Young people's views on how to tackle gang violence in "post-conflict" Guatemala

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1. Costello, P (1997), "Historical background" in Armon, J, R Sieder and R Wilson (editors), *Accord, Issue 2: Negotiating Rights: The Guatemalan Peace Process,* Conciliation Resources, London, page 10; also Torres-Rivas, E (1998), "Construyendo la paz y la democracia: el fin de poder contrainsurgente en Guatemala" in Torres-Rivas, E and G Aguilera (editors), *Del Autoritarismo a la Paz,* FLACSO, Guatemala, page 47.

2. Pain, R (2003), "Youth, age and the representation of fear", *Capital and Class* Vol 80, pages 151–171.

SUMMARY: *This paper describes gang culture in post-conflict Guatemala, and makes the case for including the views of young people in responding to the issue. Participatory research with young people from two low-income communities in Guatemala City revealed that gang violence was in fact a most critical issue in their lives, and a number of recommendations were generated. These young people identified a range of causes for gang membership, most of them related to a lack of family and social support and to the need for a sense of belonging. Proposed solutions stressed the importance of holistic, preventative responses, with organizations for youth being identified as the most effective approach. Two brief case studies describe the contributions of the Pentecostal Protestant Church and of a youth organization, Jovenes Adelante.*

I. INTRODUCTION

GUATEMALA'S 36 YEARS of violent political conflict, which left a legacy of an estimated 180,000 deaths, 40,000 disappearances and more than 1,000,000 internal refugees, ended officially in 1996.[1] Despite its formal status as a "post-conflict" state, however, Guatemala continues to be plagued by violence. Political violence, rife during conflict, has been replaced by (or turned into) an upsurge in social and economic violence. Particularly prolific in Guatemala, and much of Central America, is the phenomenon of youth gangs; these are the most visible, at times the most brutal, but also perhaps the most misunderstood manifestation of post-conflict violence in the region. The conspicuous and pervasive nature of gang violence means that repressive attempts to tackle violence often focus on youth. The vilification of young people as potential delinquents has obvious implications for their general well-being, and serves little purpose by way of actually engaging with and tackling what is a complex and multidimensional problem. It also hides the fact that young people involved in gangs are themselves victims, both in terms of being the direct victims of crime and violence, and also in a more abstract sense of exclusion and lack of appropriate opportunities or care.[2] There is, therefore, an urgent need to include the views of young people in the ongoing youth gang debate.

   This paper is based on participatory research carried out with young people living in low-income communities in Guatemala City, and explores their opinions on how to reduce youth gang violence in their communi-

ties. While being only one of a multitude of problems identified and discussed by these young people in the context of a wider research project, the violence of youth gangs consistently emerged as both the most widespread and the most serious issue affecting their lives. This paper reflects on the perceptions of these young people in the context of existing knowledge about youth gangs and related interventions in Guatemala. It explores the ways in which the opinions of young people who are directly affected by gangs both correspond to and differ from those of researchers and policy makers, and in so doing highlights the importance of engaging in participatory research with young people for understanding and working with the problem of youth gangs.

II. LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

THE RESEARCH ON which this paper is based focused on the connection between social resources (or social capital), social exclusion and well-being among young people living in two low-income, marginal settlements in Guatemala City, both established in the mid-1980s: one *colonia*, situated to the southwest of Guatemala City, and one more geographically isolated *colonia*, to the west of the city. Research was carried out with young people in these communities over a period of nine months during 2000–2001, using a broadly qualitative and participatory approach. A total of 250 young people participated in the research (127 women and 123 men). They were accessed both through local schools and youth organizations, and subsequently via snowballing.[3] Since the research was not explicitly focused on either violence or youth gangs, sampling was not determined by gang membership, although a small number of participants were themselves ex-members of gangs, and many had friends currently involved in gangs; some participants may have been involved with gangs, but chose not to divulge this. More specific research that had been planned with active gang members had to be abandoned due to events towards the end of the research period.

The methodological framework was devised to allow the focus of the research to be shaped by the priorities of participants. Participatory appraisal tools were used in discussion groups conducted with small groups of young people (Table 1). Different tools were used, first, to gain some understanding of the broad range of issues affecting their lives and those of the community more generally and, second, to explore the emerging issues as prioritized by participants. The most consistent and critical of these was the theme of violence.

