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Crossing the new frontier:
peace mediation in the city

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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

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In his essay, Dr Wennmann sees rapid urbanisation and the intensity of urban conflicts as signs that cities will be the new frontier for peace mediation. He argues that mayors, community leaders, clergy, and the multitude of perpetrators of violence need an expanded tool-box to deal with conflict and violence. He calls for a shift away from law-and-order responses towards a political approach that integrates expertise from a variety of urban actors. To strengthen this effort, peace mediators and urban actors should form networks, share data, and seek innovative and holistic strategies to deal with urban conflict and violence.

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Crossing the new frontier: peace mediation in the city

Achim Wennmann

In the late 2000s, gang violence and heavy-handed security measures in response, made El Salvador the most violent country in the world.¹ Yet, El Salvador was not 'at war' but faced intense social violence, most of which occurred at the city level. The policy response was a remarkable demonstration of the use of political instruments in a situation often understood as 'criminal violence' between gangs. In April 2012, the *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* gangs agreed to a truce that held for about two years. Mediated by Raúl Mijango, an ex-guerrilla leader, and Bishop Fabio Colindres, the truce built on a convergence of interests in violence reduction between gangs and the administration of President Mauricio Funes.

With forecasts of conflict trends pointing to cities as the future hotspots of violence and war, this paper argues that peace mediation practice should focus more on the urban space. The paper also describes how mediation instruments can prevent and resolve city-level violence and conflict.

The truce in El Salvador

The choice for the truce between rival gangs in El Salvador was first and foremost made by the gangs themselves. The older generation of gang leaders realized the damage they had done to society and wanted to end the violence. They were also tired of the social exclusion and stigmatization that prevented any gang member from having a normal life, even if they wished to exit the gangs.² But the truce was also tactical: the older leadership saw the truce as a means of reasserting control over the younger gang membership that had gained power and threatened gang cohesion. Through the truce, the older generation of leaders wanted to discipline the ranks.

The truce was also a deliberate choice of the government, which had to demonstrate that it could control violence. Mass media, businesses, and the US government pressured the administration of President Mauricio Funes to get a grip on violence. Constant media coverage of homicides and violent incidents fomented social anxiety. Based on the dismal record of heavy-handed approaches to violence reduction and the clear understanding that the fighting between *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* was the key driver of violence, the government opened a political space for discreet discussions with senior gang members. It also allowed access to incarcerated gang leaders and their subsequent transfer from maximum-security to lower-security facilities. The government maintained a strategic distance to the truce because of its political sensitivity; great parts of the population, especially the middle classes and elites, were opposed to the truce because, in their view, negotiating with criminals was both immoral and against the law.

A truce was reached within weeks and was kept alive for about two years. The truce process involved intense mediation by Raúl Mijango and Bishop Fabio Colindres, as well as discreet mediation support from different international actors: the Organization of American States acted as a guarantor for the process; the International Committee of the Red Cross established a special mission to monitor human rights conditions in El Salvador's prisons, and international NGOs provided discreet advice and technical

support to the two mediators. From the corporate side, a group of businesspeople established the Humanitarian Foundation, to generate jobs and encourage social integration of gang members. The gangs themselves delivered results to show they were serious: there was an immediate 60% reduction in homicides, which was sustained for two years. Over 5,000 Salvadorian lives were saved through dialogue and negotiation.³

The bigger picture of urban conflict

El Salvador is far from unique in terms of the concentration of conflict, violence and insecurity in cities. The majority of violent deaths worldwide occur in non-traditional conflict settings – with Central America, Southern Africa, the Caribbean, and South America being the worst-affected regions.⁴ While deaths in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Libya make the headlines, most violent conflicts no longer fit the ‘traditional’ categories of inter-state and intra-state armed conflicts. Yet, many types of violent conflict are heavily concentrated in urban areas. Caracas, Acapulco, and San Pedro Sula were the three most violent cities in 2016, with St Louis, Cape Town and several cities in Brazil among the top 20.⁵ In Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Iraq, the recent wars and their consequences have been largely urban, with 92% of those killed and injured by explosive weapons being civilians living in populated areas.⁶

