Violence and Community Capabilities: Insights for Building Safe and Inclusive Cities in Central America

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http://www.american.edu/clals/Exclusion-and-Violence.cfm

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Introduction

Urban violence across Latin America and the Caribbean is often attributed to pervasive poverty and extraordinary levels of inequality, which, despite recent significant advances, have long plagued the region. Yet poverty and inequality alone do not provide an adequate explanation for urban violence. Not only does the incidence of violence vary dramatically across countries with comparable social indicators, but even within especially violent countries, not all marginalized communities are equally violent, and some enjoy relative peace. Also, some neighborhoods of even the most dangerous cities boast community-based initiatives that significantly reduce the damage wreaked by violence, while elsewhere such efforts are either nonexistent or achieve limited if any results. Researchers and policymakers are challenged, then, to identify precisely what factors fuel violence within urban communities and what sorts of policy interventions and community capabilities seem most conducive to avoiding violence and reducing its impact. Only with such context-specific understanding can governments, donors, and communities themselves foster and sustain interventions that can bring about safer, more inclusive cities.

This paper offers insights into dynamics of urban violence in two Central American countries that have evolved very differently historically. Costa Rica boasts the lowest overall levels of poverty and inequality of any country on the Isthmus, and has benefited from decades of stable and relatively inclusive governance highlighted by ambitious social policies. El Salvador, by contrast, exhibits severe levels of poverty and inequality typical of its neighbors, as well as a long history of exclusionary rule and corresponding inattention to social welfare. Yet our research reveals significant parallels between the two countries. This three-year, multi-method comparative study, carried out by teams at FLACSO-Costa Rica and FLACSO-El Salvador in collaboration with American University and with support from the IDRC/DFID Safe and Inclusive Cities program, focused on violence in two impoverished urban communities in Costa Rica and three in El Salvador. In all five settings, we analyzed neighborhood dynamics as well as community assessments of anti-violence interventions. We identified numerous lessons, some of which are counterintuitive, as well as concrete measures for consideration by regional, national, and local policymakers and community actors.

The first section of this paper offers an overview of urban violence in Central America, synthesizing data from across the region and highlighting trends and consequences. The second explains our concept of social exclusion as a more powerful predictor of violence than poverty or inequality alone. The third addresses the nature and causes of violence in the five communities and its effects on the everyday lives of residents. We then turn to the ways in which communities, states, and donor...
Although continuous urban growth and the urbanization of violent conflict are powerful trends across much of the world, nowhere are these dynamics more acutely visible than in Central American cities. A 2009 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report established a direct correlation between crime and urban growth, with homicide rates increasing virtually everywhere in Latin American countries where urban population growth exceeds two percent per year. Per capita homicide rates vividly depict the region’s security crisis. Central America is home to only one of every 165 people globally, yet the region accounts for roughly seven of every 165 homicides (UNODC, 2013). In 2012, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala had the unwelcome distinction of being ranked among the five most murderous countries in the world. Honduras led the list with a staggering 90.4 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants; Belize was third (44.7); El Salvador fourth (41.2); and Guatemala fifth (39.9) (UNODC, 2013). Youth are disproportionately affected (Imbusch, Misse, & Carrión, 2011). In Central America, the homicide rate for young people between the ages of 15 and 24 averages 50.2 per 100,000 inhabitants—over five times the rate necessary to classify as an “epidemic” under World Health Organization guidelines (OAS, 2012; UNDP, 2013; see also Imbusch et al., 2011).

Drug trafficking and consumption and mass deportations from the United States have contributed to the explosive mix. Drug-related violence, long emblematic of illicit economies and political insurgencies in rural areas, increasingly has become an urban phenomenon across Latin America (Tickner, 2007). Booming local drug markets, at times fueled inadvertently by international efforts to suppress established trafficking routes, have drawn previously less affected countries into the realm of drug-related violence (Gurney, 2014).

