 880 million live without access to health care.
 - 13,000 million dollars would provide adequate nutrition and health care for everyone.
- **Energy:** 2,000 million people live without electricity,
- **Education:**
 - 109 million children receive no schooling.
 - Basic education for all would cost 9,000 million dollars.
- **Reproductive health care for all women would cost 12,000 million dollars.**
- **Total yearly expenditure on consumption in dollars:**
 - Cosmetics in the USA: 8,000 million dollars.
 - Ice-cream in Europe: 11,000 million dollars.
 - Perfumes in Europe and the USA: 12,000 million dollars.
 - Domestic pet food in Europe and the USA: 17,000 million dollars.
 - Cigarettes in Europe: 50,000 million dollars.
 - Alcoholic drinks in Europe: 105,000 million dollars.
 - Narcotics: 400,000 million dollars.
 - Military expenditure in the world: 780,000 million dollars.
- A child has a 1 in 10 chance of being born into prosperity and a 3 in 10 chance of being born into extreme poverty.
- 17 African countries have a foreign debt that exceeds 100% of its GDP.
- 44 million Americans do not have medical insurance.
- 147 million people in the world have access to the Internet.
- 80% of Internet websites are in English, even though only 10% of the global population speaks the language.
- 20% of the wealthiest section of the world population controls 93% of access points to the Internet.
- The 10 largest telecommunications companies control 86% of the market.

- The average diet of 20% of the population with the highest income contains 16 times more calories than that in the poorest countries of the world.
- The countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) only contribute 0.22% of their wealth to cooperation.
- In 1960, there were only two mega-cities (with over 10 million inhabitants). There are currently 17 and it is calculated that there will be 26 in 2015, of which 22 will be in poor countries.
- 95% of demographic growth takes place in poor countries. In Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa each woman has an average of 5.5 children.
- The average age in Africa is less than 11 years. 20% of the European population is over 60.
- In Africa, AIDS has reduced the life expectancy to 20 years.
- 5% of the population in Latin-America controls 25% of the wealth.
- The wealthiest 20% of the population uses 84% of the paper consumed each year.
- A third of the active population in the world is either unemployed or under-employed, this amounts to around 1,000 million people. 64 million young people between 15 and 24 are looking for employment.

Modern society therefore provides a multitude of ways to live while dying.

To highlight the social problems that we know are closely associated with young people in gangs, we will use the book written by Silvia Duschatzky and Cristina Corea: *Chicos en Banda*

The authors prefer to talk about expulsion instead of exclusion. They maintain that poverty is defined by states of material and cultural dispossession that do not necessarily imply that poor people are entirely marginalised. In fact, historically in Latin-America and other continents (the idea that all people have the opportunity to succeed is a national credo in the United States, this is underlined by the film *Forrest Gump*) social paupers –but not paupers expelled for ethnic reasons– have always desired to escape poverty and have achieved it with hard work and studying. They were excluded but managed to include themselves; in any case, they were significant political actors. Poor people were considered to be a social force that could not be ignored, even if they were excluded.

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In recent times, radical and profound changes have taken place in meaning, sense and projection. "the new social order needs to have both an integrated section of society and a section that has been expelled. These are no longer the result of a malfunction of globalisation, a failure, but are a part of the social fabric".

This makes people disappear from public life, it produces, non-people, subjects who do not matter, people who must be avoided, who are of no interest to the others and from whom nothing is expected.

Young people are the biggest victims of this system of expulsion.

The indicators for this system of expulsion includes a lack of jobs and inability to find work, or if they do find work it is piecework, by the hour, with no social benefits and no stability; others include lack of education or the abandonment of education and functional illiteracy; in the technological world in which we live, this does not only include those who cannot read or write but also those who cannot use technology.

The disintegration of families in which migration is one cause but not the only one, the proliferation of addiction which is not exclusive to the expelled section but which manifests itself in alcoholism, which is at the root of violence in the streets and in homes.

These indicators provide us with information but tell us nothing about the people suffering their implications, they tell us nothing about the solutions and survival strategies used by the subjects living through these experiences.

How do they survive? What are their social relationships like, what frameworks to they construct and what values are they based on? If happiness is based on having, on consuming, if being is replaced by appearance, if to have a job depends on luck, on relationships, if life in the cities races by at an incredible speed, accompanied by noisy buses, deterioration and danger, if neighbourhoods are no longer safe places, then violence appears as an everyday reality, underlying every aspect of the lives of the expelled section.

The normal development of violent children and young people has been interfered with, it has been recreated in order to recreate violence.

Young people want to affirm their identities as people and the model they are given is out-and-out consumerism.

They want to be recognised as individuals, but society merely makes them anonymous or recognises them as being dangerous: when looking to enjoy themselves, they are provided with violent television shows in which everyone is armed. First, they get toy guns then real ones, they yearn for a healthy environment and they are given one that is deprived, excluded and violent...

When violence becomes cultural, negative expressions such as hatred, jealousy, vindictiveness, resentment, ambition, envy and frustration turn into aggression; the traditional values of society are turned on their head and impulses are channelled and driven using new representations.

The preliminary report on violent deaths in boys, girls and young people written by Dr Leo Valladares, High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras, which we will look at later, deals with factors associated with social problems and, despite being a localised analysis of a specific society, its conclusions can be extended to many of the societies that suffer from the same problems.

Preliminary report on violent deaths in boys, girls and young people in Honduras. Context analysis. The *maras* or "gangs" in Honduras: clues for understanding their context – Leo Valladares, High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras.
http://www.casa-alianza.org/ES/reports/informe_especial/analisis.phtml

The general context in which most of these children and young people live is one of inequality and poverty. This is demonstrated by the greater incorporation of children under 14 into the labour market; they usually work in unqualified and poorly-paid jobs. Paradoxically these girls and boys are working in order to help their families, but, at the same time, they are part of a process of family disintegration that is usually irreversible.

It is impossible to disconnect the current situation of children and young people from the financial and social variables in which they grow up. A girl or boy growing up in a poor home is twice as likely to have to work as a girl or boy growing up away from poverty. Aside from ethical considerations, the fact that children have to work prematurely means that they are very unlikely to be able to continue studying to improve their future expectations of success. The vicious circle of poverty, therefore, radically affects new generations, trapping them in the cycle once more.

When the father or mother of a poor family takes their child out of school to earn money they do not realise that they are condemning him or her to be an unqualified worker and to be exposed to unemployment, they fail to realise that an extra year of primary education increases a person's salary by 10%, and an extra year of secondary education increases it by 15%.

The divide between the expectations of young people and the possibility of achieving them is extremely wide. The objective ability of this sector of the population to escape from poverty is close to zero. This makes emigration to internal industrial areas and "Maquiladora" factories, or to the USA as illegal

immigrants, inevitable. Society denies them not just the right to enjoy their youth, it also denies them the right to exercise their citizenship, it refuses to recognise their human rights or even the rights of others.

Poverty and extreme poverty continue to be the worst form of violence inflicted on most of the children and young people in the country. This is the foundation that explains why thousands of boys and girls are victims of abuse in the streets every day. It is this violence that creates criminals, not the other way around. Adults have shown themselves to be indifferent to this violence or have mistakenly responded by considering them to be "objects of both compassion and repression, instead of subjects with full rights".

4. Studies on violent conflict and juvenile gangs in three Latin-American countries

4.1. Ecuador

4.1.1. Insecurity, delinquency and urban juvenile street gangs in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Descriptive aspects

Ecuadorian society, as almost all societies on the planet, is dealing with high levels of insecurity, whose main causes are social justice and exclusion due to poverty.

The cities of the country are suffering increasing violence in all areas including market places, public transport vehicles, streets and parks, workplaces, as well as in a variety of places such as schools, colleges, leisure establishments and between neighbouring families.

In these inter-dependent reciprocal spaces it is always possible that conflicts are expressed openly and become violent when resolved using incorrect methods.

Violence, due to its endemic nature and its consequences, has become one of the main urban problems, expressing itself in many forms. One of the most astonishing characteristics of this violence is its audacity and intensity-.

On the one hand it promotes private security measures due to the inability of the state to guarantee safety, more and more private security firms are appearing, the purchase of weapons is multiplying and the use of arms is proliferating.

It is also giving rise to prison-style architecture in which residents lock themselves in in order to keep their possessions and protect themselves, while the delinquents, criminals and police walk the streets free.

Living in the city and walking in the streets causes paranoia and anxiety, fear isolates people and deprives them of liberty, however it also conditions people not to see, not to hear, not to intervene, not to report and not to collaborate with the police.