This changing spatial dimension of conflict and violence is illustrative of a new strategic landscape. Conflict over the next decade is likely to find its violent expression in urban spaces and to result from the confluence of systemic risk from rapid urbanisation, social inequalities, climate change and stressed governance systems. Yet because of the uncertain timeline for diverse pressures to converge into crisis, these conflicts may become ‘slow-onset emergencies’ that emerge not from a single event but more gradually and based on a combination of several events or risk factors. These new conflicts are neither declared nor won – but they incur a human cost similar to that of traditional wars. They therefore open a new field for humanitarian dialogue.

El Salvador is also not unique from the perspective of how local actors take the lead in resolving conflict through deliberate and carefully tailored processes. The Colombian city of Medellín achieved a 90% drop in violence from 1991 to 2006 through a holistic strategy involving pacification and community policing, improving access to basic services for marginalized communities, changing the built environment and spatial segregation of the city, creating jobs for at-risk youth, promoting social cohesion within the city, and improving urban security governance.⁷ Colombia has since developed more than 300 such integrated initiatives, and Brazil has at least 200.⁸ Many of these initiatives place mediation within a broader approach that focuses on perpetrators of armed violence, instruments of violence, formal and informal governance institutions, and the people affected by violence and war.⁹ In Ecuador, for instance, *Barrio de Paz* projects worked at the community level to facilitate truces among youth gangs and to provide job training to gang members. These projects have worked on the assumption that criminal violence can be reduced if gang members receive the tools to earn an alternative living and experience a more positive form of social recognition. The projects were credited with having contributed to a reduction in violence in Ecuador between 2006 and 2008 and to the peace between its two largest gangs – the Latin Kings and *Los Ñetas*.¹⁰

A review of armed violence reduction initiatives shows that informal mediation is the most common instrument with respect to interventions targeting perpetrators of violence.¹¹ In urban settings, local mediators associated with these efforts are often called ‘interrupters’, as part of community-based neighbourhood initiatives to prevent violence. They are typically trusted members of a community with first-hand

experience of street violence. They are trained to intervene in crises and mediate disputes between both individuals and groups. Interrupters often follow public health models that treat violence as a disease, working in conjunction with clergy, community organisers, educators and the police to change behaviour and norms. The 'interrupter' may be comparable to what is called an 'insider mediator' in peace mediation circles, because of their perceived legitimacy, capacities, and leverage to prevent and mitigate crises or violence.¹² This community-based or neighbourhood-level experience emphasises that urban safety programmes are no newcomers in reaching out to all actors relevant to a specific conflict system. There is a rich field of practice with which peace mediation can connect.

Despite the places of warfare that make the headlines, we see a plethora of peace initiatives within different urban spaces. In Syria, for instance, local communities negotiated at least 35 local ceasefires between 2011 and 2014. These local responses to a whole set of challenges were ultimately overpowered by the escalation of violence; yet they show the resolve of local actors to work towards arrangements or their own survival, services, and security.¹³ In Libya, the towns of Bali Walid and Sirte developed their own 'peace charters' through consultation and dialogue with different groups in each community. These efforts demonstrate the degree of local agency that can exist in parallel with, or despite, national peace efforts. People in war-affected cities do not just passively wait for peace to arrive but roll up their sleeves and go about shaping the life of their community.

People make choices between conflict and peace. A study on local strategies for opting out of violent conflict found a prevalence of rational calculations, even among those who were or had been active fighters. People would "fight if they felt a war were justified," yet would opt out if "they simply calculated that the present war made no sense to them."¹⁴ Many actors engage in local peace efforts not because they have an agenda for peace but because conflict interferes with their more important priorities, which can be connected to a range of personal, economic or political agendas. As illustrated by the case of El Salvador, less violence can be achieved despite weak institutions, lack of trust in government, legacies of grievance, and the presence of spoilers content to exploit conflict to meet their own narrowly defined interests.