More specific to Central America has been the increase since the mid-1990s in the deportation of ex-convicts—many of them gang members—from the United States, a policy that has exported gang violence to a number of countries in the region. The problem has been exacerbated by the failure of Central American states to provide avenues for reinsertion of deportees, for many of whom gang membership becomes the sole available avenue for social incorporation. More broadly, recently emerged from decades of internal conflict, and plagued by weak institutions and stagnant economies, nascent democracies like El Salvador and Guatemala have proven unable to offer credible opportunities to their youth. In the resulting vacuum, gang membership frequently provides an avenue for opportunities and a sense of belonging (Dudley, 2012).
Sub-national level data reveal a disproportionately high concentration of violence in the region’s urban communities. While the urban bias of homicide is by no means unique to the region, in Central America the trend is particularly striking. In Honduras, for example, 65 percent of homicides take place in just five percent of the country’s urban areas (Ojea, 2014). Central American cities have surpassed other internationally recognized epicenters of urban violence, such as Ciudad Juárez in Mexico. Indeed, for four consecutive years, San Pedro Sula in Honduras reported the highest murder rate per capita on earth, and Tegucigalpa, Guatemala City, and San Salvador rank among the twenty most violent cities in the world (Pachico, 2015).

Yet homicide statistics tell only part of the story. In the 2012 OAS Report on Citizen Security, 27.9 percent of Costa Rican households asserted that at least one member had been a crime victim in the previous year. The UNDP (2013) estimates official robbery statistics in El Salvador to be 130 times lower than the numbers gathered through actual victimization survey data, signaling the absence of public confidence in police and security forces more generally. In Guatemala, official records for 2014 list 8,413 cases of extortion (Dedik, 2015), a “profit-motivated” crime committed predominantly by organized gangs, such as the Salvadoran cases described in subsequent sections of this paper. For the *mara*, extortion of bus companies, local businesses, and individuals constitutes a vital source of income, while sexual violence and forced recruitment of youth are additional gang-driven phenomena that generate widespread and extreme suffering.

The costs of crime and violence in Central America are immense. Related expenditures on security, law enforcement, and health absorb growing portions of both public and private spending (Tuluy, 2013). Insecurity and fear of crime among residents and investors impede economic activity. Forty-three percent of Salvadorans and 30 percent of Costa Ricans report having limited their recreational activities due to insecurity, and across Latin America the number of survey respondents citing crime as their main concern has tripled over the past decade (UNDP, 2013; Tuluy, 2013). The consequent withdrawal of the citizenry from public spaces weakens interpersonal ties and undermines community institutions, exacerbating the social isolation that feeds the expansion of gangs (Imbusch et al., 2011). Thus, city dwellers across Central America, from Guatemala and Belize in the north to Panama in the south, suffer the effects of violence not only as individuals but also in the fragmentation of the social fabric critical to healthy urban life (Muggah, 2012). Increased public expenditures for security have not translated into effective measures to curb crime and violence, and impunity is rife across the region (Rodgers, Muggah, & Stevenson, 2009).
The combination of primary and secondary exclusion—located, respectively, in the domains of the market and the state—opens the way to patterns of violence that result from the emergence of actors that replace the state’s monopoly on violence and territorial control.

Social Exclusion

The FLACSO study began with the hypothesis that rather than poverty or income inequality per se, social exclusion is the main underlying factor influencing the vulnerability of Central American cities to violence. Social exclusion, in our terms, is the result of extreme inequalities rooted in underlying structures. When citizens lack the basic skills and opportunities required to secure stable employment, and have no access to capital, land, or other income-generating assets, they suffer what we label “primary exclusion.” In the cases we studied, this results in unemployment, unregulated wage labor with no social protection whatsoever, or informal sector self-employment that may provide subsistence income but offers no prospects for growth or capital accumulation. Primary exclusion generates a degree of disempowerment so extreme as to preclude any prospects of achieving wellbeing. Our study shows that in some circumstances primary exclusion motivates its victims to engage in various forms of violence.