It is within this framework that we need to understand the problems associated with urban juvenile street gangs and the violence they generate, and what makes them responsible in most cases.

Children are the most vulnerable group in this process because they are involved in it.

Youth is the stage between childhood and adulthood.

It is the foundation for future life, marriage, a house, education, a chosen or imposed profession, studies being undertaken or not.

Being a part of the process, and all this entails in terms of instability and risk, in terms of lack of security, is neither easy nor comfortable. How do we plan one year ahead, or five, or ten? How do we plan for the future when tomorrow is unknown, when there is no social, political or legal framework.

If we all want to be secure, then young people require models, they require leaders and examples they can imitate or question. They need something or someone to fight for, to live for and to love. These models have collapsed, except in the case of some musical leaders. And some sports stars.

The collapse of society, just like the collapse of the twin towers, was caused by adults.

They are now suffering the consequences.

The much-admired process of globalisation is also at their service.

Almost all the young people involved with urban street gangs have a cell phone, how they come by them is another matter.

They use computers to communicate on the Internet. Even those who abandon secondary education are aware of the rudiment of computer communications.

In Ecuador, it is estimated that there are approximately 70,000 youths in these groups of which 57% live in the province of Guayas, the other 43% live in the other provinces, the largest of which is the province of Pichincha. It is also known that a significant percentage of this population have access to guns, which are used in initiation rites, for self-defence and in disputes with other gangs. The use of the term "pandilla" (gang) entails a political connotation that stigmatises the younger sections of society. The phenomenon of the "pandillas" is not exclusive to marginalised urban sectors as some of these groups also include youths from other social strata.

The "pandilla" phenomenon is not analysed according to its causes but rather by its consequences; in Pichincha, it is generally stated that the infractions are committed by the gangs, laying the blame on certain groups coming from certain areas as is the case with the Cayambe region, which is a flower cultivation area where many young people from different areas of the country work.

The anti-gang units exercise "control" over the situation using an impressive police force who have been trained to apprehend minors and send them to transit homes where they receive "chats and advice" before being sent back to their parents. In the opinion of the chief of police of Guayas "this is only done to protect the minor, it is not an act of repression rather of prevention". The nature of the problem is not understood, neither are other policies, whose design the children should be involved in. The complexity of the causes that lie behind their cultural forms and, in some cases, behind the violence itself requires us to renounce stereotypes.

When talking about the gangs...

First, we need to clarify the conditions required to understand and analyse the problem: this syllabary has been created by a group of 14 leaders from various organisations.

The "**pandillas**" are groups of young people with between 20 and 30 members with ages ranging from 13 to 30. They do not obey chains of command nor do they have written rules. They include young people of both sexes who meet in parks to chat and to plan actions, to "show their faces" or to see who is around (to plan or execute assaults or to rob passers by).

Nations, Clans, Associations and Organisations are more extended and organised groups of juveniles who obey a traditional chain of command and obtain merit.

They are made up of at least a hundred members and are divided into cells following the law of the street. They have a pyramidal, hierarchical structure that is very similar to that used by the military. They have membership procedures for which they have to pass tests, some of which are very similar to military initiations. Many young people in the popular classes go to military service for many reasons, to gain accreditation or to be able to get a job afterwards, to be able to eat for a year and to have guaranteed housing. They do not have the resources to leave the country at military service age, nor to pay for their certificates if they have not completed this legal requirement. They are generally sent to the most dangerous areas such as the borders, they learn the rules of belonging to a group from American and Puerto Rican websites; these are reinforced in the barracks.

The income of the members of these groups is strictly controlled. They are usually at least 15 years old but once they have sworn unconditional loyalty to the group they will belong for their whole lives.

The leaders generally meet several times a week to plan, discuss and execute various activities, many of which are related to the underground hip hop culture.

Some of the groups are dedicated to what they call love from the heart, love without lies or tricks, the total support of each member by all the others. We will look at this aspect again later on as it is one of their principal values, at least in terms of the strength it gives them.

Membership of the various groups is identified using necklaces and graffiti. The bosses wear tattoos.

They also make signs with their fingers and the position of their hands is used to communicate a code that can be "read" and understood by the others.

The most conservative estimates show that 20% of them carry weapons. Often the top leader, the "blanco" will be unarmed, but the "oscuros" that surround him and act as bodyguards do carry them.

Some of the groups will defend a territory and be in permanent conflict with other groups, these are the ones that conduct street wars, though it is not all of them.

The "Imperio" is an alliance or union of various organised groups and leadership is shared between several leaders.

(We also have **criminal gangs**, these are mostly made up of adults that were once members of the pandillas, their main activities are committing crimes)

All of these groups have their own cultural expressions that are particular to them, graffiti art, which is different from the "chapoteo", and rap are examples. We must also distinguish graffiti from "chapoteo". This is used to mark out territory and can be seen all around cities, they use different symbols that identify the various groups, only people who have been "initiated" can read them. In fact each group will have its own alphabet, or nearly.

Graffiti has an artistic value and is an explosion of colour and forms representing caricatures, landscapes or letters.

Rappers are divided into singers and dancers. The first of these use samples to create musical tracks in the rap and reggae genres, they also compose their own lyrics, which express their forms of thinking and their lifestyle. The second group use spins, dance steps and break dancing to express themselves.

The experiences gathered in Ecuador have shown that cultural approaches have allowed many barriers to be broken down and the main conclusions that have been drawn is that this is a process that requires analysis and study from a cultural point of view, as do indigenous and black cultures when we want to understand them and to find channels for promoting mutual understanding.

"The articulation of aesthetic groups who define various positions in terms of lifestyle, how they group themselves, how they feel, how they make themselves visible and occupy the public space", could easily be applied to the "pandillas".

On the 11th of July 2002, during the Guayaquil festivals, the leaders of various organisations presented a manifesto for the consideration of the city and the country, stating that people should work everyday for the declarations to be turned into action. This took place in the Seminario Park with the Cathedral in the background, in the shadow of the statue of Simón Bolívar, it was attended by the Governor, the Chief of Police, the University Deans, a politician, a priest and members of SER PAZ; all watched over by members of the metropolitan and national police; later on they were serenaded by the band of the national police; they all heard the demands and proposals put forward by the various members of the groups, both male and female.

These had been prepared in workshops during the previous month at twice-weekly meetings.

It was not easy for everyone to agree on the text. One of the paragraphs of the manifesto stated that: "All the members of the gangs, the nations and the organisations, recognise that we have made mistakes, in many cases we have injured the people around, but we have suffered too. We understand that saying sorry will not change what has happened. It is up to us to demonstrate that with our youthful spirit we are able to make people smile and to fill people's hearts with happiness, where before we did not". These are their words not ours. More than a tear was shed on hearing these words.

Despite their cultural and social differences, young people everywhere have common aspirations in terms of their present and future lives, they all want to be happy.

The groups offered them a space for socialisation, friendship, protection and the support they needed. They felt safe within them. Above all in the parties they held in which they were allowed to express their soft side.

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They give advice, the hug, they support each other and cry together when something moves them; and when they have children, the males are far more loving and protective. The political, social and cultural value of tenderness must be reassessed.

4.2. Honduras

4.2.1. Preliminary report on violent deaths in boys, girls and young people in Honduras.

1) In all the years gone by, the youth of Honduras has been both physically and conceptually absent from the political debates of the government and the state. While some youth institutions have been created, such as CONJUVE (National Youth Council), they have been no more than clandestine means of manipulating politics and the electorate. Notable exceptions were the replacement of obligatory military service in 1994 with a "voluntary" service, the eradication of the savage polio virus in the same year, or the approval of the Child and Adolescent Code in 1996, but these achievements have not stopped the growing lack of interest in democracy and in forms of improving their lives.

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http://www.casa-alianza.org/ES/reports/informe_especial/analisis.shtml

2) In a survey conducted on 1,773 young people, all with secondary education, 47.4% were unable to define what "democracy" is and 63.5% could not define a "dictatorship". The most serious result of this survey is that one of the most essential values of democracy, tolerance, was clearly not well understood by young people. Of all those surveyed, 69.9% described themselves –when questioned– as being "intolerant", 17.8% described themselves as "tolerant" and 12.6% either did not know or did not answer. The main intolerances revealed were of a sexual or religious type. When interpreting these data, the sociologist Leticia Salomón maintains that "tolerance, conceived as being a respect for differences, or a respect for those who think and act differently, is a value that has not taken its place within Honduran political culture and which is still trapped in the vestiges of an authoritarian political culture".