However, in the case of El Salvador, spoilers eventually did exploit the deep divisions around the truce processes. The truce became part of electioneering and infighting between El Salvador's two dominant political parties – the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) and *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA). It was also trapped in a perception that saw the truce as an end result, and not as the beginning of a broader process to address social vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses at the heart of the violence in El Salvador. The FNML government under President Salvador Sánchez Cerén that came to power in 2014 passed heavy-handed anti-gang legislation in April 2016 that prohibited negotiations with 'criminals', and classified gangs as 'terrorist organisations'. The ensuing trials against several officials, and the two mediators, involved in the truce facilitation were a tactical move by the Government within a highly polarized political environment. All defendants were acquitted in September 2017.

Despite these difficulties, the El Salvador truce and other examples illustrate that even the most acute conflict can be manageable when dealt with pragmatically, locally, and on its own terms. In El Salvador, pragmatism meant engagement of the conflict parties on their partisan interests, and working within the de facto distribution of political and economic power. It also meant working as close as possible to the sources of conflict – in prisons and in gang neighbourhoods – as well as at the political level with the political parties and their respective constituencies. El Salvador also shows the importance of placing violence reduction within the context of broader social and political transformation that enables inclusive development. Regrettably this was a shortfall in this case, where the step towards broader political and social transformation could not be made.

Across the new frontier

The new frontier for peace mediation is the city. This means building new networks and relationships, and envisioning and standing up for the use of the 'political' instruments of peace mediation and conflict resolution as a primary response to what is frequently described as 'criminal violence'. At present, this domain is still largely influenced by a law-and-order approach. However, excessive reliance on this approach has in many cases generated very limited results in terms of violence reduction and inclusive development.¹⁵ Solving crime and violence with political instruments means expanding the tool-box, and offering more effective and lasting solutions for reducing violence and building peace at the city level. National dialogue processes, architectures of peace, and local capacities for conflict prevention are just three practice trends which could have wide applicability when translated into city contexts. Peace mediation could connect to decades of experience of urban geographers and city officials in participatory urban planning, slum upgrading, and urban service delivery.

Shifting the response of urban violence towards politics also occurs at a moment of growing political power of crime groups.¹⁶ In the context of dysfunctional institutions and weak state–society relations, crime groups infiltrate municipal, provincial or national politics to serve their needs and, in the process, affect institution-building, urban safety, and development efforts. Crime groups can act like lobbyists seeking to influence political decisions and systems, working politically to shape the state, the economy, and society to fulfil their own interests. In this context, entry-points for the reduction of crime and violence may lie in reframing the challenge of organised crime as a 'political' rather than a 'criminal' issue. If actors involved in organised crime are perceived as 'political' actors, "perhaps they can become partners for peace"; yet if they are perceived as 'criminal' actors, "then surely they must be targets for law enforcement."¹⁷ A political approach brings with it diplomatic resources, while a crime-based approach implies policing, law enforcement or security instruments. To consider actors involved in organised crime as political actors can strengthen the case for peace mediation or discreet dialogue processes commonly associated with ending armed conflict.

So far, many cities have seen repressive approaches as a default, where state authorities aim to crush crime through 'law and order' or a 'war on drugs'. These approaches have, however, largely proved ineffective in terms of violence and crime reduction.¹⁸ In Latin America, heavy-handed policies to crime and violence have had tremendous humanitarian consequences and led to even greater levels of violence. Heavy-handed anti-crime strategies in the Philippines are another example. While securitised approaches remain popular among politicians, there is increasingly stronger evidence that the integrated approaches discussed above are more promising. Such evidence highlights "a range of violence prevention and reduction strategies across a number of sectors and purposefully target the key risk factors" of conflict and violence, and that integrate violence reduction and prevention "objectives and actions into regional, national, and sub-national development plans and programmes."¹⁹ What is more, there is so much good practice across the peace mediation field that one can confidently approach mayors, gangs, and other actors with a stake in violence or violence reduction to suggest tested approaches to mitigate and end urban social conflict or 'criminal' violence.²⁰