The effects of primary exclusion can be mitigated in settings where the state affords the population some degree of social citizenship, reflected in access to social welfare protections and education. Where these protections are absent, or where the state abandons territories altogether, communities suffer what we call “secondary exclusion.” The combination of primary and secondary exclusion—located, respectively, in the domains of the market and the state—opens the way to patterns of violence that result from the emergence of actors that replace the state’s monopoly on violence and territorial control.

Considerable scholarship (Moser & Winton, 2002; Perez Sáinz & Mora, 2007) has emphasized precarious employment and government neglect as critical factors underpinning urban violence. By emphasizing how these two phenomena intersect, this research project sought to better understand why poverty and income inequality alone do not explain the prevalence of violence in certain areas. At the same time, it also aimed to explain why communities with comparable levels of social exclusion might experience varying levels of violence, and why efforts to combat violence in environments characterized by widespread social exclusion have produced mixed results.

Our empirical research in five communities confirmed the relationship between social exclusion and urban violence and provided convincing evidence of why policies aimed at addressing only employment and other income-generating activities, on the one hand, or the revitalization of state institutions, on the other, tend to fail. However, it also revealed how features of the social and institutional landscapes in such settings generate counterintuitive and even troubling conclusions about the impact of some common approaches to addressing the causes of urban violence.

Furthermore, this study draws attention to an additional way in which social exclusion drives urban violence: households suffering from social exclusion are more likely
Evidence also suggested that victims of domestic violence are more likely to become perpetrators of violence in the broader community. This linkage between dynamics at home and behaviors in public has important implications for both the analysis of violence in the region and the range of potentially effective policy options to counteract it.

Social Exclusion and Urban Violence in Five Communities

This study focused on five urban communities in which we conducted surveys, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with selected households and key stakeholders, and community workshops where structured discussions took place to evaluate existing initiatives to reduce urban violence.

The two Costa Rican communities—Cariari and Concepción Arriba—rank among the most disadvantaged in the country according to human development indicators. Indeed, the former exhibits levels of hardship that resemble those prevalent in El Salvador, with the major difference being the social security coverage that in principle exists in Costa Rica. In both communities, unemployment and job stability are major concerns, with study participants identifying lack of jobs and low educational attainment as the primary reasons for low labor force participation. Characteristics of secondary exclusion are also evident: while basic government services such as education and health care do in fact exist, access to these services is often hindered by high demand, low household budgets, and distance. This highlights the significance of geography: Concepción Arriba benefits from its location in the highly populated Central Valley, whereas Cariari is located more remotely. With few exceptions, both localities evidence low levels of social cohesion and community participation, which hamper the growth and effectiveness of local actors capable of advocating against government neglect. This phenomenon has been attributed in part to high concentrations of displaced and migrant settlers from the Costa Rican capital of San José and neighboring Nicaragua.

The three Salvadoran communities that were analyzed included two in the municipality of Sonsonate and another in the municipality of Santa Tecla, all of which rank poorly on human development indicators and exhibit varying degrees of social exclusion. In each instance, waves of informal settlement have produced precarious

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2Names of the Salvadoran communities are withheld from project publications in order to protect informants.
There are significant differences in the forms of violence that residents encounter in each of these communities. In the Costa Rican cases, “profit-motivated” violence occurs as a byproduct of the emergence of local markets for drugs. Demand for drugs has long existed here, but supply has expanded considerably in recent years, mainly due to the rerouting of international drug trafficking flows. Central America constitutes a key link between South American producers and North American consumers, and in a classic example of the so-called “balloon effect,” Costa Rica has witnessed increased trafficking through its territory as national and international authorities have clamped down on routes elsewhere. Some local residents receive in-kind payment in drugs in exchange for logistical support to the traffickers. As a result, drug availability and consumption have increased significantly. The local markets attract not only the most socially excluded members of the community but also individuals for whom the industry offers opportunities to gain prestige and to accumulate power and money. The latter consideration takes on greater importance in an era when youth are increasingly drawn to consumerism and, amidst high degrees of social exclusion, are liable to turn to illicit activities in hopes of satisfying these aspirations.