3) Social intolerance does not arise suddenly and it reflects, among other things, an incapability or difficulty in forming dialogue and discussing what is happening inside the family, between the parents and the children, as well as in their earliest places of socialisation such as schools. Because of this, the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) carried out a study in an attempt to understand the perceptions, thoughts and feelings belonging to children and young people in Honduras about issues they were interested

in and worried about. About half of the 600 surveyed stated that it was hard for them to express their opinions at home and in school. They said that they were not given an opportunity to speak at home and that they were not listened to when being punished when they were not to blame; at school they found it hard to put forward their problems or their needs. About 22% of those surveyed by UNICEF stated that Honduras was becoming a worse place to live because nothing changed; the government and the politicians have not lived up to their promises and there is unemployment and a financial crisis. Three out of ten children stated that for them an ideal country would be one "without bad people and crime".

4) In contrast to this desire, the socialisation undergone by most of the children and adolescents in Honduras is one of a "culture of violence", not one of dialogue or tolerance. The UNICEF survey found that around 25% of those asked declared to have experienced, either directly or indirectly, a robbery and one out of every three stated that they felt little or no security in the place where they lived, and with good reason. This violence has not only invaded their surroundings but their personal lives and those of their families, but this is not all they are exposed to.

The *mareros* (gangsters): Victims or victimisers?

5) How much is known about the dynamic of violence that affects young people in Honduras who are members of the so-called *maras* and how do they affect the rest of society? Very little is known, very little indeed. There are two main factors that would appear to explain it.

6) The first is the substitution of research and analysis with a journalistic coverage of the subject that can be characterised as being "sensationalist" and "yellow journalism", in which the *marero* is stereotyped as being a "criminal" although the figures from the General Directorate for Criminal Investigation (DIC) confirmed that under 18s are not the main causes of social insecurity. Of the 42,000 crime reports received in February of 2000, only 5.5% of those responsible were aged under 18. An investigation into gangs and youth violence showed that "it is common to find news stories in the local press in which criminal and violent actions are blamed on young people and adolescents belonging to gangs. This broad coverage of their activities found in the local press has contributed to the image of gangs in the public perception that juvenile gangs are made up of incorrigible youths and adolescents, the only alternative for which would be to keep them locked up in perpetuity or to kill them". The first academic efforts undertaken in an attempt to bypass the subjective monopoly of the media and to understand the full nature of this social phenomenon have only taken place recently, starting in 1998, most of these were undertaken by institutions and academics and were not very socialised.

7) The second factor is that the escalation of the conflict "between" the *maras* and against them was extremely rapid. In hardly five years (1997/2001), it had grown to such an extent that it surprised society and the authorities; although not all, a fair number of police were involved in this dynamic. Reports produced by the Prevention Police and the General Directorate for Criminal Investigation (DIC) state that there were 397 gangs in 1999; a year later this figure had grown to 475. How they multiplied like this and in what circumstances has not yet been investigated sufficiently. One highly disseminated version maintains that the expansion of the *maras* is linked to the massive deportation of Hondurans from the United States, many of whom were supposedly linked to the *mara* "18" and *mara* "Salvatrucha" in Los Angeles, California. **Nobody doubts this link, but any external initiative to organise the *maras* would not have been successful unless the internal conditions had been right and other sectors were driving it and taking advantage of it.**

8) Some testimonies gathered by human rights organisations such as the Committee for Family Members of Missing Persons incriminate the police at all levels in the formation of some gangs or state that there are agreements between them to commit crime, although none of these accusations has ever made it before a court of law. *Most of the population are indifferent to this massive growth until it has repercussions that affect them either directly or indirectly, that is, when they cannot control the situation or when it is difficult to resolve or understand.* This was as if a skyscraper were built in a neighbourhood and the residents did not notice until it was finished. In these circumstances, it is not strange that the Mara Prevention Unit (UPM) of the police was created far too late (in 1998), only once the phenomenon was already widely present; what is more, their approach was far too institutional to be able to deal with it properly. The Basic Manual for Maras of the UPM is simply a re-hashing of the old concepts of cold war in that it describes the actions of the *maras* as "terrorism". Its view of the young gang members is absolutely de-contextualised and maintains that "it is very difficult to understand the irrational behaviour of the gangsters; their forms of thinking can be qualified as being absurd for the following reasons: For a gangster the most important thing in his life is the gang and he would be prepared to die for it. For the gangsters it is an honour to display their scars received in confrontations in which they were defending their neighbourhood, their gang or one of their homies".

9) The above demonstrates that a lot has been written about the subject but that so little has been said that we need to start from the beginning and to define what a *mara* actually is. *For the purposes of this study, we will say that a *mara* is an association of young people, mostly male, socially excluded, having an informal hierarchical structure, that has no political, social or economic ideology to deal with the various forms of violence and marginalisation they are faced with, and which is held together by a desire for security and kinship that the family, society and the state are not able to provide them with.* This, of course, is not the only possible definition. The authors of the above-mentioned report state that "a *mara* or a young gang is organised when a group of adolescents or young peo-

ple who have left their homes due to financial and other problems, meet together to perform certain activities. This gives rise to an organisation with an internal structure that uses certain initiation rites, that adopts certain symbols to identify itself and that develops a certain lifestyle that is their own. Once the *mara* or youth gang has been formed, those joining must adapt and socialise according to the templates established by the founders of the gang". To call this type of association a *mara* and its members *mareros* has no pejorative meaning in this sense, unlike the ones which are usually given to them in the press, but rather responds to a particular reality that cannot be avoided. In the same way, we can succinctly warn of the enormous danger they present both for their own members and for the larger part of society.

10) Without the complicity and tolerance of the state and Honduran society, the current crisis among young people would not have reached the levels it has. Their responsibility can be demonstrated in three clear stages of the process:

- a) The advancement of exclusion, with adolescents surviving in a context of progressive financial, social and cultural crisis.
- b) The "preventive" repression that victimised and took advantage of street children.
- c) The consolidation of the internal identity of the *maras*, on the one hand, and direct repression on the other.

The advancement of exclusion

11) Understanding the phenomenon of juvenile violence and defining how the gangs have constructed their identities requires us to take a fresh look at the historical, social, economic, political and cultural context in which this generation grew up, that of "democratic transition". This has already been emphasised in some aspects such as the destruction of the family, the tensions that face young men and women in poverty and the removal of forums and opportunities for improving their abilities and their lifestyle. The gangs that so terrify the population are a consequence of a succession of events that this same society largely brought about itself. There is a clear link between juvenile violence, poverty, inequality, population growth, homelessness, family disintegration, degradation of the environment, militarisation and demilitarisation, and the work and educational crisis. It is difficult to expect that it should be otherwise in a society where the richest 20% earn 57.3% of the national income, while the poorest 20% only earn 2.65%, the last decade has seen a notable reduction in this figure.

12) The welfare of children has never been one of the main priorities of the public authorities. Looking at the conditions in which children and adolescents lived during the 70's, 80's and 90's reveals an appalling social debt that is

still growing today. Their rights, enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic and the Convention on the Rights of Children, have been repeatedly ignored, marginalised or violated. The "transition generation" has been habitually excluded through poverty, discriminated against and killed violently, they are also victims of illnesses such as HIV/AIDS. The state, the various governments and society in general have abandoned the majority of the young population to their luck during the last two decades, although 65% of the population of the country is under 25.

13) The efforts and goals of many groups trying to improve the lot of children and adolescents made some advances in the legal field, in vaccinations against certain illnesses and in an expansion of educational coverage, but, in general, the terms of the Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) and the commitments of the World Children's Summit (1990) have not been fulfilled. On seeing their needs ignored, many of the initiatives taken by residents, governments and external bodies have been focused on specific groups or areas (street children, disabled people, children in the markets, child labour and others), however these efforts have not been backed up with structural policies to consolidate the positive results achieved, rather, the opposite has happened: after being in force for a decade, the economic model in place has accentuated inequality instead of decreasing it. Today, the conditions of poverty and their consequences are more profound and the housing conditions in which children are born are a "disaster" for the future of the children. Being born into a particular ethnic group will involve overcoming greater challenges and obstacles to achieve stable growth. All children born to the Lenca, the Tolupan or the Tahwaka will see their rights violated. In fact their rights are in danger from the moment they are conceived. And if the child is a girl their rights are liable to be even more trampled on. It is known that at least 38% of the school-age children living in indigenous and black communities do not attend school (World Bank, 1999).

14) These problems are not new but their way they are related has become more visible during the last decade. They mutually reinforce each other, they reciprocally aggravate each other and invalidate all rights written down on paper. The adolescents growing up within gang conflict were denied their physical, emotional and intellectual rights during their childhood and this seriously affects their transition from children to adolescents and adults. This is understandable when we consider that there are 437,000 "integrated" homes (in which it is assumed that both a man and a woman share the responsibilities, which is not necessarily true) in conditions of destitution, to which we need to add 136,000 "disintegrated" homes in conditions of destitution where only a woman is present.