Young people were also given cameras and asked to take photographs of the positive and negative features of the community, and of the places and people that were important to them. These photos then facilitated further individual and group discussion, and provided a unique insight into the lives of the participants. Issues and themes emerging from these methods were then followed up in greater depth through in-depth interviews. Interviewees were recruited largely through the discussion groups, although some young people who were not comfortable working in groups were happy to speak individually (and vice versa), and some were accessed indirectly through other participants.

3. This is a method where the researcher is introduced to potential respondents by those already participating in the research.

4. For further discussion on the nature of youth gangs in various contexts, for Colombia and Guatemala, see Moser, C and C McIlwaine (2004), *Encounter with Violence in Latin America: Urban Poor Perceptions from Colombia and Guatemala,* Routledge, London; also, for Colombia and Nicaragua, see Rodgers, D (2003a), "Youth gangs in Colombia and Nicaragua: new forms of violence, new theoretical directions?" in Rudqvist, A (editor), *Breeding Inequality – Reaping Violence, Exploring Linkages and Causality in Colombia and Beyond,* Outlook on Development

Table 1:	List and description of tools used in diagram-based discussion groups	
Tool	**Description of tool**	**Number conducted**
Causal flow diagram	Diagram with a particular problem in the centre, to which causes, effects and solutions are connected with arrows.	24
Community map	Map identifying what are perceived to be the main features of the community, with symbols marking safe and dangerous areas during the day and at night.	22
Drawing	Drawings expressing specific ideas of, for example, happiness and sadness.	8
Flow diagram	Visual representation of the perceived components of a certain theme, with arrows drawn to represent connections.	24
Institutional/ group map	Diagram showing institutions or groups either within the community, or directly affecting it, as identified by participants, with institutions drawn as shapes of different sizes to denote their importance within the community, and colour/dashes used to indicate whether they are seen as positive or negative, or both, and for whom.	15
Interrelation flow diagram	Diagram to represent connections between a number of key problems already identified.	9
Matrix	Used to deconstruct an issue or problem: used here for institutional performance, the nature of trust, and coping strategies and solutions to problems.	6
Problem-listing and ranking	List of all the problems faced by young people and/or the community in general, which are then ranked according to their perceived importance.	48
Thematic bar and pie charts	Developed in this research, for example, to analyze trust: a number of individual bar or pie charts representing different groups of people are drawn and filled in to a level which identifies how much they are trusted. Explanations are connected to these charts with arrows.	11
Timeline	Graph to show how the severity of a particular problem, for example gang violence, changes over a given period of time.	4
	TOTAL	171

Series, Collegium for Development Studies, Uppsala, pages 111–141; text available at <http://www.kus.uu.se/poverty&violence/PovertyViolence.pdf>; and, for El Salvador, see Smutt, M and J L E Miranda (1998), *El Fenómeno de las Pandillas en El Salvador,* UNICEF/FLACSO, San Salvador.

III. FUNCTION OF YOUTH GANGS IN GUATEMALA CITY[(4)]

THERE ARE NO reliable data on the number of gangs operating in Guatemala or, indeed, on the proportion of crime actually attributable to youth gangs. Yet this very ambiguity, when coupled with the high visibility of this type of organized violence, has allowed the profile of gangs to be raised to such an extent that there seems little need for the perceived severity of the problem to be verified by actual data. The "Mara 18" and "Salvatrucha" (or MS 13) operate throughout Central America, and the (usually marginal)

urban neighbourhoods where gangs operate generally have a number of smaller territorial gangs, which may or may not be affiliated to a larger gang. While many gangs do have female members, and there are some female-only gangs in Guatemala, youth gangs are dominated by young men.[5]

In terms of interventions, it is important to avoid singular understandings of the nature of what could be collectively termed "youth gangs". Although the term "delinquent" and the Central American term for youth gang, "*mara*", have become almost synonymous in common usage in Guatemala, especially in the media, there are important differences between the two.[6] "Delinquents" operate in *bandas* (bands), which are structured around criminal (economic) violence. *Maras* are also reported to engage in pick-pocketing, mugging, theft and bus robberies, and to participate in organized crime such as kidnapping, bank robberies, and arms and drug-trafficking. But in addition, *maras* are responsible for high levels of social violence, including territorial conflict, rape and vandalism. The extent to which involvement in the distribution and consumption of drugs influences the function, dynamics and violence of gangs is unclear and largely context-specific, although it is becoming an increasingly significant influence on the nature of gang violence in some contexts.[7]