In contrast, violence in the Salvadoran communities revolves around youth gangs, locally known as maras. The maras do not strive merely to control specific locations and social groups in a community, as is the case with the highly localized Costa Rican drug markets. Rather, they seek total control of the territories in which they operate, replacing the state as the institution responsible for ensuring social order. The gangs’ monopoly on coercion in settings where the state is largely absent can generate an environment in which violence or the threat of violence is acute and constant. The landscape varies across communities, however: while some maras exert social control and thus contain violence unrelated to their own activities, the study also documented cases in which mara control over an area did not translate into effective violence reduction.

Urban communities characterized by deficient living conditions and, because of their illegal nature, severely limited access to government services. Levels of state engagement vary across the three communities, as do the forms of community mobilization. Notably, in one case joint efforts by community organizations and municipal authorities have secured property rights and some basic services.
In one Santa Tecla community we found that maras actively blocked the presence of state institutions. There and elsewhere in El Salvador, gangs frequently intervene in domestic and neighborhood-level conflicts, sometimes at the request of the residents themselves. Their monopoly on violence also offers protection to residents against threats from sources outside their communities. These interventions lend the maras a degree of local legitimacy, and the gangs thus become highly problematic yet crucial local institutions. As noted in the conclusions to this paper, our research finds that efforts to counteract urban violence in El Salvador will fail if they do not take into account the ambiguous yet critical role that gangs can play at the local level.

In all three Salvadoran communities, maras both forcefully recruit minors and offer gang membership as an avenue for advancement where no alternative paths to status or resources exist. The socioeconomic isolation of residents in these communities intensifies as outsiders associate them with gangs and stigmatize them accordingly (Sampson, 2012). This locks them out of labor markets and thus ensures the perpetuation of primary exclusion, thus reinforcing conditions that account for the propensity of residents to engage in various forms of violence.

Compared to Costa Rica, profit-oriented violence such as extortion is more common in the Salvadoran communities, where it is carried out exclusively by maras and is highly organized. This contrasts with the drug-related and more atomistic and sporadic violence in the Costa Rican communities where there is no overarching local organization controlling it. There, residents mainly cope with the fear of victimization.

This ambiguity is illustrated further by the ways in which social violence is managed in these communities. In El Salvador, maras “police” both domestic and neighborhood conflicts to avoid intervention from the state and thus safeguard their own unchallenged influence. In contrast, in the Costa Rican communities, domestic violence and violence between neighbors are routine occurrences that usually unfold without outside intervention. But however ubiquitous they may be, these forms of social violence are perceived by residents to be less threatening than the comparably low incidence of profit-oriented violence.

The impacts of different forms of violence are clearly visible in both Costa Rica and El Salvador. Across the research sites, we noted widespread fear among residents, who retreat into their homes and limit interactions with neighbors and outsiders alike, thereby increasing isolation and social fragmentation. Some fortify the security of their homes. Others alter certain routines, such as the times and starting points of their commutes. One option is to turn toward religion, particularly evangelical churches, to find spaces to sustain minimal social interaction.

Although crime rates are higher in El Salvador than in Costa Rica, it is telling that Costa Ricans are more likely than Salvadorans to report being victimized by criminal violence and violations of property rights. This observation underscores the “normalization” of violence in El Salvador . . . and its relative novelty in Costa Rica.
Because of the absence of any sense of community, nearly all efforts to counter violence in these settings come from the outside. “normalization” of violence in El Salvador, where it has long been a feature of everyday life and where the population lacks expectations of effective responses from state agencies. Whereas violence in El Salvador is widely taken for granted, its relative novelty in Costa Rica and societal expectations of the state explain both lower levels of resignation in the face of rising crime rates and the greater tendency of residents to report crimes to authorities. Yet the situation in the Costa Rican neighborhoods we studied is fragile: in the absence of timely, community-based interventions, residents are showing signs of losing faith in the state as a provider of security.

