For a new strategy to reduce violence in non-war contexts

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Over the last 20 years, high levels of crime and violence have become a very important problem in several Latin American countries, significantly affecting their development. The danger of this situation becoming chronic points to the need to evaluate the violence reduction strategies that have been implemented, to study the responses that are being offered by the civil population, as well as to measure the impact that this chronification of violence is having on children and youth, two of the groups most affected by this situation.

This Policy Paper poses the need to reorient the policies currently being promoted by public administrations at a state and local level, arguing for a more integral approach, rather than policies based merely on security measures. Although several countries worldwide suffer high levels of violence in non-war contexts, in this Policy Paper we will focus on the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras), Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. This choice is based on a criminological analysis over time and takes into account the need to evaluate the public policies that are being applied in these places, allowing a comparative vision.

Context

Since the 1990s, new challenges have been posed in terms of security and the culture of peace in some Latin American countries. The deportation from the United States of America of thousands of Central Americans, among them members of North American criminal gangs returned to their countries of origin, marked a turning point in the process of democratic construction in the region. In Mexico, the expansion and growing territorial consolidation of the drug trafficking network has put into question the rule of law and its ability to guarantee the safety of its citizens. In Brazil, the lack of opportunities and the struggle for the control of urban areas has led to a big growth in crime and insecurity in a large part of the urban fabric of the big cities. And in Colombia, an open armed conflict lasting more than five decades has left a broken country that would like to forget a past of common widespread violence. All these countries have for years been at the top of the world league charts in security

and crime, especially with regard to murder. All of them share common problems, such as corruption, impunity or institutional weakness. They also share the consequences of years of a widespread violence that has led to a significant fall in quality of life for the civilian population: restrictions on freedom of movement, forced displacement, problems in public health, the destruction of social fabric, effects on public space, increasing vulnerability of women, etc., besides high economic costs to people and companies, to civil society and to the state.

All these forms of violence have, furthermore, some common characteristics. The main one is that they occur — principally but not exclusively — in the urban environment, preventing cities from becoming shared spaces for socialisation, generating visible and invisible walls between their inhabitants. Social and spatial segregation has become one of the greatest challenges that local governments are facing. Overcoming those social dynamics influenced by insecurity and the pressure of criminal groups is one

of the main lines of work of the civil organisations active in urban territories, where women and youth are the groups that most suffer this violence. The social fractures that have been opened are becoming more and more evident and the new generations are suffering an increasingly chronic insecurity.
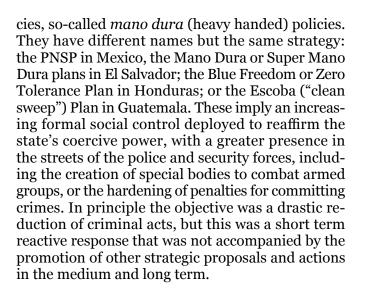
At the same time, there is an increase in selective violence against those leading figures that fight for peace, justice, democracy or the environment in these territories. Social activists, human rights defenders and journalists are the three main groups that suffer extrajudicial executions, pressures from the state and local governments, as well as from criminal groups. The objective sought by these measures is to silence them, to make reality invisible. The connivance between a part of the political class and criminal groups is also a factor, as is the growing interest on the part of some governments in silencing communities.

Analysis

More than two decades of generalised violence have led to the civilian population increasing their capacity for resilience, that is, their ability to adapt themselves and overcome adversity. While society has forcibly adjusted to this situation, a large part of the political class has been incapable of proposing effective and transformative solutions that significantly reduce the levels of violence and insecurity in these areas. Even the criminals have managed to minimise the impact of the harsh securitisation policies promoted by national governments of all political colours. This process of adaptation to the new circumstances has meant, for example, that prison policies are currently one of the biggest failures in the struggle to reduce violence, because they do not focus on nor achieve satisfactory levels of social reintegration.

There has been a greater fragmentation of criminal groups (gangs, cartels, *maras*, etc.) alongside a greater territorial expansion. By increasing the sophistication of their organisational structures they have achieved greater autonomy and resistance in the face of the attempts by national and local governments to eradicate their criminal activities. In the case of the countries of the Northern Triangle, they have also had the complicity and support of an important part of the social fabric where they operate, greatly increasing the difficulties for the political, social and police efforts to face up to them.

The repeated response of governments to a situation of ongoing exceptionality has been directed towards the implementation of securitising policies, so-called *mano dura* (heavy handed) policies. They have different names but the same strategy: the PNSP in Mexico, the Mano Dura or Super Mano Dura plans in El Salvador; the Blue Freedom or Zero Tolerance Plan in Honduras; or the Escoba ("clean sweep") Plan in Guatemala. These imply an increasing formal social control deployed to reaffirm the state's coercive power, with a greater presence in the streets of the police and security forces, including the creation of special bodies to combat armed groups, or the hardening of penalties for committing crimes. In principle the objective was a drastic reduction of criminal acts, but this was a short term reactive response that was not accompanied by the promotion of other strategic proposals and actions in the medium and long term.

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The militarisation of public space, with the participation of the army in internal security functions, was yet another sign of governments' inability to offer longer term strategies of intervention. Their presence on the streets has the obvious aim of visible dissuasion and of reassuring the public, but the military lack the medium and long-term competencies to deal with citizens' insecurity.