Of these different types of violence, it is territorial conflict that has the widest ramifications in terms of the personal safety and mobility of both gang and non-gang members. The level of violence between *maras* ranges from fist fights to the use of knives, guns and even grenades. The proliferation of firearms following the conflict in Guatemala, and their increasing use in territorial fighting, heightens the risk of death and injury for gang members, and also for those not involved in gangs. It is revealing that the most common cause of death among 15–24-year-old Guatemalans in 1997 was from firearms.[8]

The frequency of territorial disputes increases in contexts where there are a number of small territories within the same settlement. It was common in the research communities, for example, for the territory of one gang to extend no further than a few blocks – and, in some cases, single blocks – which made it almost impossible for gang members to conduct their daily lives without encountering conflict. Violence, in this sense, may literally come with the turf, but the specific motivations for gang violence are far from clear cut: "…*it may be an expressive violence in some cases, a functional violence in others and an emotive violence in still others. It may also reflect all three motivations at once.*"[9] Broadly speaking, however, the use of violence is crucial in gaining and maintaining social and economic power. Also significant is the use of violence to establish and enforce solidarity within the gang, a practice which begins with commonly violent initiation rituals. Although the specific nature of these rituals, and the level of violence they require, varies between different gangs, their common purpose is to allow potential members to prove that they are prepared to accept the norms and values around which the gang functions, and to adhere to these behavioural expectations. Accepting gang rules, however, is a serious commitment, not least because it is often very difficult to leave a *mara* once a member. It was reported by young people in this research that many gangs will attempt to kill a member trying to leave, often on suspicion of joining a rival gang. Their family may also be threatened. Alternatively, they may have to commit an extreme act of violence in order to be allowed to leave.[10] Gangs, therefore, exercise extreme internal control of their members, through which commitment to the interests of the group is forcibly maintained and solidarity guaranteed.

5. See reference 4, Moser and McIlwaine (2004); also World Vision (2002), *Faces of Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean*, World Vision International, San José.

6. See Moser, C and A Winton (2002), *Violence in the Central American Region: Towards an Integrated Framework for Violence Reduction,* ODI Working Paper No 171, Overseas Development Institute, London; also see reference 4, Smutt and Miranda (1998) on El Salvador.

7. For Nicaragua, see Rodgers, D (2003b), "Dying for it: gangs, violence and social change in urban Nicaragua", Crisis States Programme Working Paper 35, DESTIN, LSE, London; text available at <http://www.crisisstates.com/download/wp/wp35.pdf>

8. Poitevin, R, A Rivera and V Moscoso (2000), *Los Jóvenes Guatemaltecos a Finales del Siglo XX*, FLACSO, Guatemala.

9. Briceño-León, R and V Zubillaga (2002), "Violence and globalization in Latin America", *Current Sociology* Vol 50, No 1, pages 19–37.

10. The generally accepted reason to leave a gang eventually is to settle down with a partner (see reference 6, Moser and Winton (2002)) or to join the Church (see below).

11. Cruz, J M (1997), "Problemas y expectivas de los jóvenes pandilleros desde su propia perspectiva", paper presented at the PAHO Adolescent and Youth Gang Violence Prevention Workshop, 7–9 May 1997, San Salvador.

12. Bronfenbrenner, U (1977), "Toward an experimental ecology of human development", *American Psychologist* Vol 32, No 5, pages 13–31.

13. Moser, C (2000), *Violence in Colombia: Building Sustainable Peace and Social Capital,* World Bank Country Study, World Bank, Washington DC; also Moser, C (2001), "The gendered continuum of violence and conflict: an operational framework" in Moser, C and F Clark (editors), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence,* Zed Books, London; and WHO (World Health Organization) (2002), *World Report on Violence and Health,* WHO, Geneva.

14. See reference 6, Moser and Winton (2002).

15. Briceño-León, R (1999), "Violence and the right to kill: public perceptions from Latin America", paper presented at the workshop Rising Violence and the Criminal Justice Response in Latin America: Towards an Agenda for Collaborative Research in the 21st Century, 6–9 May 1999, University of Texas, Austin.

16. See reference 6, Moser and Winton (2002).

17. FLACSO (no date), "Programas para la prevención de la violencia y delincuencia juvenil", document prepared for the IDB, ES–0116.