Community Responses

A substantial literature (McIlwaine & Moser, 2000; 2003) addresses the difficulties of forming and sustaining community in urban areas marked by social exclusion and provides clues for understanding some of the dynamics uncovered in our empirical research. One such clue is that all of these communities are relatively recent settlements where residents have had limited time to form a collective identity. The heterogeneous origins of the inhabitants make achievement of a common identity all the more elusive. In Costa Rica, rapid growth of the population in the Cariari settlement in recent years reflects migration from the capital city of San José, which has created a rift between longstanding residents and new arrivals. Indeed, some of the “original” residents perceive migrants to be the source of crime. This demographic heterogeneity is compounded by varying degrees of social exclusion. In Concepción Arriba, household surveys and interviews reveal profoundly different lifestyles and social aspirations, with some residents trapped in exclusion but others having managed, with varying levels of success, to overcome it.

Difficulties in land titling further reduce the likelihood that community identity will develop. In two of the Salvadoran communities the lack of recognition of property rights leaves residents utterly without access to government services or to formal governance mechanisms. Moreover, as noted above, in the Salvadoran cases residents are stigmatized by the association of their communities with the presence of gangs. These settlements are perceived among the broader Salvadoran population as zones of “barbarity,” separated cognitively from the “civilized” city. This stifles the inhabitants’ desire to be identified with their communities or to develop a sense of emotional belonging to their place of residence.

Because of the absence of any sense of community, nearly all efforts to counter violence in these settings come from the outside. The only notable exception is Cariari, in Costa Rica, where local residents launched the so-called Territorios Seguros (Safe Communities) initiative. In none of the other communities studied were we able to document locally-driven responses to the violence. The success of Territorios Seguros has been based on its collaboration with the judiciary in combating local drug traffickers and its emphasis on social citizenship, which motivates the community to
make demands on the state on issues ranging from public property to citizens’ rights. Yet Territorios Seguros has not led to greater employment opportunities, nor is it clear it will develop into an institutionalized representative of the community capable of engaging with the state for planning long-term development. This calls into question its potential for overcoming the underlying condition of social exclusion.

In contrast to this relative success, a Seguridad Comunitaria (Community Safety) program developed by the Ministry of Public Safety for Concepción Arriba has not functioned consistently. More effective were committees composed of long-time residents, typically homeowners, who took responsibility for a limited and well-defined territory and whose activities were not limited to safety issues. In these cases, cooperation between residents and state security forces helped revitalize the communities.

Meanwhile, municipal public safety plans developed in El Salvador with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) involved varying degrees of participation from three types of actors: a group of political institutions broadly supportive of non-punitive measures; the mayoralty/city government; and community mobilization. The Salvadoran cases have seen successes, which include strengthened local leadership as a result of externally led interventions; invigorated “social capital” as measured by trust and cohesion among inhabitants; and greater confidence of residents in local institutions. Moreover, it is worth highlighting an important achievement specific to one of these communities, where we found that power relations between the ruling mara and the residents have been reconfigured in spite of a fragile security situation.

But several challenges clearly emerge from these experiences. Heading into the March 2015 municipal elections in El Salvador, competing political parties sought to recruit and coopt new community leaders and community organizations as well as the projects they manage. At a more fundamental level, there is an inevitable tension between two approaches to public safety: repressing crime vs. socially reintegrating offenders. A key finding of our research is that municipal safety plans generally work when social integration prevails over repression. In the case of the aforementioned community where relations between the mara and residents were reconfigured, a shift in emphasis from traditional repressive approaches to community policing led to unprecedented interaction between youth gangs and the police. This innovative experience offers evidence that there can be a real possibility of reinsertion. This opportunity was facilitated by the state’s unofficial sponsorship of the so-called gang “truce” which lowered homicide rates dramatically between 2012 and 2014. But while the truce lasted longer than many anticipated, by the second half of 2014 it had broken down. Homicide rates in 2015 returned to pre-truce levels and state policies once again focused primarily on repression over reintegration.