15) *The biological and social boundaries between childhood, adolescence and adulthood have been practically wiped out in the country. The need to work, no matter how or under what conditions, has no age.* In 1990, the Economically Active Population (EAP) amounted to 1,605,917 people, while,

in 1998, it had reached 2,222,658 people: an increase in absolute terms of 616,741 people, equivalent to 38%. Similarly, the child EAP (10-14 years) rose from 85,532 to 110,213 (12.5%), while the adolescent EAP (15-18 years) rose even more, from 193,600 to 279,309 (44.3%). The situation for women was similar; in the same period, the EAP of female children increased by 75% while for adolescent women it rose by 69%.

16) The above implies that of the 77,092 new members of the EAP, which was the yearly average during the 90's, about 12,000 were under 18; or to put it in other words, 15 of every hundred people joining the EAP were under 18 years old. Of these fifteen, 13 were adolescents between 15 and 18 and two were children between 10 and 14. Using the most conservative figures, in 1998, there were more than 97,000 children under 15 and around 261,000 adolescents working in Honduras. If this is shocking, it is even more so when we find out how many of the children and adolescents who need to work are out of work and surviving as best they can. The chain of consequences for the children and young people who work or who need work and are unemployed is predictable and dramatic. In both cases there is a loss of several years of formal education and once they become adults their income is notably lower than those who received an education; as a natural consequence of this, they join the estimated 82%-86% of Honduran families who live below the poverty line according to Interforos (a coalition of civilian organisations) or 66% according to the Government.

17) *Honduran society needs to recognise that it waged an undeclared war against children, especially the poorest, before the maras appeared on the scene, and one that was extremely inhuman.* Domestic violence, rape and other sexual abuse, preventable diseases that turn into pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS, and sexual and ethnic discrimination have all been used as lethal weapons; and society has reacted to them with a mixture of passivity and complicity. To cite one example, HIV/AIDS is the second largest cause of mortality in the country. When the first official case occurred in 1985 (an odontologist in El Progreso), it appeared to be confined to a particular social sector, but, since then, it has rapidly spread through the young population in poverty. Ten years after the first case appeared, the Health Secretary estimated that 16.3% of contagion took place in the 10 to 24 age group; by the middle of 1998, the 20 to 39 age group accounted for 70% of the infected population and the 15 to 29 age group accounted for 40%. The mortality rate has of course been growing. In 1999, it was estimated that 138.7 of every 100,000 inhabitants aged between 15 and 49 died; and this had increased to 148.7 by 2005. The phenomenon is so serious that in 2000, the National Statistical Programme estimated that there were 11,938 orphans whose mothers had died from AIDS. Has the State been able to tackle this tragedy? Despite the rolling out of massive campaigns trying to raise awareness of the illness or to prevent transmission, mainly focused on changing people's behaviour, Honduras is losing the battle. The health services are overwhelmed by demand that limits access to those suffering from the virus, food insecurity has spread increasing the vul-

nerability of malnourished people to the illness and difficulties in increasing education levels (5.2 grades) limits the ability to perceive and confront risks, there are no prospects of solutions being presented to tackle any of these problems. To give an example of these problems, the country has only managed to raise the school-leaving age by one year per decade over the last thirty years.

Keys for understanding this phenomenon

18) We can clearly see that in having to deal with the *maras* this society is facing a very complex, multi-dimensional and multi-causal phenomenon, one of the main difficulties is the failure to understand what lies at the bottom of the dispute. Honduras is the setting for an unprecedented flood of inhuman violence; the main protagonists are well-known, but all other aspects of this violence are ignored. There are far more questions than there are answers. What is on and what is lost in the "neighbourhoods" that have become the setting for a "conflict", whose apparent cause is irrationality? What are the in-depth reasons explaining so many useless deaths?

19) The need to conquer and to possess is intrinsic in most conflicts and this helps us to understand it, but for the *maras*, the "neighbourhoods" or "territory" where they operate never belongs to them completely because, within them, they must establish borders between themselves and those who are not members of their groups. Their hegemony can be particularly brutal, but it is also partial or limited. The nature of this violence has specific traits, it is the product of a specific cultural, economic and socio-political structure.

20) The fact that much of the society does not understand what is happening does not imply that it has nothing to do with its roots and evolution. A key starting point for advancing in the search for solutions is that the violence that makes so many young people victims and victimisers lives in the context of a society that is also violent, so feeding it. The violence of the *maras* cannot be understood without the various other forms of violence that affect Honduran society, but this is not a mechanical reaction of cause and effect, rather it has its own particular dynamic as we shall see later on. Society does not appear to see its own reflection in the roots of this conflict, not only because it does not understand its own responsibilities but because it is not aware of the changes that have taken place in the last twenty years, precisely the "incubation" period of the *maras*.

21) The country they must grow up in is significantly different to the one their parents grew up in. The stage, the actors and demands all changed within a short time. Before the 80s, the Honduran urban landscape, which is now the main stage for the *maras* was fundamentally fairly stable in terms of numbers. Peasants tended to be involved in processes of agricultural colonisation, from

field to field rather than from the field to the city. Of course, there was still migration to Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and to the USA, there always had been, however this did not noticeably alter the demographic landscape.

22) A good indicator of accelerating change in the last two decades is the transformation of the "neighbourhood" from a highly cohesive social unit with a tradition of belonging that had often existed for more than three generations, to another type in which the old customs of socialisation and conduct were swept away, a large number of unknown people who had no sense of belonging and did not identify with the place arrived. "The data reveal that a significant number of the families of the young gangsters are first generation migrants, with all that this means in terms of economic, social and cultural uprooting", states that investigation undertaken by ACJ/Save the Children, it goes on to state that, of the (99) parents surveyed, 49% were not born in Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula, they had an average age of 43.

23) In the new "neighbourhoods", also known as "colonies", "violence" is the result of a cultural pattern, not a circumstantial attitude. The old residents had absolutely nothing to do with the new conflicts. These *barrios* or colonies were erroneously termed as being "marginalised" (in fact they are not on the margin but fully within the social and urban model) and were transformed into areas of constant insecurity, from where attacks were planned and executed. The metamorphosis of the *barrios* over these two decades was radical. Invisible barriers grew up between these neighbourhoods and the rest of society causing them to feel excluded, assaulted and discriminated against. This trend can be easily compared with the disintegration of the family that took place within them. The search for advancement and personal or family improvement was no longer a social objective and was replaced by a brutal and pragmatic fight for survival.

24) In this context young people have gradually been isolated from their traditional social and cultural links in an accelerating process in which their values and identity are being stripped from them. In broad terms, first, the usual mechanisms of integration into society –education and work– were dismantled and then the families were disintegrated, even if they still lived together (although most of these were already dysfunctional), finally they became indifferent to their own lives. The rules of respecting other people or of demanding respect are completely different from the traditional ones. In the old *barrios*, a person's reputation was linked to values such as honesty, experience and professional knowledge or to the financial and social status of the family. Owning a house represented a guarantee of permanency that shaped responses to neighbourly differences. Exclusion and intolerance were more usually associated with people who rented housing as they were usually considered to be transient. The roles and the subjects have now changed radically. The

processes of socialisation young people usually encounter are those of loss, aggression, violence, force, ferocity and fear. An affront is not repaid with discipline but with another affront, more extreme than the first.

25) The influential schools and teachers of the old *barrio* have been replaced by the street and other young people who quickly become instructors in the codes and secret language of the gang. In the context of the new economic, social and cultural trends associated with globalisation, the *barrios* lacked solid and permanent institutions, where these did exist they became isolated, surrounded by violence that replaced the old forms of solidarity with others based on pacts of blood.

26) Over the last decade something else has been occurring in the old *barrio*; new *barrios* are springing up within them, but these are controlled by the gangs of youths. They take this *barrio* with them and the links are more emotional than they are geographic. In the inner *barrios*, symbols are used to communicate by those that can interpret them. For example, the *mareros* tattoo their bodies with their memories, including fallen friends or family members. Many of these tattoos are names or crosses that represent pending revenge attacks and, unlike the traditional conception, do not focus on a particular person but are generalised and permanent. In both of these *barrios*, the physical/external and the emotive/internal, reputation and leadership are achieved in the same measure in which the scale of values and expectations of the *mareros* are satisfied. The investigation involving adolescents and young people conducted by ACJ/ Save the Children on the qualities that the leader of a *mara* should possess included, in order of importance, bravery, respect, fury, killing the most people, bravery in killing, a commanding voice, weapons, tattoos, intelligence, being loyal to the *barrio*, being the strongest, being decisive and living in the *barrio* the longest.

