

# Central America

## Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

Bernardo Arévalo de Leon and Ana Glenda Táger

### Introduction

The last internal armed conflict in Central America ended more than 17 years ago. The peace accords reached in the three countries that suffered internal armed conflict succeeded in effectively integrating armed dissidents into the political process and consolidated democratic political frameworks that, notwithstanding their dysfunctions and limitations, respond to the basic principles of a political democracy.<sup>1</sup> Yet, almost two decades later, the region remains one of the most violent in the world. The peace accords and formal democracy have not brought an end to violence. In El Salvador and Guatemala, violence has reached levels higher than those that characterised the war years. In Honduras, no civil war has taken place, but the country has the highest murder rates in the region and violence has become a chronic occurrence of everyday life. Even in Costa Rica, Panama and Belize, the indicators for violent deaths increased during the first decade of the century.<sup>2</sup>

But it's not only about murder rates. International and national dynamics are combining to form socio-political phenomena that generate new patterns of conflict and violence, an interplay between longer-term legacies and emerging driving factors. Today, violence emerges mostly in the context of phenomena that war-time factors contributed to, but do not entirely explain: an increase in transnational crime flows; a breakdown of social tissue in marginalised urban areas; the limited capacity of states to effectively mediate conflict in society, and the appropriation of violence by social actors as a recourse to pursue their interests. Moreover, violence is linked to social polarisation around the use of natural resources and state capture by illegitimate and criminal actors preventing the consolidation of democratic institutions and the emergence of social peace.

<sup>1</sup> R. Dahl, *Poliarchy: Participation and Opposition*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> PNUD, *Seguridad Ciudadana con Rostro Humano: diagnóstico y propuesta para América Latina*, Informe de Desarrollo Humano (New York: Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2013); OEA, 'Información sobre Seguridad Ciudadana en las Américas', Washington DC, 2012.

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:



Central American countries are critical peacebuilding scenarios. In the face of such complex problems, traditional developmental approaches need to be complemented by the implementation of peacebuilding approaches that strengthen elements of social and political cohesion. Indeed, peacebuilding as a concept and practice has evolved since its inception in the late 1990s. Born in the context of international efforts to assist countries emerging from conflict and initially conceived of as a 'phase' occurring along a sequential path towards a neat, precise schematisation of 'peaceful' social reality, it has since become evident that sustainable peace is not limited to a specific period of time. Rather, its aim is to develop the capacities – the social, political and economic institutions within societies – to manage and transform conflict without recourse to violent coercion. Peacebuilding is, therefore, core to statebuilding processes and a new angle through which we can understand the continuous, but unique, challenges countries face in this process.

Fortunately, there is no lack of agency for peace in the Central America region: actors in the state and society are exploring innovative 'out-of-the-box' approaches and beginning to make inroads into seemingly intractable problems. International assistance is required to support efforts already in place, initiated by national actors. The international community should commit its political, technical and financial support to enabling Central American stakeholders in state and society to scale-up and mainstream innovative, often controversial but effective approaches to the consolidation of peace and eradication of violence.

## Challenges to building peace in Central America

The peacebuilding agenda in Central America is a response to the challenges posed by this complex situation. International support should be developed taking into account three key factors:

- **The erosion of the state monopoly over violent coercion:** a proliferation of arms and weak state security and justice institutions has led to a 'democratisation' of violence in which violent coercion becomes a recourse available to all social actors. Traditional security state functions have been 'privatized' by groups and individuals through phenomena such as the proliferation of private security companies and vigilantism.
- **The development of 'uncivil society':** individuals and groups in society progressively turn to crime and violence as a way to pursue their social, economic, political or personal interests, and violence becomes 'normalised' – an available recourse to resolve any difference of opinions or interests in social life.
- **The progressive weakening of state institutions:** security institutions unable to deal with the surge of violence themselves turn to authoritarian responses that compound the problem. State security and justice capacities are moreover captured by criminal actors that use them not only to prevent prosecution, but to further their trade. As a result of inefficiency, state capture or both, impunity increases and consequently the affected population withdraws its support from emerging democratic institutions.

These factors together comprise three socio-political phenomena that currently pose the biggest challenges to the consolidation of peace in Central America: crime as a threat to social peace; natural resources development as a source of social conflict; and state capture by private and criminal interests.

### *Criminal violence*

Criminal activity turning Central America's 'Northern Triangle' – El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala – into one of the most violent regions on earth has featured prominently in

international media. In some of these countries, death rates for young men are higher today than during the political crises and civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s.