Given the extreme danger faced by gang members, what are the benefits outweighing these potential costs? Overall, gang membership is not motivated by a desire to become involved in violence, but rather to belong to a cohesive social group. Indeed, nearly 85 per cent of 1,025 gang members surveyed in El Salvador in 1996 would like to "calm down" their life in the gang, that is, give up drugs and violence, and when asked which elements of the gang they would like to maintain, the most common answer was friendship (24 per cent), followed by unity and solidarity (21 per cent).[11] Participants in this research in Guatemala City identified a similar range of benefits accruing to gang members, namely friendship, protection, solidarity and collective power. In the words of one young woman: "…*you're protected – you feel like you're more than other people … and they support you*". However, it is the fact that these intense social bonds are maintained through violence that makes seemingly innocuous social needs potentially damaging.

This research found that for young people not involved in gangs, the ramifications of the violence are both direct (such as fear of physical danger and vulnerability to crime) and indirect (such as the reduction in community cohesion and community trust of young people). Indeed, those participants who did not want to remain living in their community (63 per cent of those who discussed this in interview) mentioned only the *maras*, and more general violence, as reasons for moving.

IV. WHAT CAUSES YOUNG PEOPLE TO JOIN GANGS?

SINCE YOUTH GANGS are, in many ways, the epitome of increasing everyday violence in Central America, it is worth outlining the range of social, economic, political and institutional "post-conflict" problems that are widely believed to have led to the upsurge in social and economic violence, and to explore the reasons why youth gangs have emerged as key players in this trend.

One of the best-known attempts to unravel the interrelated nature of violence is the "ecological model", based on Bronfenbrenner, which seeks to demonstrate that no single level or cause determines or explains violence.[12] This model identifies violence at structural, institutional, interpersonal and individual levels,[13] within which there are factors that cause violence and others that shape and perpetuate it.[14] Briceño-León,[15] for instance, identifies factors that generate violence, for example social inequality and the breakdown of traditional controls such as the family; those that promote violence, such as the absence of mechanisms of conflict resolution; and, finally, those that facilitate violence, such as easy access to firearms, alcohol or drugs consumption, and media sensationalization.[16] Many such factors are identified in Figure 1, a diagram drawn by three young people in Guatemala City to explain the causes of gang membership.

More specifically, it is generally in the marginal urban areas of Central America that youth gangs proliferate, where it is argued that a number of factors all serve to weaken the socialization function of the family: precarious living conditions, tensions provoked by an accumulation of shortages, excessive working hours of parents, the increased material and emotional responsibility of women, severe overcrowding, the lack of recreational space, and the lack of basic services.[17] Indeed, a lack of family support (itself seen to be caused by other, principally economic, problems, which