27) In this stage of the process there are no mediators and no external mediation capable of changing this "subculture". The mothers are completely impotent as they are generally looking after children, as are the fathers, teachers, and even the police who have become players rather than mere witnesses, as is stated in this investigation. The growth in the self-esteem of the *mareros* has tended to isolate them from society even more as they see themselves as "soldiers", "combatants" or "warriors" with their own codes of ethics. The leaders (or "veterans") have their faces tattooed and exclude themselves by taking refuge in the middle of the *barrios*, they do not come out unless in circumstances in which they are in control, when they are confident or surrounded by friends. The rest of the society only gets to see them in newspapers or on the news. They do not normally reveal their symbols on the streets or on public transport. They have testified that they do not like to be seen in situations they do not control; in the streets, they are condemned to be seen by others, the *paisas* with a mixture of revulsion and fear.

28) *In these circumstances, the paths towards tolerance, dialogue and negotiation have closed, the maras cannot approach the society and the society will not approach the maras.* In fact, when the *maras* choose to testify in the media, they always show themselves as they are, even though this ratifies the opinions of society and leads to isolation. For them their two *barrios* are the best place for them, they are fundamental for their security and their survival. What they are looking for is space to be able to move securely and with trust and to create a structure about which little is known. There are many unanswered questions: What is their hierarchy? What are their supply networks? How do they bury their dead? What are their records like, if there are any? There are even more sordid aspects: How do they get their drugs, arms and the other logistical resources they need to wage their "war"?

29) As various investigations into violence have shown, doubt always arises as to whether this behaviour obeys structural (socio-economic), psychological and cultural models. They way the *mareros* interpret the violence in which they are immersed is different from the way the rest of society interprets it. The shocking thing about this case is that within five years this affair has become a puzzle of enormous dimensions. There is no similar example in Honduran society, not even during the era of the most political and ideological controversy during the 80s. *What could originally be explained by increasing inequalities, by the tensions facing young men and women or due to the consolidation of a society that consumes media greedily, is now profoundly rooted in psychological and cultural perceptions that have their own life and inertia and respond to a logic of growth and reproduction.*

30) For those involved in the *maras*, jobs, salaries, the material goods that are so attractive to other young consumers, are no longer attractive to them. Their preferred attire does not follow market fashion trends but those of the organisation itself (*cholos* clothing). Possessing a *chimba* provides more self-esteem than wearing cologne or a fashionable shirt; it is in the conditions imposed by a hostile environment in which we can find the explanations for social groups that are both victims and victimisers.

31) The above makes us realise that key cultural beliefs are imprinted at the start of childhood, these might include confidence, security and a feeling of playing an effective role in the social world. *In this sense, the mareros as a generation are the subjects of betrayal, despoliation and constant inequality from childhood onwards. Their conflict with society stems from childhoods that have been marked by hardship, privation and hostility.* The nation in which they grow up is marked by democratic debate and exclusion. The 80s and 90s were times of conflict, tension, social polarisation and authoritarianism. The whole of Honduran society has very low self-worth. This generation bears the scars of militarisation and demilitarisation. The first "death squads", repression and torture are the main references to power in the society they were born into.

32) The authoritarianism of the 80s, with its many human rights abuses and forms of impunity was a major factor that would make it logical to ask, is there a direct or indirect relationship between this institutionalised phenomenon and the rise of the *maras*? The decade of the 90s did not help to resolve this panorama; what is more, this sector of the young population is one of the few social groups in which the process of demilitarisation contributed to destabilisation instead of stabilisation. Many of the thousands of military and police who were demobilised, discharged or retired joined other legal armed bodies such as private security firms, but also illegal ones linked to organised crime and who are not far from the *maras*.

33) What is definitely clear is that the young Honduran generation is very vulnerable to the surrounding violence and the people who inflict it. Who is a friend? Who is an enemy? These roles become intermingled in a mass of confusion. These circumstances include violence, an unawareness of people's rights and exclusion, and they have become a pattern for life. It is hardly surprising that a large section of the Honduran society is very unhappy, but what is surprising is the violent nature of the conflict.

34) For most of the population, the first impression or the most general impression they get of this conflict is that it is a fight to death between the *mara Salvatrucha* and the *mara18*. The differences between them are almost imperceptible for the average citizen but is clear for those directly involved and there is a good reason for this, being able to recognise one of the enemy at first sight might make the difference between life and death. For the *mara18*, the main tattoo consists of three points in the form of a pyramid, for the "MS" these three points appear in the form of an inverted pyramid.

35) The dilemma revolves around the fact that this is not a question of two groups, it involves the whole of society. For example, it is essential to understand how each group stays cohesive when they do not have the traditional resources to do so. ***Do they have an ideology? If so what? What do they require of each other? What are their differences?*** Although the two gangs immediately recognise the differences between them, including their social conditions, their origins, their family types, the father-child relationship, their needs and frustrations are very similar. Any member of "MS" could easily be a member of "18" and vice versa, but once they have taken the decision to join one gang there is no turning back. The cohesion of their own group is vital for their survival. In this respect they do not allow cracks, fractures or exchanges.

36) A gang may eventually allow one of its members to leave as long as they become a practicing member of a church. But this will not save him from the members of the other gang. Both groups are able to recognise the validity of the church but they do not practice the "right to asylum". The gang identity is never lost. Becoming one of their members is like getting an indelible tattoo; the person is dissolved into the group, into what is socially accepted. Culturally speaking, the gangs have common values and practices, they live in

clearly defined areas and have similar responses that clearly link the interests and actions of the individuals. In the case of Honduras, neither the media nor the authorities have tried or been able to understand the cultural fabric of a type of violence that they consider, a priori, to be irreducible and from which they can only try to escape.

37) This goes some way towards explaining why the counter-culture to the gangs is equally violent and has its own forms of aggression, its own codes and its impunity.

38) Again we need to ask, what is the real difference between the gangster who kills a rival gangster and the "unknown" executioner who kills both of them? If the culture of violence of one group is responded to using the same logic, this would explain why this society has a specific pattern that promotes conflict, instead of disappearing, it gets worse. The same Honduran society that was able to bring a halt to the "dirty war" of the 80s and to prevent open warfare with its neighbours, it was able to overcome the hegemony of an omnipotent army without bullets, but it was incapable of preventing the gangs from acquiring the dimensions that they now display.

39) *The fate of this section of society did not concern the rest of the society until it affected them directly, even now they are more inclined to exterminate it than to find a real solution to the conflict, this being the reason why the proposals for confronting it have never worked.* When the roots of the phenomenon appeared in the 70s and 80s, people tried to combat it in the schools, but this was the wrong section of society; they were young people but they were not the most vulnerable, and demands for space, management and leadership were met with repression from the state, putting a brake on organised participation.

40) Over the last 30 years, the student population has almost completely disappeared as an organised social player. The transition to democracy and the return to constitutionality began –as we have already said– as a decree removing the student representatives chosen during the internal elections. The paradox is clear, the country returned to the system of the vote and the participation of the citizenry, but young people were excluded from this. The disappearance of formal youth organisation, the contraction of their values, proposals and dreams, gave birth to the gangs, not necessarily as a direct consequence in that they were not founded by the student leaders, but indirectly this is true. What is clear is that there is a lack of state policy in favour of young people.

41) The foundations on which the gangs were based were totally incomprehensible for their parents, for the authorities, for the press and for most other sections, including those who worked with young people. The brotherhood and the links that united these young people under a new flag were indecipherable for the older generation. The concepts and parameters of protection changed radically. The formal protective shield was no longer the family or

groups of friends, it was now a far more powerful structure that was semi-clandestine, with its own codes and defence mechanisms. The old family is replaced by a "new" family in a transition driven by the systematic deterioration of the emotional links between parents and their children, a consequence of the deterioration of relationships and the disintegration of the family this brings. Finding out the real point at which these young people broke with their families is peculiar to each case, but it is obvious that it happened before the gang appeared in their surroundings. This rupture occurred even when the children and the parents were living together. The gangs are impressive due to their numbers, that is, it is not an exceptional case but something that is constant.