Patterns of violence here are the result of a combination of transnational and national factors. A surge in the transnational illicit traffic of drugs, arms, goods and persons has combined with traditional international security responses favouring militarised approaches. At the national level, depleted state capacities to efficiently and effectively address these problems, the growth of corruption and clientelism, and an authoritarian political culture sustain violent governmental and social responses that only exacerbate violence.<sup>3</sup> Sicariato, drug cartel warfare, vigilantism and lynching, domestic violence, youth violence and social cleansing, etc. are expressions of violence that take place at different levels, in different realms of society.<sup>4</sup>

A concrete example is the phenomenon known as 'maras'. Originally established by young illegal immigrants repatriated from the US' West Coast, where they had been immersed in the violent culture of street gangs, these youth gangs provided a sense of identity and belonging in an environment marked by social exclusion, crumbling family structures and a lack of economic opportunities. Gangs became factors of ever-increasing violence exercised upon themselves and their social environment, and encroached on the livelihoods of already impoverished communities, extorting money from big businesses and local businessmen using murder as a credible threat.<sup>5</sup> 'Iron fist' response policies used by governments have not only been ineffective, but have exacerbated the problem: implemented by a weak and ineffective justice and security system, harsh legislation criminalised not just the delinquent activity of gang members but membership in a gang itself, turning every youth living in impoverished communities into a potential target of repressive policies. Governmental policy has not only failed to stop the violence, but its own violent approach – pure repression, little regard for the human rights of gang members and their families and criminalisation of a social group – has become a violence-generating factor in itself.<sup>6</sup>

Drug trafficking is another significant source of violence. Central American countries are transit points for international drug cartels moving narcotics between producing regions in South America and consumer markets in North America and Europe. In each country of the region, local criminal gangs engage with international Mexican and Colombian criminal organisations to transport the products via sky, sea and land routes. Fledgling democratic institutions, especially in the justice and security sectors, limited state control of and presence in the national territory, and widespread corruption at every level of government have enabled international and local criminal organisations to establish a presence and to penetrate state institutions. Whole towns have been known to be under the total control of drug cartels. National institutions have been neutralised through the recruitment of governmental authorities into the cartels

---

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Cruz, L. A. González, E. Romano and E. Sisti, 'De la guerra al delito: Evolución de la violencia en El Salvador' in *Asalto al desarrollo. Violencia en América Latina*, J. L. Londoño, A. Gaviria and R. Guerrero (eds) (Washington DC: IADB, 2000); I. Aguilar and A. G. Táger, 'La tregua entre pandillas salvadoreñas, hacia un proceso de construcción de paz social', *Interpeace, Oficina Regional para América Latina*, 2013; D. Kruijt, 'Uncivil actors and violence systems in the Latin American urban domain', *Beroamericana*, XI: 41, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> M. Shifter, 'Countering Criminal Violence in Central America', Council Special Report No. 64, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 2012; W. Savenije 'Las pandillas transnacionales o "maras"' in *Violencia urbana en Centroamérica*, Foro Internacional n° 189 Vol. XLVIII, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> An example of the societal dimensions of the problem is in El Salvador: here, 10,000 gang members are in jail and 60,000 are in the streets, yet if we consider their social network of family and friends, then the phenomenon involves more like 400,000 persons, or about 8% of the Salvadorian population.

<sup>6</sup> I. Aguilar, B. Arévalo and A. G. Táger, 'El Salvador: Negotiating with gangs' in *Legitimacy and peace processes: from coercion to consent*, Accord, Conciliation Resources, 2014. Available at: <http://www.c-r.org/accord-article/el-salvador-negotiating-gangs#sthash.B7emHLYd.dpuf>.

(including elected officials, police and military officers, judges and justice sector operators) and through alliances with businessmen. Groups like Los Cachiros and Valles in Honduras, or the Lorenzana and Chamalé in Guatemala operate in broad daylight and use unbridled violence in their confrontation with the security agencies and competition for the control of routes and posts, generating a heightened sense of insecurity in a population already rendered vulnerable through governmental incapacity.<sup>7</sup>

The social violence generated by criminal activities has had negative impacts on the consolidation of fledging democratic institutions, reinforcing authoritarian enclaves in the security apparatus, preventing the effective monopolisation of violence by the state, eroding public support for democracy, marginalising social groups and breeding mistrust of public institutions.<sup>8</sup> A public security problem has therefore turned into a political crisis. What is at stake is the possibility of eradicating violence and coercion from social and political relations, and consolidating the social and political institutions that can enable this goal: a clear peacebuilding challenge.