Figure 1:	Interrelation flow diagram of problems connected to gang membership, drawn by three young men and women, aged 20–23, Guatemala City
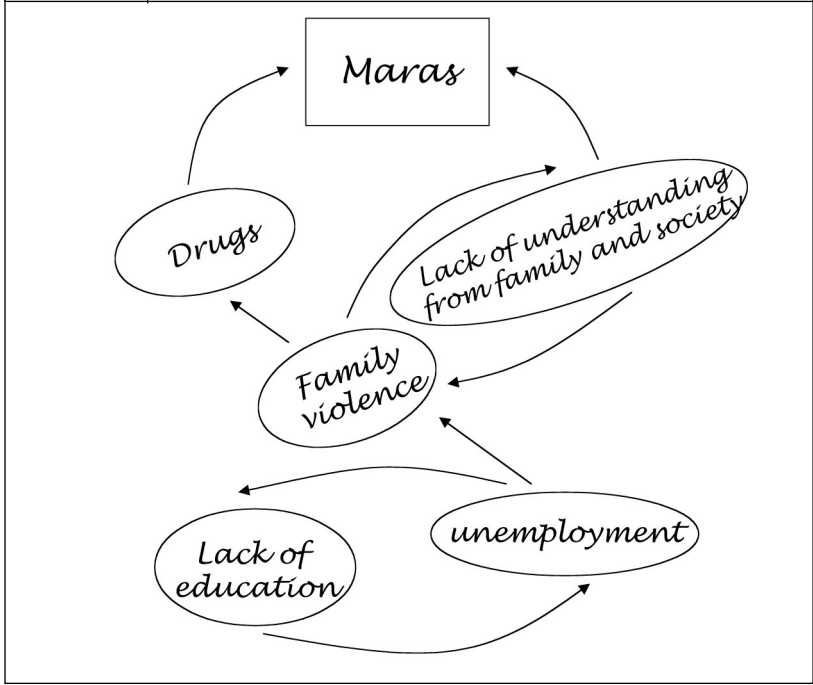
reduce the time parents can spend with their children) was cited repeatedly by participants as a significant cause of gang membership (Figure 2). A lack of "positive" social resources in one sphere (the family) was, for some young people, compensated by the resources of another (the gang). As Veronica, aged 17, suggested: "…*if your parents don't support you, what are you going to do? If you find a friend who is involved in bad things, you go around with them too – you feel that you have their trust, and not your parents'*."
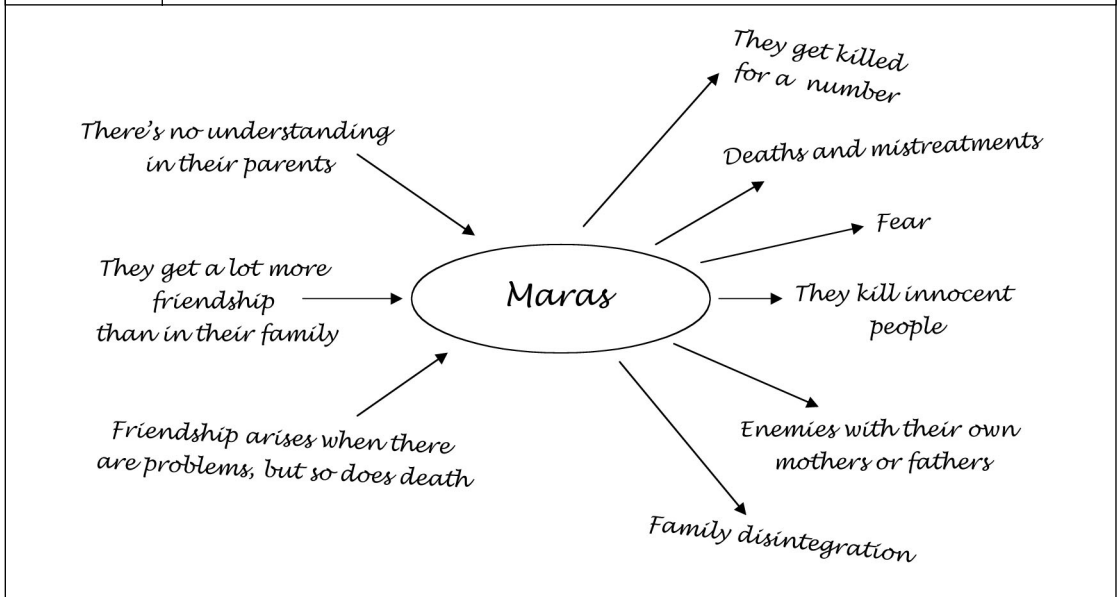
Participants also saw family problems resulting from gang membership (see Figure 2), whereby friction was caused within the household as a result of problems associated with gang involvement, particularly drugs consumption and crime, which further decreased trust and communication within the family.

Young people identified another connection between gang membership and family problems: intra-family violence. A relationship emerged between different types of social violence, where it was reported by some participants that domestic abuse may lead young people to join gangs which "make you feel big", highlighting the connection between gang membership and power, as noted above. However, rejecting one type of violence in this way might mean adopting another. As Nancy, aged 18, noted: "…*if [their parents] hit them, they want to feel like they're in a group. She comes [to the gang] and someone else hits her.*"[18]

Thus, it could be argued that the traditional institutions of the state and the family are no longer able to provide young people with a meaningful social identity. Increasing social fragmentation and polarization are countered by the development of an alternative societal membership, whereby

18. See also reference 4, Moser and McIlwaine (2004).

Figure 2: **Causal flow diagram of the *maras*, drawn by one young woman and two young men, aged 14–15, Guatemala City**

They get killed for a number

Deaths and mistreatments

There's no understanding in their parents

Fear

They get a lot more friendship than in their family

Maras

They kill innocent people

Friendship arises when there are problems, but so does death

Enemies with their own mothers or fathers

Family disintegration

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19. See reference 9, page 27.

20. See reference 4, Rodgers (2003a).

21. Dissel, A (1997), "Youth, Street Gangs and Violence in South Africa" in G Hérault & P Adesanmi (editors), *Youth, Street Culture, and Urban Violence in Africa,* IFRA, Ibadan, pages 405-411.