Yet the use of dialogue and negotiation to counter crime and violence is still perceived as untested from the perspective of many actors responsible for urban security or insecurity. Many mayors still have more confidence to quell violent conflict by sending in the riot police. For many gangs, violence has become a way of life and the basis for their livelihood. Indeed, for all actors in the conflict system it seems hard to reach out to the other side. For a country's elite or political class, the possibility of dialogue and negotiation with perpetrators of criminal violence or transnational crime groups can violate a moral principle or belief system.²¹ The same can be true for gangs or terror groups when dialogue means reaching out

to the very elite and political class that they consider responsible for their exclusion or marginalization. Within the gang, there can also be peer pressure to keep using violence.²²

In these settings, the classic rationale and value added of mediation is relevant. When the parties are so deeply locked into opposition and hostility:

“They cannot reach a turning point of perception and find a way out by themselves. They are unable to communicate with each other, unable to think of a solution that could be attractive to the other side as well as themselves, unable to conceive any side payments or enticements to turn the zero-sum conflict into a positive-sum solution, and unable to turn from commitment and a winning mentality to problem solving and solutions to grievances.”²³

In these circumstances, actors in a conflict system can be hostages to their own mindset that structures how they perceive problems and solutions, and traps them into believing that violence or repression is the only way out.

For seasoned peace mediation professionals, this situation may be reminiscent of the state of their field over 30 years ago when governments and ‘liberation movements’, ‘insurgents’ or ‘rebel groups’ were at loggerheads with each other and unable to find ways out of their conflicts. Negotiating with today’s ‘gangs’, ‘crime groups’, ‘terrorists’, or ‘violent extremists’ may not be much different from negotiating with what are more neutrally called ‘non-state armed groups’. Over the last decade, the peace mediation and conflict resolution profession has evolved into a discreet, global web of experts with channels of communication to any armed actor – whether state security forces, rebel groups, or other perpetrators of violence. These networks do the important exploratory work to see if parties are ready for talks or if parties allow access for humanitarian assistance in the territory they control. They can also provide expertise to and accompany parties during a process, including on how to navigate the legal grey space when communication or negotiation with ‘terrorists’, ‘criminals’ or ‘gangs’ is criminalised as part of war-fighting or anti-drug policy. Over the years, ‘mediation support’ has become mainstream – there is even a *UN Guidance on Effective Mediation* – and is supported by many international organisations, governments, and private foundations.

Given the rising conflict pressures in cities and the wealth of know-how on preventing and resolving conflict through dialogue and negotiation, it is both timely – and possible – to stand up for the use of political instruments in situations of ‘social’ or ‘criminal’ violence. A concrete and practical proposition would be to establish a mediation support network for mayors, community leaders *and* the range of perpetrators of violence in specific urban conflict systems. Such a network could be a dedicated resource for discreet engagements across lines of fire and divided territories within cities. Such a network could also make the case for the protection of local facilitators or ‘interrupters’, and for an expanded tool-box and political space to address urban violence through dialogue and negotiation.

Endnotes

- 1 Based on average violent death rates in the period 2004–2009. See Geneva Declaration Secretariat (GDS), 'Global Burden of Armed Violence', Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p.6.
- 2 In its analysis on El Salvador, this paper draws on Teresa Whitfield, 'Mediating Criminal Violence: Lessons from the Gang Truce in El Salvador', *Oslo Forum Papers*, N°001, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, June 2013; Ana Glenda Táger and Isabel Aguilar Umaña, 'La tregua Entre Pandillas Salvadoreñas Hacia un Proceso de Construcción de Paz Social', Interpeace, 2013; Chris von der Borgh and Wim Saventije, 'De-securitising and Re-securitising Gang Policies: The Funes Government and Gangs in El Salvador', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 487(1), 2014; Adam Blackwell, 'If the War on Drugs is Over... Now What?', Friesen Press, 2015, and coverage on the truce on www.insightcrime.org.
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- 5 Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal A.C., 'Las 50 Ciudades Más Violentas del Mundo 2016 + Metodología', 2017, available at <http://www.seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/biblioteca/prensa/send/6-prensa/239-las-50-ciudades-mas-violentas-del-mundo-2016-metodologia>
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