42) The old "camaraderie" that was typical in rural areas had nothing to do with this new relationship based on complicity, on violence as an act of initiation and group legitimacy, in which the new generation rules over the old. ***A young person joining a gang will feel protected by it, but at the same time he protects his gang. Their interests are based on the interests of "everyone".*** Young people found the ideal role models to develop their individual and group personalities in their own companions, a search which is constant in adolescents. ***The adoption of their own slang and an entire gesticular language are the key elements of a common identity that will become a factor for survival in the stage of socialisation by violence, when they need to know who are their friends and who are their enemies.***

43) ***During their fastest phase of growth, the gangs did not limit themselves to the use of guns, they also used loyalty and alienation, emotional attachment and rejection. Most young people joining the gangs were already very aggressive or were so insecure that the organisation was able to create the perfect surroundings in which to give them what they wanted.*** Along these lines, in the context of extreme Manichaeism the consolidation of a personality without remorse is as fast as it is brutal: the gang represents both evil and good. But killing the enemy is not the only goal, they must also keep the group cohesive. This aspect clearly distinguishes the gangs from other forms of violent association present in the country. The gangsters know that for each rival they kill, another will take his place; however, this was not seen as a problem, at least not in the first phases of their expansion. Most of these young people grew up with violence and therefore do not reject it. Many of them were punished everyday, with or without reason. In their homes and their *barrios* they were accustomed to high levels of intolerance, be it from their mothers and fathers or from the children around them.

44) Since they came in a search for "security" at any price, joining a gang was a very attractive offer. Understanding this also allows us to understand why the dissuasive mechanisms used by society such as legal measures and repression

have not worked. In this downward spiral, the gangs, the state and society have all been driven to adopting increasingly aggressive measures to defend themselves.

45) Between 1997 and 2001, the phenomenon went through a period of change, it was no longer just about membership. Out of need, other groups and interests attached themselves to the original groups in the conflict. To arms trafficking, ever present to support the war, drugs trafficking and common delinquency were added. Inevitably the situation spilled out beyond the limits of the *barrio*. All boundaries, from inside going out and from outside going in, have been broken. Despite the growing seriousness of the violence, they are still only confronted using violence, there is no form of negotiation or mediation involved in the search for solutions. The few examples of social rehabilitation programmes working with the gangs are not governed by any form of agreement and are attempting to respond to the crisis entirely alone. The general trend is towards increasing intolerance, a strong political and authoritarian response with no type of conciliation. The reduction in the age of criminal responsibility is promoted as being a viable tool in the fight against the violence supposedly inflicted by young people. The social climate –which is openly driven by the mass media– surrounding the gangs is now one of stigmatisation and fear.

The mass media and violence

46) The precise nature of the responsibility of the media for the violence has not been measured, but they clearly go further than simply reporting the news. The media are very biased against the young section of the population, both from a technical point of view and an ethical point of view. We should state that their role in the generation of violence or apologising for violence is not definitive, but it does not go unnoticed. Newspapers, radio and television stations and other audiovisual resources that are highly disseminated are the showcases for the socialisation of the violence to which Honduran children are submitted. The media create the idea that the society surrounding the gangsters uses a model that promotes social exclusion and an investment in negative values. All good news is not news from the perspective of the all-powerful Honduran media.

47) In these conditions everything to do with the gangs is blown out of proportion, the gangsters are painted as being strange, lost, aggressive, irrational and condemned to die prematurely. Their stigmatisation has been highly Manichean as it puts them on the bad side of society while the "others", the rest, are the good guys. The "death squads" are presented as good guys, as are the so-called *olanchanos* or the *carro gris* (grey cars) who take it on themselves to execute young people with impunity. To be a "victim" of violence in these circumstances is promoted and socialised as being completely "normal", or at least a common occurrence. The media do not follow up on these types of news

stories. Hundreds of young people have been executed over the last four years and the few news stories about this have been limited to reporting statistics, but there is never any kind of investigative journalism involved.

48) Things have even come to the point where some influential radio programmes have openly called for the extermination of the gangsters, something that horrified the UN Special Envoy for Extrajudicial Executions during her mid-year visit to Honduras. An acceptance of the various forms of violence as being "natural" has altered the traditional criteria society uses to value both "life" and "death". The headlines and the content of most national newspapers when reporting the so-called "events" or "red news" reflect this reality, especially in the case of the gangsters.

49) From the point of view of content, the mass media stereotypes young people as suppliers of so-called *nota roja* (red news), highlighting their conditions and their age and always linking them to violence.

Family disintegration

50) In our society, it is families who suffer the direct effects of poverty. Children are subject to abuses of all types, physical abuse, psychological abuse and denial of their basic needs. These privations have various effects: Childhood labour from a very young age, sexual abuse and exploitation, abandoning the home, drug addiction and prostitution, among others. Sectorial studies on each of these socially destructive effects also indicate that parental irresponsibility and children abandoning families are usually the result of parents travelling to the United States to look for work and never coming back; or they will leave their children in the care of other family members for long periods of time, all these aspects are a faithful testimony to the abandonment and abuse of children. The patterns of disintegration are transmitted across generations, repeating themselves time and again, the obvious lack of preparation of couples getting married must be looked at carefully and the state must be urged to take measures in this respect.

The search for a solution

51) Despite the seriousness of the events, no one in Honduras has proposed any effective mechanisms of mediation to put an end to the conflict that has turned many *barrios* and communities into inhuman battlefields. Not one of the major players involved has been able to overcome the dominant dynamic of fear, vengeance and "execution" that surrounds them. The country is still following the debate between the defenders of human rights who consider more violence to be unacceptable as an answer to the conflict and a broad section of the population who, egged on by the mass media, demand *mano fuerte* (strong hand) and support any measures to remedy the situation.

52) *For the National Commission on Human Rights, the first step is for the state and society as a whole to recognise their collective complicity and responsibility for a drama that is not exclusive to the gangs.* It is for this reason that this report attempts to lay the foundations for a new way of looking at the issue that promotes a solution other than extermination: First, all initiatives for resolving the conflict put forward by public institutions and NGOs must be based on a rejection of violence, even in circumstances in which it is still occurring. The idea of allowing the gangsters to "kill each other off" is ineffective as well as being abhorrent.

53) In order to channel the various proposals, we will need to organise a minimum consensus that represents various sections of society including the gangsters themselves and other youth organisations, we need to create mechanisms for mediation and reconciliation that promote the reconstruction of the communities in conflict. In order to achieve this through negotiation, we will need to reach at least two basic objectives:

a) A truce between the "18" and the "Salvatrucha" gangs which breaks down the rivalry between them that only leads to more atrocities and conflict. There can be no doubt that the capacity for destruction that has accumulated promotes degradation, isolation and exclusion.

b) We must set up a national programme of community reconstruction that is properly funded and then reinsert the gangsters into productive jobs and educational and social activities that break down the current trends of isolation and marginalisation. These agreements must be complementary to a truce and must be strictly applied.

54) To do this, it will be essential to organise a national advisory body in order to determine the problems to be confronted and to understand the concept of youth violence, distinguishing it from other types that endanger security, such as organised crime. We must try to discuss issues and to reach agreements concerning the *barrios* including disarmament, domestic violence, community policing, health, drug trafficking and others. The peace and security of the residents in the *barrios* and colonies cannot be improved just by getting rid of the gangs or the establishment of a Law for the Prevention, Rehabilitation and Social Reinsertion of Gang Members, approved in September of 2001.

55) This law, which does not use the term *mara* as it states that it does not appear in the Dictionary of the Royal Academy for the Spanish Language, stipulates that the "good people" must redeem the "bad people". The young gangsters are involved in the process but are not really taken into account. The keystone of this proposal is the formation of Socio-educational Centres that can be accessed in three ways: 1) Voluntarily by persons subject to law; 2) in the case of minors, through a justified application by parents or teachers, and 3) by court order in cases that fall under criminal law. Although the law contains some positive aspects, the aim is to use all possible resources to search for

and support peaceful and long-lasting solutions to a conflict in which young people are the main protagonists, whether they are involved or not. Among other things it is therefore essential that the state demilitarises all forms of intervention with the gangs and that the young gang members renounce the use of arms in response. There can be no moral, social or legal justification for appealing to the use of arms and repression to "resolve" the conflict.

56) Solutions will not be easy to find, nor will it be easy to find a consensus and put it into practice, but it is essential that the state and civil society do not capitulate just because of the complexity of the problem. The economic, political, social and cultural structures that drive the existence of the gangs can be transformed from the *barrios* themselves without waiting for action from public bodies.

57) Honduras is not starting from zero in this initiative. There are many organisations specialising in children and adolescents who would be able to drive a continuous process of reconciliation and which, up till now, have not been taken seriously. The aim is to construct a culture of peace both nationally and within the *barrios*, to construct new alliances and civilian networks that are both imaginative and robust and are supported by communities, schools, churches, the media and young people themselves.