22. AVANCSO (1996) (third edition), "Por sí mismos: un estudio preliminar de las 'maras' en la ciudad de Guatemala", *Cuaderno de Investigación* No 4, AVANCSO, Guatemala, page 18.

the violence of gangs is "…*a resource with which to obtain an acknowledged identity*".[19] The local repercussions of this are that in communities where gangs are present, the violent expression of youth gang identity "…*is a form of social being, built into the structure and functioning of society; it shapes, frames and interacts with the lives of individuals and communities*".[20]

Furthermore, a lack of employment opportunities, together with (and connected to) generally poor levels of education, means that young people in Guatemala often suffer high levels of economic exclusion. Gangs become a rational alternative, as they are economically, as well as socially, self-sufficient. Young people in this research made frequent reference to the economic attractions of gangs. Overall, as Dissel suggests, "…*gangs provide members with a sense of belonging, as well as opportunities for economic improvement, for gaining a sense of power, acceptance and purpose.*"[21]

Whether or not gang members want to relinquish their membership in favour of something less dangerous depends heavily on what else is available to them. Only 8 of the 290 gang members questioned by AVANCSO in Guatemala wanted to "…*leave the maras and become good citizens*".[22] Yet, this does not necessarily suggest that these young people blindly accept the violence of their gang. Rather, I suspect it is more concerned with the concept of citizenship holding very little positive meaning for the socially, politically and economically excluded; the prospect of being a good citizen is unlikely to outweigh the benefits of belonging to a gang. This was underlined by participants in the current research, who frequently lamented the lack of understanding of young people by society in general, the stigmatization they faced, and what they saw as a lack of political commitment to provide them with appropriate assistance (see below).

Finally, the spread of gang culture in Central America has been influenced strongly by migration movements. The deportation of Latino gang members from US cities back to Central America has contributed to the dissemination of violent gang culture in the region, such that the two main

gangs in Central America are branches of Latino gangs in Los Angeles, namely the MS 13 and Mara 18. Similarly, migration within Central America has advanced further the regional spread of gang culture, particularly from El Salvador. Indeed, participants made reference to the influence of Salvadoran gangs in Guatemala far more often than that of US gangs, connections between the two notwithstanding.

V. YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON POSSIBLE REFORMS: WHAT AND HOW TO CHANGE

THE VIEWS OF participants in this research regarding the solutions to gang violence were, not surprisingly, strongly related to its perceived causes. The multiplicity of causes put forward by young people meant that they identified a wide range of solutions to gangs. Solutions were suggested to address both individual "traits" and a range of structural problems – as outlined above – which culminated in a lack of social, cultural and economic resources among some young people. For the purposes of this paper, proposed solutions are divided between those that involve informal support from family, friends and other community members, and those that concern formal support through – in this case – state security forces, NGOs or religious institutions (Table 2). It should be noted, however, that a strict distinction between informal and formal action is not always possible, as many formal interventions also involve (and perhaps transform) participation, reflection and action within the community and the family. Nevertheless, it is a useful means of highlighting the perceived need for formal support, with solutions in this category cited more than twice as often as informal solutions.

a. Informal solutions

When referring to informal solutions, young people often spoke in distinct terms about two groups of actors: "*jovenes*" (youth) and "*la communidad*" (the community) – an interesting distinction in itself in terms of inclusion/exclusion – and recommended various types of action by each group. Many participants suggested that young people themselves may play an important role in convincing other young people not to join gangs. Some participants felt that young people were not fully aware of the consequences of joining a gang (and particularly the difficulties of leaving prematurely), and that the guidance of others who knew more about the implications could be valuable – highlighting the importance of diverse (and positive) social capital for young people. For example, two young women discussed how gangs tried to "recruit" young people on the street; one of the young women was warned off by friends, but the other joined, mainly through curiosity.

It was also thought that peer advice would be useful to help young people to leave gangs. As Carmen, aged 16, suggested: "…*setting up groups of young people who aren't involved [in gangs] to talk to them about youth, remind them that you have to enjoy it*." Such ideas formed part of an approach to breaking what may have become a dominant norm (especially among young men) – namely participation in gangs as a "rite of passage". Outreach programmes of local youth organizations were considered to be a key mechanism for establishing these advice networks, demonstrating the link between informal and formal solutions.

| Table 2:	Suggested informal and formal solutions to the *maras*
Informal solutions	**Percentage of citations**
Communication, understanding, love in the family	17
Communication, respect, unity in the community	8.5
Advice to youth	7
Subtotal	**32.5**
Formal solutions	
Groups for youth	20
Security	15
Religion	12
Groups/advice for parents	7
Justice	5
Recreational centres	5
More jobs/money	3
Subtotal	**67**

SOURCE: Discussion groups and interviews.