### *Social conflict over natural resources*

In the last few years, Central America has been witnessing the development of a pattern of social conflict around issues of access, use and conservation of natural resources. Private and governmental initiatives seeking to develop energy, agricultural or mineral resources are met with resistance and rejection from local communities that consider themselves marginalised from the benefits of such endeavours and negatively affected by their environmental impact. Hydro-power projects, mining activities and land-intensive agricultural projects generate tensions with local communities around issues of pollution, deforestation, access to and use of traditional territories and protected areas, and the economic impact of these initiatives in neighbouring communities. The absence of a social culture of dialogue and the lack of adequate mediation and conflict transformation capacities – both in the state and in society – have turned these development opportunities into open confrontations between interested groups, including private actors, government agencies, local (often indigenous) communities. Explosions of violence deepen mistrust and entrench a polarisation of the actors' positions, enhancing the intractability of the problems.

In Guatemala, conflicts around the expansion of palm oil cultivation have led to confrontation and forced displacement of indigenous communities in Alta Verapaz; resistance to hydroelectric initiatives in their territories have led local communities to burn company property and ransack a military outpost in Huehuetenango; and a death and several injured persons resulted from a governmental decision to disperse a peaceful sit-in by local communities blocking access to a mining project in San Rafael Las Flores, in the east of the country.<sup>9</sup> In Panama, several roads in Las Veraguas and Chiquirí provinces have been blocked by local *campesino* and indigenous communities, who claim irregularities in the licencing of environmental permits for the development of hydroelectric projects.<sup>10</sup> In Honduras, social movements and human rights campaigners have denounced the murder of several *campesino* activists in the Bajo Aguán region in the context of disputes between local communities and

---

<sup>7</sup> J. Bunck and M. Ross, *Bribes, Bullets and Intimidation: Drug Trafficking and the Law in Central America* (Pennsylvania: Peen State University Press, 2012); UNODC, *Delincuencia Organizada Transnacional en Centroamérica. Una evaluación de las amenazas* (Viena: Oficina de Naciones Unidas Contra la Droga y el Delito, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> J. M. Cruz, 'Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America: The Survival of the Violent State', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 53: 4, 2011, pp.1-33.

<sup>9</sup> Convergencia por los Derechos Humanos, 'Estado de sitio Santa Cruz Barillas', Informe de Verificación, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> H. Waxenecker, *Poderes fácticos y la disputa por los recursos estratégicos: Redes, poder y violencia*, Heirich Böll Foundation, forthcoming 2014.

landowners, while police units forcibly dispersed representatives from indigenous communities protesting the implementation of the Aguas Zarcas hydroelectric project.<sup>11</sup>

Proliferation of conflict around economic initiatives results from the precarious nature of the social contract. In most of Central American countries, neither the peace accords nor the political democratic process have succeeded in articulating a shared vision and strategy for the future that acknowledge, legitimise and mediate the contrasting needs and interests of culturally diverse and deeply unequal societies. Authoritarian 'enclaves' of values, ideologies, attitudes and mechanisms continue to operate under a logic of coercive domination and imposition/resistance, which in the context of weak and ineffective state institutions enhances contradictions, breeds polarisation and contributes to fostering violent conflict.<sup>12</sup>

### *State capture*

In several countries in the region, clientelist political cultures and widespread corruption are threatening the emergence of effective state institutions that can articulate a peaceful and sustainable social contract. Particular interests are encroaching upon key state structures at every level of government. The workings of the justice system, parliament, executive branch (including security agencies), as well as municipal governments are being leveraged by certain interests, often illegitimate and illegal, in doing so betraying the democratic principles enshrined in national legislations.

Drug cartels openly control large territories along transit routes in rural Guatemala with the collaboration and connivance of municipal authorities and local National Civilian Police, who provide coverage and protection to drug lords that combine violent threats with investment in social infrastructure as a way to control the local population. Local families in Petén, Guatemala engage simultaneously in legitimate commercial activities and in illegal trafficking networks linked to regional and national drug cartels.<sup>13</sup>

The negative effects of state capture are manifold and complex. Rule of Law cannot be developed and implemented. State functions – security, development, and political integration – cannot be properly fulfilled. Public goods cannot be produced or delivered according to principles of efficiency and effectiveness. Political parties do not mediate between legitimate social interests and political authority. The legitimacy of political authority is eroded, trust in public institutions wanes and society becomes mistrustful and cynical.

## **Opportunities for building peace in Central America**

Peacebuilding strategies offer alternative approaches to address such critical challenges to peace in the region. By focusing on long-term strategies that strengthen capacities for non-violent conflict transformation in state and society, and contributing to the development of strong and healthy state-society relations, peacebuilding approaches can complement more traditional developmental approaches by fostering trust and legitimacy, critical components of cohesive and peaceful societies.