Thus, the preference for reinsertion is never guaranteed to last. Similarly, the sustainability of local projects, especially those focused on economic opportunity, remains in doubt. If these projects are to generate secure, reliable sources of income and thus

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alleviate social exclusion, sustained financing is critical. Since both of these challenges directly affect gang members, the gang leadership could eventually seek to destabilize the situation in order to safeguard their economic and social influence in these communities.

We found limited possibilities for sustaining existing violence reduction projects, raising the risk that current beneficiaries return to previous activities, which could induce further violence, as has in fact occurred in El Salvador since the second half of 2014. Deprivation in most of the communities studied remains real, and youth seeking recognition, resources, and respect have limited loyalty to these projects, especially given their often negative prior interactions with the state. Yet our findings nonetheless caution against a return to mano dura approaches to law enforcement. Although these programs may be politically popular at times, reintegration and not repression should guide future policies, even while gang leaders might pursue an agenda of consolidating power in the communities.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Analysis of the study’s findings supports our hypothesis that social exclusion lies at the heart of urban violence in Central America, even while there can be circumstances in which community residents enjoy relative safety from physical violence. The research yields a number of conclusions that should guide efforts of policymakers seeking to address the scourge of violence in these settings.

First, it would be mistaken to frame the phenomenon of urban violence in Central America as homogeneous, and doing so would result in the design and implementing of interventions that will inevitably fail to produce safer and more inclusive cities. Policymakers must recognize and take into account variations in the nature and dynamics of violence in specific settings. Central American communities are subjected to multiple types of violence, each of which must be considered separately and as a piece in the overall landscape.

Second, in communities with comparable levels of social exclusion, other factors besides community-based initiatives may hold violence in check. Our research determined, for example, that the maras in El Salvador curb certain forms of violence, including those associated with domestic disputes, conflicts between neighbors and common crime committed by outsiders. At the same time, however, the gangs promote and exercise other forms of violence, such as extortion, sexual abuse, and forced recruitment, which profoundly affect the communities in which they reside. Thus, one cannot assume that the existence of organized actors in a community translates into a functioning social fabric and a defense against violence. Outside support aimed at reconstituting urban communities affected by violence must account for the role of gangs where they exist.
Communities may endeavor, with differing degrees of success, to cope with the effects of violence, but absent external support they are incapable of mounting initiatives that lead to structural improvement.

Thus, even though politically risky, negotiating with the maras in locales where they are prevalent is crucial, given the territorial control they exert. At the same time, international donors and implementing agencies must exercise caution when they equate projects carried out in partnership with local groups as automatically constituting community-building measures. Local partners such as maras may, in fact, pursue agendas that challenge the consolidation of statehood in communities. This need not imply that they must be excluded from violence reduction interventions, but program planning needs to be mindful that certain local interests may resist and undermine the state’s monopoly of coercive force.

Third, inhabitants of communities like those studied are limited by social exclusion as a result of both their disempowerment in local markets and continuing state abandonment. Thus, efforts to overcome social exclusion must encompass both the strengthening of state institutions and attention to economic conditions. The latter requires a concerted focus on reducing unemployment, addressing the circumstances of employment that comes without any rights or protection, and making informal but licit economic activities sufficiently profitable to provide a viable option for those unable to find work in the formal sector. Unless changes are made to the socioeconomic structure surrounding community residents, opportunities for overcoming social exclusion have clear limits.