Other informal solutions proposed included increased communication within the family, to improve its capacity for support and understanding, and within the community, to foment unity and respect among members. It became clear that institutions could, again, play a role in aiding these processes to some extent.

b. Formal solutions

In terms of formal interventions, participants were variously supportive of repressive, rehabilitative and preventative approaches to gangs; the construction of a solution depended on how the phenomenon was understood. If gangs were thought to be principally the expression of perceived rebellious, violent or lazy behaviour by young people (among those who, interestingly, distanced themselves from these *jovenes*), a repressive approach was seen as the most effective solution. One diagram drawn by two 14-year-old young women, for example, identified the cause of gangs as "disobedient children", and identified the solution as "more security and more police patrols". Yet, while many participants spoke of the importance of effective security, very few considered such an approach to be sufficient in isolation. This was due in part to the widespread opinion that the police were too inefficient to make a considerable impact on gang activity. As Berta, aged 14, noted: "…*now instead of the groups of maras being afraid of the police, the police are afraid of them*." Indeed, the police, seen as inefficient and irresponsible, were identified frequently in discussion

| Figure 3: | Causal flow diagram of distrust of the government, drawn by two young women and three young men, aged 11–15, Guatemala City |
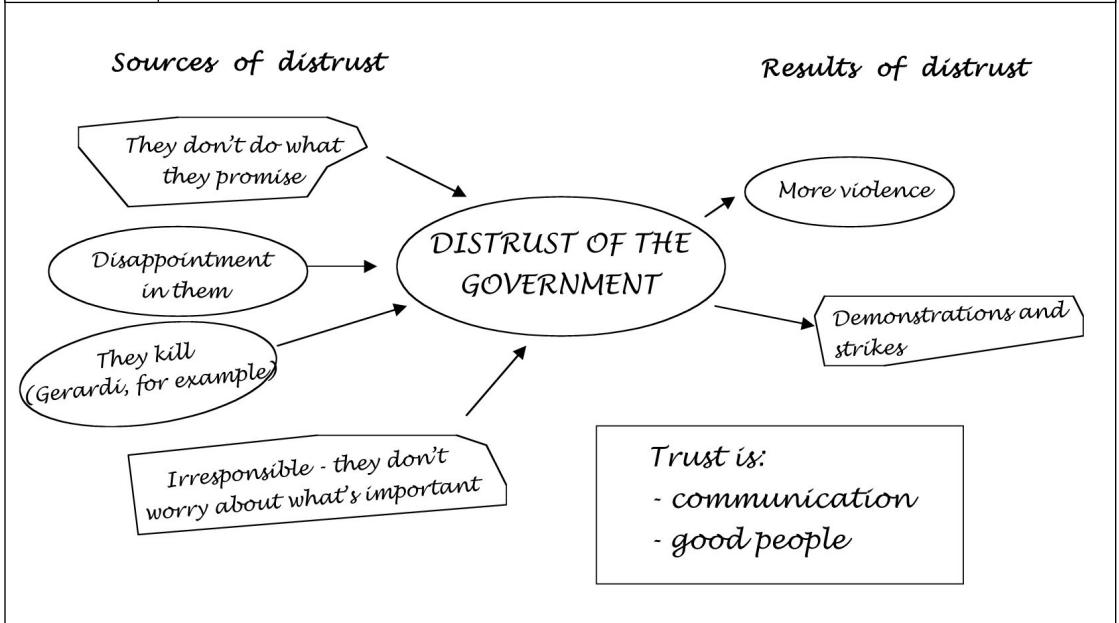
groups in both communities, as the most negative institution, along with the *maras*.[23] This was a reflection of a broader dissatisfaction with the perceived corruption and inefficiency of state institutions in general. In the words of one 20-year-old young woman, "*…the government isn't going to worry about you. The government isn't interested in what happens to families here or young people.*"

This lack of trust in the state apparatus has complex antecedents, but relates in part to a failure – common among newly democratic and "peaceful" states in Latin America – to reform successfully the police and the judiciary,[24] which is both especially important and particularly difficult where citizens have been subject to intense political violence, as was the case in Guatemala during the conflict. In such contexts, state security and the judicial apparatus might be seen both as unreliable in terms of lack of action and as repressive when its actions revert to arbitrary and, at times, brutal control. These institutional shortfalls overwhelmingly affect the poor and feed insecurity on many levels. The direct link between a lack of trust in the government and insecurity, as perceived by five participants in this research, is shown in Figure 3.