---

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'There are no investigations here. Impunity for killings and other abuses in Bajo Aguán, Honduras', 2014. Accessible here: <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/honduras0214web.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> L. Gilbert and P. Mohsemi, 'Beyond Authoritarianism: The Conceptualization of Hybrid Regimes', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 46: 3, 2011, pp. 270-297.

<sup>13</sup> Insight, *Grupos de poder en Petén: territorio, política y negocios* (Washington, DC: Insight – Organised Crime in the Américas, 2011).

Two areas appear as critical entry points:

### *1. Fostering state/society collaboration to address mounting insecurity*

Traditional, technical 'statebuilding' support to governmental bureaucracies on security and justice issues needs to be coupled with process-sensitive approaches that place citizen participation as an essential element. Working to foster collaboration across the state/society divide is important to prevent mistrust and alienation between citizens and security forces, as well as to allow the development of effective synergies addressing the insecurity crisis and judicial impunity. Such an approach can offer important outcomes:

- At a regional level, the facilitation of regional spaces and mechanisms for collaborative research and policy dialogue to foster a deeper understanding of transnational crime and insecurity dynamics, facilitate the identification of successful experiences, and foster synergies for the design and implementation of effective policies.
- At a national level, civil society participation in legislative and policy development efforts can contribute to enrich the debate on legal and operational justice and security frameworks, balancing the authoritarian and violent-prone approaches still favoured by some security sector apparatchiks and politicians, and contributing to the development of a broadly legitimate legal corpus.
- At a local level, citizen involvement in community policing frameworks and local security can assist in the implementation of policies that hold both the community and public agents jointly responsible, allowing security forces to enhance their information and insight into crimes, and preventing phenomena such as the alienation of poor communities, mob justice and the criminalisation of poverty.
- At all levels, civil society observatories can play a supportive role in the development and improvement of institutional performance. Such a policy implementation monitoring function can be achieved via collaborative arrangements with public institutions.

### *2. Building upon successful and innovative peacebuilding approaches*

The peacebuilding capacity of Central American societies has been evidenced by the active engagement of the state and society in a range of innovative, creative approaches to outstanding challenges. There is a need to identify, support and empower such actors. This and other 'out-of-the-box' efforts will require a combination of political, technical and financial support to enable stakeholders to scale-up and mainstream innovative and often controversial approaches.

Some concrete examples include:

- In El Salvador, collaboration between state officials and civil society actors facilitated the engagement of warring gangs in a truce process that resulted in a dramatic reduction of violence.<sup>14</sup> The engagement of criminal actors through civil society allowed governmental officials to explore conditions under which homicidal violence could be contained. The reduction of violence enabled actors in civil society and the state to engage gang representatives at the local level to agree on the creation of 'violence

---

<sup>14</sup> The two main gangs in El Salvador, MS-13 and Barrio 18, agreed to establish a truce in March 2012. The truce was facilitated by a representative of the Catholic Church, Bishop Fabio Colindres, and a former guerrilla commander and congressman, Raúl Mijango. The truce had an immediate and significant impact on the levels of violence in the country: murder rates dropped from a daily average of 17 homicides to 5.5. See I. Aguilar, B. Arévalo and A. G. Táger, 'El Salvador: Negotiating with gangs', *op cit.*; O. Argueta and A. G. Táger, 'Paz, seguridad y prevención de conflictos en Centroamérica', *Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (CRIES)*, forthcoming 2014.

free' territories, including the development of municipal policies enabling effective reintegration of youth into the community.<sup>15</sup>

- In Nicaragua, a preventive approach to policing based on close collaboration between security agencies and communities resulted in an effective reduction of crime and violence with indicators well below the regional and Latin American averages.<sup>16</sup> Effective integration of civil society into security policy design and implementation (25,000 members of Committees for Social Prevention of Violence; 76,000 members of Citizen Power Cabinets; 3,900 volunteers against domestic violence; and 1,300 County Security Committees) has allowed a police force with the lowest density ratio in the region – 9 agents per square kilometre – to extend their reach into urban and rural communities, stressing the importance of preventive work on issues such as youth violence and domestic violence prevention.
- In contrast with the heightened confrontation affecting other regions, in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala collaboration between national international development agencies, local authorities, civil society organisations and the local indigenous population has enabled the successful implementation of community-managed hydroelectric projects. A process-oriented approach using participatory methodologies has enabled all stakeholders to engage constructively around these initiatives, from consultation to implementation, empowering the communities to become effective administrators of their natural resources.<sup>17</sup>
- Elsewhere in Guatemala, civil society organisations have taken a pro-active approach to combat the encroachment of illegitimate and criminal interests into state institutions. Ad hoc coalitions have brought civil society organizations together (including public associations, academics and non-governmental organizations) to successfully collaborate with conscientious actors in state institutions in public campaigns aiming to prevent the manipulation through clientelistic and corrupt practices of legally-established selection processes in state institutions, such as the General Attorney's Office and the Supreme Court.