In addition, there is the fact that corruption has been and still is a determining factor in understanding the use of military forces in public security tasks. In recent years, there have been cyclical processes aimed at cleaning up the police in, for example, Mexico, Honduras or Brazil, when it was shown that police forces had participated in extrajudicial executions or had been accused of corruption; the same accusations that have also been faced by numerous local and national political leaders that have been removed from their posts.

The governments' focus on directing all their efforts towards the implementation of securitisation policies has been constant over recent years and only the recognition that levels of violence continued to be high has led them to consider new models and

strategies. In fact, over the last few years, despite the implementation of heavy handed policies, crimes such as extortion, kidnapping and homicides have increased. It is impossible to reduce high crime rates with heavy-handed policies alone.

These exclusionary and short-sighted policies have also led to a significant reduction in citizens' fundamental rights, placing the need to recover and guarantee these rights at the centre of public debate.

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We are also seeing a significant generational problem, given the ongoing situation of exceptionality, which in reality is one of "normalisation". Society is losing its capacity to be shocked and to react; the high levels of impunity are the great failure of these countries' judicial systems, and this leads to a consequent loss of citizens' confidence in their institutions.

While national policies have mainly oriented their efforts towards the application of measures based on securitisation, at a local level, which is much closer to the reality of the civilian population, there has been an effort to incorporate other types of policies, especially prevention strategies and public health programs. These are strategies to reduce violence whose results can not be expected in the short term. We are talking, for example, of programs for the prevention of violence among youth, within families and against women; effective compliance with international norms relating to children, adolescents and young people; programs for conflict resolution and reducing levels of social exclusion; strengthening the networks of social organisations, etc. The recomposition, strengthening and development of the social fabric, especially in marginalised urban areas affected by violence, is essential for progress in reducing crime rates on the basis of civil society.

The situation of endemic violence in territories of the Northern Triangle, Mexico, Colombia or Brazil is clear. In some urban areas it is even a chronic problem. Repressive policies in themselves are ineffective if they are not accompanied by other policies that are proactive and aimed also at prevention.

Recommendations addressed to governments

- *Promote an evaluation of official violence reduction policies.* It is necessary to measure the impact of the different strategies promoted by regional, national and local public administrations over recent years. This study will facilitate better decision-making regarding security.

- *Make a commitment to the implementation of integral government policies;* these must leave behind policies merely oriented on securitisation. The very growth of violence and crime makes it necessary to apply inclusive, non exclusionary, policies. Violence in non-war contexts is not only a security problem, it is also an economic and social problem, and a public health issue. There is a need to incorporate all these perspectives, including public health, and all of them must be taken into account in the search for solutions.

- *Promote the implementation of preventive policies*, especially in those areas where criminal groups might recruit children and young people. It is absolutely essential to protect schools and make them centres free of violence.

- *Put citizens and their needs at the centre of public debate.* The gradual loss of rights and the ongoing debate between security and freedom is distancing citizens from politics.

- *Promote the active participation of social agents* in particular, and civil society in general, in the taking of decisions about violence reduction strategies. This will facilitate their implementation and reduce resistances, empowering the groups to which these strategies are directed.

- *Moving from public security to citizens' security.* Changing the current monitoring system to one oriented on results, thus improving the measurement of the impact of security policies, and placing emphasis on active follow up and accountability.

- *Encourage the creation of broad regional and national agreements on citizens' security,* with the participation of governments, political parties and the principal civil society actors. Security policy must be a matter for the state, not the government.

- *Strengthen the state* at all administrative levels. The weakness of public institutions, whether due to corruption, lack of competences or resources,

puts into question the ability of the state itself to face up to challenges in the area of security and also of justice.

■ *Regulate firearms.* The proliferation and uncontrolled availability of firearms can contribute to maintaining the intensity and duration of violence in non-war contexts.

Key strategic recommendations for the ICIP

■ *Promote networking among different actors — organisations, public administrations, specialists.* Recognising the strengths and weaknesses of the ICIP when initiating a new area of work and research, it is necessary to establish new alliances with actors who have experience and knowledge in the field.

■ *Create a multidisciplinary working group* that will allow the ICIP to generate its own network of social agents, public administrations and specialists on this subject.

■ *Support efforts to systematise statistical data* on violence and crime, especially at a local level, where there is hardly any analysis and evaluation of successful cases in the issue of violence reduction.

■ *Focus research on the Northern Triangle, Brazil and Mexico,* countries that, due to their statistics and comparisons regarding insecurity and crime in the last two decades, require special attention. The regional and transnational dimensions of organised crime, gangs and cartels, however, will make it necessary to retain a regional vision of the program. Evaluate the need to maintain Colombia within the group of priority countries for analysis and study.

■ *Analyse the impact of these forms of violence on the civilian population,* especially forcibly displaced people: internally displaced people, unrecognised or made invisible by their own governments; and forced migrants seeking refuge in third countries.

■ *Evaluate international cooperation policies on security and culture of peace.* International cooperation by the main international agencies has not been blind to the reality of these countries, and has implemented numerous programs over recent years. Evaluate specifically the policies aimed at children and youth.

■ *Become an international mouthpiece* that denounces the ongoing violation of basic rights in these territories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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POLICY PAPER

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