58) One essential part of the process of reconciliation will be research and a search for justice and the application of the law in all the crimes committed over the years, but this should not be subordinate to the agreements reached. Nevertheless, putting an end to impunity will be one way to guarantee that peace is legitimised and consolidated. The old ways and the old structures that promote systems of violence must not be allowed to persist. The Honduran state and the society itself must admit that their efforts up to now have been insufficient to put an end to the culture of violence; the tragic fate of the young gang members is proof of that failure. We need to stimulate a new awareness of the issue, one that is able to accept and promote non-violent mechanisms for resolving conflict.

4.3. Brazil

4.3.1. Child and young combatants Report from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

"Child combatants" are children and adolescents under the age of 18 who use small arms in wars and civil conflicts and other situations of intense violence involving armed groups.

"Child combatant" is a broader category than "child soldier", as this only applies to children fighting in areas that fit under the traditional definition of "at war". Therefore, the term "child soldier" does not cover the reality of millions

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www.adital.org.br

of children in the world who are employed by armed groups to participate in armed violence in countries that are not officially at war, but have higher levels of armed homicide than other regions where there is civil war. In these areas, children and adolescents participate in armed violence on a scale that is similar or even more intense than in some areas that are considered to be in conflict. However, armed violence in these areas is considered as "crime" or "juvenile delinquency". Although there are some similarities with what we would traditionally understand as criminal activity, these definitions do not really reflect the level of participation of children in these types of combat.

Examples of child combatants that are not fighting in actual wars are the children and young people employed by drug gangs in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

These hierarchically structured factions have existed since the sixties-eighties and they have become openly armed and a political force in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. It is estimated that around 4,000 child combatants use weapons of war and participate in intermittent and intense territorial conflict between rival gangs. They are responsible for most of the 3,000 casualties caused by guns that are recorded in the city each year.

The involvement of child combatants in armed disputes between rival gangs and against the police is being documented in an investigation being undertaken by Viva Río and the ISER that will be published in September (www.desarme.org).

"Disputes between gangs of drug traffickers for the territorial control of Rio de Janeiro cause more deaths in young people and adolescents than the armed conflict between Israel and Palestine or the internal conflicts in Africa and Colombia. This is the conclusion drawn in a research on child combatants in organised armed violence undertaken by the ISER (Institute of Studies on Religion).

According to this study, which included armies and insurgent groups that recruit "child soldiers", from December 1987 to November of 2001 467 children and young people died in the Middle East conflict, but during the same period, 3,937 minors and young people died from firearm wounds in the area of greater Rio de Janeiro.

The epidemiology of the external causes and indicators of violence and accidents in Rio de Janeiro shows that the probability of someone being killed by a gun in Brazil was three times greater in 1998 than it was in 1979.

Recife is the city that presents the highest rate of gun deaths in Brazil. The probability of a person dying from a gunshot wound in Recife in 1998 was twelve times the average for the city of New York in 1996. Rio de Janeiro occupies third place in the ranking of Brazilian cities with that rate.

Between 1996 and 1998, the highest number of gun deaths was recorded in the metropolitan area of Rio among the 20 to 29 year-old age range, with a rate of 102.6 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by the 15 to 19 year-olds.

According to the police, close to 68% of the homicides occurring in Rio involve firearms: More adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 died in Rio de Janeiro in 1998 because of gunshot wounds than by any other cause, including illness and traffic accidents.

The goal of the investigation undertaken by ISER was to understand the scope and the dynamic of child involvement as victims and perpetrators of armed violence in Brazil, especially in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro. Using this data, ISER developed programmes designed to extract children and young people from violent surroundings, rehabilitating them and involving them in prevention programmes.

5. Ideas for interpreting the documents about Ecuador, Honduras and Brazil

- Juvenile reactions, their organisations, their excesses and their faults go beyond an interpretation in which the family and the schools are mainly to blame for failing to educate children.
- The body is an important way for young gang members to express themselves. They are tattooed, they dress in colours that identify them, their shoes are a part of their identity, they wear baggy trousers, they cut their hair in a particular way, their street culture reflects the exclusion and stigmatisation they are subject to.
- Their necklaces and their names are the symbols they use to create their distinctive and particular identities. Their territories are marked out by *chapeteo*, a primitive form of graffiti.
- Their initiation and membership rituals are very similar to the hazing performed in the military and in the temporary homes and prisons they find themselves in. They use these forms of punishment, they exaggerate them and make them a part of their codes of conduct.
- These rites have to do with their concepts of courage, machismo and authoritarianism. A person who is unable to pass them is not worthy of joining the *mara* or gang.
- Women take on masculine behaviour when they join these gangs, except in the way they dress, as their clothes are often tight-fitting and provocative.
- They mark out their territories to warn off rival gangs and serious confrontations can occur if these boundaries are broken.
- The leader is the person who demonstrates the most aggression and stamina. They will often have been in prison several times, which adds prestige and makes them someone who knows life. Each group has only one leader, the others are subordinates.
- The leaders will often have bodyguards, the so-called "dark leaders" who carry arms.

Bibliography

See Cervino, "Imágenes e imaginarios de la conflictividad juvenil". *Seguridad Ciudadana*, FLACSO, page 417 onwards. June 2002

- Most of the members of the group will be armed but not all. They know how to get hold of arms and these often come from the official law and order bodies.
- Gangs are emotive communities, especially for those males who are not used to displaying their emotions in public, as they shield themselves behind a macho aggressive image.
- There is a high level of drug consumption including alcohol. Most of them drink a lot, both males and females.

6. Some proposals and actions designed to reverse the situation in Ecuador

- In Ecuador, the SER PAZ organisation is committed to work directly with gangs as an organisation and not with the individuals that belong to them.
- After a first stage that included approaching the gangs, getting to know them and creating trust, their work was reported in media outlets in the city.
- The turning point was the death of several taxi drivers, a student at a school and a young woman at the hands of the gangs within a few days.
- An anti-gang committee was established in the city that included representatives from the government, the forces of law and order and normal members of society.
- SER PAZ brought together the leaders of various groups they were in contact with and planned a meeting between them and the governor of the province, who represented the executive power.
- The meeting was held on neutral ground, without the presence of the press or the police. The leaders requested that two witnesses be present.
- At this meeting, they talked about putting an end to discrimination and to the police arresting them for being in the street. They asked for a place in the city where they could paint graffiti, a public area where they could break-dance and assistance with producing a record including rap, reggae and hip hop songs dealing with the topic of peace.
- They also asked for grants to help them take short technical courses and support for setting up micro-businesses.
- In return, they promised to keep the parks where they danced clean and bring the "street war" to an end.
- The governor organised a meeting with the anti-gang committee at which they presented their 8-point plan. They also held a press conference at the governor's house that included the governor, a graffiti gang, the Colonel-in-Chief of the police and the director of SER PAZ.
- It was quite an achievement for the gang members to be seated there with these people.

- The chief of police proposed that the walls of the prison and the police hospital be the first places to be painted. A private company and some embassies provided the paint and the necessary equipment and the first examples of graffiti art painted by the gang members were unveiled 12 days later with the attendance of the police band, the authorities of the province and the media. This took place on a public thoroughfare, so the traffic had to be diverted beforehand.
- Later on, eight more murals were painted in various public places of the city both in the city centre and in the suburbs.
- This provided visibility for many of the graffiti artists in the gangs who worked together despite being from different groups, it took them out of obscurity and made them feel important, recognised by society for their artistic abilities and not for their crimes.
- At the same time, a group of artists, composers and singers recorded their first CD with songs composed by them: "EL PACIFICADOR" (lyrics attached in the annex). Four different groups competed musically instead of using guns. Recording a record professionally required discipline, timetables and listening to the opinions of others. It was an opportunity for others to recognise other people's abilities as well as their own. The record was launched in the auditorium of the Central Bank in the presence of the authorities, the military and the police.
- Private banks also began treating the gang members as micro-entrepreneurs and provided them with their first loan allowing them to set up a shoe micro-business on preferential terms. The meeting took place in the board room of the bank in the presence of the management and the loan officers, all of them seated on impressive chairs. Never before had a leader of Imperio, an organisation that includes several "nations", been treated in this way.
- The State University also provided a lecture room belonging to the psychology department in which leadership lessons were given to the heads of the gangs. 16 leaders were given 20 hours of training and were awarded a diploma after demonstrating that they were able to put what they had learned into practice with their groups. The fact that they were awarded the diploma in front of their "subordinates" after a "practical exam" was good both for the leaders and the training organisation.
- SER PAZ went on to employ one male and one female who had received this training as facilitators in a workshop for young gang members that they organise in a suburb of the city. They both worked as a team with other professional members of the institution while one was still the leader of his gang and the other an ex-member of hers.