## Required support for building peace and the role of the UN

The region's peacebuilding agenda outlined above does not substitute more traditional developmental approaches to the governance and security issues that lie at the heart of the current crises in these countries. Rather, it calls for such approaches to be sensitised to peacebuilding. The process-oriented emphasis of peacebuilding delivers critical outcomes necessary for the strengthening of Central American capacities for peace, such as enhanced trust between social groups, transformed attitudes and renewed social networks that enable inter-sectorial collaboration and foster legitimised governmental institutions.

This is not an agenda for the future, but a current one. Central Americans – national governments, civil societies and regional organs – are already engaging in some of these issues with different levels of success. The international community (including bilateral donors, multilateral organizations, such as the Organisation of American States (OAS), the United Nations

---

<sup>15</sup> Interpeace, *Ilopango, un año después: comunidad, pandillas y reducción de la violencia* (El Salvador: Alianza Internacional para la consolidación de la paz, 2014); Interpeace, *Santa Tecla, un terreno fértil para la reducción de la violencia* (El Salvador: Alianza Internacional para la consolidación de la paz, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> 13 homicides per 100,000 persons. The rates for Central America and Latin America are 35 and 26, respectively, with rates of 42, 69 and 78 for neighbouring Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, respectively. OEA, 'Información sobre Seguridad Ciudadana en las Américas', Washington DC, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> 25 indigenous communities are benefiting from 4 small-scale hydroelectric plants after a process that started with consultations in 2009 went into operation in 2014. The project is the result of a collaboration between the local non-governmental organisation, Fundación Solar, local municipal authorities, the Ministry of Energy and the International Cooperation Agency of Japan.

(UN), international non-governmental organizations and foundations) should act to support such initiatives and actors.

Such support should be provided according to the following key principles:

- Build upon the capacity and insight of local actors, strengthening both their technical and dialogical skills, anchoring cooperation processes in strong national ownership and aiming for the institutionalisation of capacities in both state and society.
- Enhance collaboration across the state/society divide, using every intervention as an opportunity to foster the development of skills and attitudes that lie at the basis of inter-sectorial collaborative networks.
- Enhance coordination and synergy among different stakeholders – primarily among national stakeholders and then with the international community. This is necessary to prevent the development of contradictions and redundancies resulting from uncoordinated cooperation flows.

Sustained flows of assistance – financial, technical and political – that build on existing capacities, respect locally-driven agendas and processes, and emphasise collaboration across the state/society divide can provide effective support to improve the conditions in which Central Americans address a governance and security crisis that, if unresolved, will entrench violence in society and render meaningless the promise of peace that resulted from the end of armed conflicts.

---

**About the authors:** **Bernardo Arévalo de León** is Senior Peacebuilding Adviser at Interpeace's International Peacebuilding Advisory Team (IPAT). He has been with Interpeace since 1996, both in the field and as Deputy Director-General for Research and Development. He is the author of several publications on issues such as democratisation, civil-military relations and peacebuilding. Previously, Bernardo served in Guatemala's Foreign Service for over 12 years, including as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and as Ambassador to Spain. **Ana Glenda Táger** is the Regional Director for Latin America at Interpeace. Previously, Ana Glenda was Programme Officer at WSP International (Interpeace's predecessor) and an investigator for FLACSO-Guatemala. She has also served as Cultural and Tourism Attaché of the Guatemalan Embassy in Spain. Ana Glenda graduated from the Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain and has pursued studies in Political Science at Rafael Landívar University, Guatemala.

**About this Paper:** This paper is part of a series providing regional peacebuilding perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding. The authors' task was to provide an authentic, original and honest analysis about three questions: (1) What are the main challenges for building peace in your region? (2) What are the key opportunities for building peace in your region over the next one or two years? (3) What would be the key support necessary to build peace in your region over the next one or two years? Is there any specific role for the UN?

**Disclaimer:** All views expressed in this article are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, or the four Platform partners: the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP); the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP); Interpeace; and the Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva (QUNO).

**About the White Paper on Peacebuilding:** The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.