Fourth, our study established that social exclusion can only be overcome through changes effected from outside the communities. Communities may endeavor, with differing degrees of success, to cope with the effects of violence, but absent external support they are incapable of mounting initiatives that lead to structural improvement. One such intervention, the Salvadoran municipal public safety plan, was initiated with UNDP backing. Similarly, community safety committees in Concepción Arriba resulted from implementation of state policy rather than community initiative. Arguably, the only case deviating from this pattern was the Salvadoran experience with Territorios Seguros, which were conceived and championed by a community leader, but even here sustainability is doubtful absent external engagement.

However, just because community initiatives must originate externally does not mean that outsiders can enter the communities as if they were empty spaces ready for social action. Important actors like the maras may already be present. The ambiguous institutional role they play is also seen in other countries where violent non-state actors have assumed prominent roles in local governance and provision of public goods (Abello-Colak & Guarneros-Mesa, 2014). On the one hand, the gangs hold a monopoly on violence, generating fear among community residents who cannot turn to the state for protection. On the other hand, the gangs provide essential goods for these same residents. In the Salvadoran communities studied, the maras protected residents against profit-motivated violence carried out by outsiders, and intervened in domestic and neighborhood conflicts. At the same time, they victimized residents for their own profits and to consolidate control over territory.
Fifth, for interventions to successfully and sustainably address different types of violence, they require effective community leadership and the empowerment of local actors. The Territorios Seguros initiative achieved this through its founder’s personal influence and his experience as a regional leader. Another mode of leadership is shown by the successful case of Concepción Arriba’s public safety committee. Here, the community organization’s old leadership has recovered, infused with new energy.

The empowerment of other community actors is also essential. For example, the participation of women in interventions against violence reflects a longstanding pattern in Latin America, where for decades struggles to obtain basic services for marginal urban settlements have been female-led. In the cases we studied, women have assumed leading roles in confronting different types of violence. But women’s participation comes with a disturbing catch: all too frequently women’s involvement is possible and indeed catalyzed because—amidst conditions of social exclusion—they have few alternative career options. Women’s voices in these initiatives are, of course, critical, but their presence may reflect the structural exclusion of women from sustainable livelihoods.

A traditional pattern of power that poses a challenge to successful interventions is the political patronage (clientelismo) that coopts organizations and leaders. This problem was not detected in the Costa Rican cases, and Territorios Seguros intentionally avoids partisan politics. In El Salvador, however, local politics are more important than in highly centralized Costa Rica, and evidence of cooptation aimed at politicizing projects was found among emerging leaders and organizations. This was accentuated as the most recent municipal elections overlapped with the final phase of our study. This challenge inevitably compounds local governments’ presence in these interventions. Because local governments are so prominent in El Salvador, it has been important to strike a balance between them and community development organizations.

Related to the importance of leadership is the emergence of new types of organization. In San Rafael, the implementation of the municipal public safety plan has been delineated more along territorial lines, leading to a greater involvement of community residents. Territorios Seguros’ different organizational experience highlights important challenges: the residents’ actual participation in this organization; the aforementioned issue of leadership; the need for a minimal organizational structure; financing; and the limits of its social citizenship demands, which focus on lobbying the state but tend to neglect petitioning for economic empowerment.

Sixth, in light of these challenges, and particularly the outsized role of the maras in El Salvador and other Central American countries, it is imperative to forge strategies for reintegrating youth and involving them in the process of becoming positive community actors. To promote such involvement, public safety proposals should
be introduced at moments when a political commitment to reintegration prevails over public demands for repression. As described above, the Salvadoran gang “truce” emerged from a political embrace of reintegration, and it created space for developing municipal public safety plans, which regrettably appear not to have been sustained.

Finally, and importantly, interventions that succeed in strengthening community organizations may also work to counterbalance the power of the maras, thus breaking the vicious cycle of social exclusion, stigma, and recruitment. Of course, such interventions are not without risks. If economic inclusion projects are unsustainable, young people will return to the gangs to seek resources, power, and prestige. Development agencies and governments across Central America must take this risk into account if they are to overcome social exclusion and facilitate the construction of safe and inclusive cities for all.

References


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