- Other young people were invited to several discussions with the various Rotary groups in the city, they were also invited to television programmes in which they could either appear anonymously with their faces covered and voices distorted or with their faces revealed.
- This whole process allowed to tackle the problems associated with gangs from a different perspective than repression and condemnation. A dialogue was established in the city. One of the culminating events was the reading of a manifesto for peace in the main park of the city in the presence of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel, on the commemoration day of the independence of the city. The text was as follows:

Guayaquil Puerto de Paz 2002 Manifesto

The young people of the city of Guayaquil who belong to gangs, groups, nations and organisations, facing discrimination by the authorities, the failure to comply with the rights of children and adolescents, a lack of training and development spaces for all young people, an increase in violence and complicity and a lack of attention from the authorities, are meeting here to present the city with this manifesto.

We want this manifesto to be above all a call to individual conscience and a wake-up call for the authorities. We want to be a part of the solution, not just part of the problem.

At the moment, we feel threatened by the presence of war, a war not perceived by society but one that we have to live through everyday on the streets of the city. We want to put an end to violence. We understand it is hard for even one person to achieve this. As young people, we want to be the spark that lights the flame of peace within the city.

We promise to put a peaceful end to our organisations. We want them to become positive forums where young people can meet and express themselves. As leaders, we promise to undergo training so that we can in turn train the other members of our organisations on peace. We want our groups to be examples for other youth organisations. We know that respect must be mutual, and for this reason we ask for respect for ourselves and all members of our groups, for our families, for our teachers and for the authorities.

We are prepared to work in initiatives put forward by the authorities. We are prepared to discuss and to work together.

We want to remind the police what we have learned. Violence cannot be resolved with violence. We want to walk the streets without being harassed for the way we dress. We want to be able to meet, freely.

We call on the media to report the good things we do as well, we would like to remind them that our art and our music should not be used as a means for discrimination. Belonging to a gang does not mean being a criminal. We ask the community to help us. We ask businessmen to fulfil their commitments to society and young people and to give back some of what they have. We want jobs to be created for young people. We want to receive training.

To our families we promise to work to create understanding at home. We ask the heads of schools to be understanding towards young people and not to expel them from the classroom.

All the members of the gangs, the nations and the organisations, recognise that we have made mistakes, in many cases we have injured the people around us, but we have suffered a lot too. We understand that saying sorry will not change what has happened. It is up to us to demonstrate that with our youthful spirit we are able to make people smile and to fill people's hearts with happiness, where before we did not.

We, the undersigned young leaders, promise this in the name of our organisations.

- A cooperative-bank is currently in the process of being set up. The initial capital is \$1,000, which was donated from the sales of a book written by a well-known priest of the city. The first 10 members have been chosen and they include 5 males and 5 females. They have promised to repay the loans, whose maximum amount will be \$100. They will also receive personal and administrative training. To achieve this, they travelled to a city in the mountains where a similar organisation exists run by female farm workers. Here, they will learn how to keep up to date with their payments and to invest their earnings. Loans will be progressively increased as long as they comply with their obligations. The last person to receive their loan will be the leader of the group. The lenders come from different groups and different cities. One of the problems that needs resolving is that they want loans in order to set up a small business to sell pirate CDs. In Ecuador, original CDs are very expensive (between \$10 and \$15), but there is a black market in pirated disks (which cost \$3). The dilemma revolves around the copyright, but poor people can only afford these types of disks. Perhaps this is a better than openly stealing... The problem exists, but has still not been resolved.
- Another initiative requiring municipal support that has still not been achieved is the allocation of a space in the city where they can dance. This is an important aspect. It will improve their self-confidence. It could be a place where tourists go, allowing them to generate income by selling food or graffiti t-shirts etc. Dancers would not be allowed to drink or take drugs and they would have to go to the gym several hours a day. Although this might seem simple, it is proving hard to achieve. The authorities are still thinking in terms of suppression rather than finding areas for dance and rap music. However, it will be achieved eventually.
- We are asking for the collaboration of the Ecuadorian leaders to intervene in the problems generated by "affiliates" in other countries, above all Spain.
- One of the nations is documenting its 10 year history and they are excited about the possibility of turning it into a film, they themselves proposed

the idea of doing it together with other interested parties. The support for this would come from Spain.

- Another proposal being considered is that they travel to the United States and get to know other groups such as "Barrios Unidos" in California and others in New York. They do not have the resources to make this trip, but it would be interesting because they admire the United States. Other gangs who do not use violence would make excellent models for other ways of organising their own gangs.
- Contacts are being made to find a way of bringing together the families of the victims of youth violence and some of the aggressors, although not those who attacked the victims. This is an important task that is just beginning and will require a lot of understanding and maturity. It is the aggressors who undergo the greatest transformation when they understand the magnitude of their actions and the way the people they attacked or killed were loved. The process is being designed based on other experiences, but always listening to all proposals.
- It is very important for the victims to be heard.

7. Final conclusions

The following achievements have been made so far:

- The problems associated with gangs have been brought into the open to be dealt with by society as a whole.
- The seriousness of the problem has been exposed and we now know the rough number of young people of both sexes involved in this process. (30,000-40,000 in the city) The employment of these juvenile networks by drug-trafficking gangs is a clear danger and is beginning to become a reality.
- It has ended confrontations between the groups participating in the process.
- It has ended confrontations between the most violent gangs who were feuding.
- Getting the support of the media.
- Two active members have been integrated into our professional team.
- The self-esteem of gang members has been increased.
- There is collaboration and respect for the authorities.
- Regional and central government authorities have become involved.
- Police collaborate by providing statistical data.

Many mistakes have been made.

- Setting up a successful small business requires market research, and this was not done.
- The gang members who joined the team require special support as they have suffered severe emotional crises. SER PAZ is committed to maintaining them as leaders to change the actions of their groups. They do not see themselves very well in their groups, their notable personal changes are hard to deal with in the world they belong to.

- A lot of follow up work needs to be done that requires highly qualified staff, which cannot be paid due to a lack of resources.
- Intervention projects have not become self-sustaining.
- Some gangs expect to be given a lot and give back little in return.
- The expectations of the gangs go beyond the capabilities of SER PAZ and there are no other groups doing similar work in the city.
- The state is not providing resources for this problem.

The methodology used in training members includes:

- Recognising the knowledge and experience of these young people.
- Enriching and corroborating their knowledge, clearing up doubts, using workshops to analyse and transform their daily lives.
- The practical application of their knowledge in everyday life is evaluated.

It is based on the following principles:

- Being positive
- Being proactive and creative
- Being reliable, our word is our bond. Recovering the chance for discussion allows other symbols to be accessed that are not being used by most of the young gang members.

The following parameters are used:

- Belonging to the group
- Competence in the sense of being competent and not competitive
- And vision. This is a challenge, because they want immediate results and do not have long-term plans.

The result of this experiment is the publication of the first training leaflet dealing with the subject of: self-esteem. SER PAZ believes that in order to dismantle violence and the underground state of war in which the gang members live it is essential to promote self-esteem. The economic problems are significant and concomitant, but resolving these problems does not really change the behaviour of those who consider themselves and who are considered by others to be non-people.

However, there are other people and institutions undertaking other types of activities in order to diminish the aggression of many gangs, above all in Colombia, where the relationship with arms and drug trafficking is more evident given the state of civil war that has existed in the country for over 40 years. Some people believe that the fact that the gang members have regained their credibility in the *barrios* thanks to the community activities they have been performing gives them more power, so they should be prevented from working in groups to make it impossible for them to recruit new members for their gangs.

In Peru, the youngest gang members receive intensive training from the military when the mothers or family members allow it; they have to rise early and bathe in cold water, and generally follow a strict, severe, harsh and authoritarian regime. Often, the Stockholm Syndrome comes in to play, children and young people identify with their trainers and want to be soldiers like them.

I believe that the debate is still open. We need to decide which proposals are best in the short, medium and long term and which produce the best results in society and make people grow the most.

These processes go at their own speed, they need to be respected and listened to, but also accelerated. Nothing can justify the death of a human being at the hands of another, much less in the case of young people. Allowing people to learn is better than teaching them, no-one learns something they have not asked about, but we can arouse their curiosity and imagine the answers together.

The wise person contemplates the inevitable and sees it is not inevitable...
The average person contemplates what is not inevitable and sees it is inevitable...

Zhuangzi, quoted by Lou Marinoff in: *Plato, not Prozac!*