Participants most often identified organizations for young people as the most effective solution to gang membership – on the grounds that the root of the problem lay largely beyond individual actors, and was better dealt with by addressing the manifold problems facing young people.

Prevention and rehabilitation

Participants suggested that while it is possible, and indeed vital, to work with young people already involved in gangs, it is perhaps easier to provide a substitute for those who have not yet joined one. Accordingly, most participants generally considered prevention to be the most effective long-term solution. As Jorge, aged 18, commented: "*I think that what you can do*

23. See reference 4, Moser and McIlwaine (2004).

24. See Pereira, A W (2001), "Virtual legality: authoritarian legacies and the reform of military justice in Brazil, the Southern Cone and Mexico", *Comparative Political Studies* Vol 34, No 5, pages 555–574.

most is prevent. Those who are involved now – I mean, you can, but it's more difficult. But preventing with groups like these [Jóvenes Adelante – see below], I say you can prevent it."

Participants generally talked about the importance of providing young people with the resources and support they lacked, rather than re-channelling the organizational capital of gangs in more positive directions. This has important implications in terms of policy, in that it points to the central role of youth-focused (rather than gang-focused) programmes in long-term violence-reduction strategies, and indeed in the achievement of community development goals more broadly (see below). Nevertheless, participants did see the provision of various formal associations as instrumental in both prevention and rehabilitation, and in terms of rehabilitation, they highlighted the particular success of the evangelical Church (see below).

The function of youth organizations was seen as both offering guidance and providing an alternative social group; as one young woman, aged 15, commented in a discussion group, to "…*give them what they never had*." While many young people are able to rely on "positive" informal social resources to provide the social support they need, many others were thought to lack these informal social resources. Formal groups were needed, it would seem, to provide the benefits of belonging to a gang, without the associated problems and dangers. Organizations were thus seen as an alternative source of emotional and psychological support. In addition, it was suggested that organizations could offer help to parents, so that they might be better aware of the causes of gang membership and able to help their children avoid joining at all. Organizations could thus support young people indirectly by increasing the supportive capacity of the family.

Despite the complexity of many of the causes of gang membership, there was undoubtedly evidence that certain interventions had been successful in improving the well-being of young people, and thus reducing gang membership. The following section explores two particular – yet vastly different – examples of such interventions, which were discussed in some depth by many participants.

Case study 1: The role of the Church in rehabilitating gang members

The Church (both Catholic and Protestant) was an important institution in both communities. However, the evangelical Protestant Church was most closely associated with actively targeting gang members for rehabilitation. Indeed, it could be argued that this enlistment forms part of a project of determined missionary work among evangelical Protestants in Guatemala, and Central America more broadly. Many young people who participated in this research were themselves involved in actively recruiting local gang members to the evangelical Church, in the belief that religion was key to changing individual behaviour. For example, Ingrid, aged 15, suggested it was up to the individual to change, and the best aid was "…*looking for God, because that's the only thing that can help us*." In order to examine religion as a tool in the rehabilitation of gang members, it is worth discussing briefly the recent spread of Protestantism in Guatemala.

Guatemala, once nearly exclusively Catholic, is now 30 to 35 per cent Protestant, one of the highest percentages of any Latin American Catholic country.[25] Importantly, Pentecostal Protestantism prevails in Guatemala, and has marginalized the mainstream and progressive Protestant churches in the region.[26] Particularly relevant here is the spread of Pentecostal groups into urban areas. These groups capitalized on the massive

25. *Washington Post*, 27 July 2002.

26. Barry, T (1990), "The sword of God", *New Internationalist* Issue 210; text available at http://www.newint.org/issue210/sword.htm

immigration from the countryside to the city during the armed conflict, and expanded throughout Guatemala City. In contrast to Catholicism, the evangelical Protestant movement relied on a large number of small churches, ensuring accessibility and the creation of a sense of belonging among people who had lost previous social ties through migration. Above all, "…*belonging to a moral community attracts members and offers relations members can count on in a fragile and sometimes hostile environment.*"[27]

However legitimate criticisms of this sect may be (largely based on the passivity and divisiveness it breeds,[28] and its ideological alignment with the Guatemalan right-wing[29]), it is undeniable that it has had some impact in terms of reducing gang membership. This has been possible for two main reasons. First, gangs generally accept Church membership – together with settling down with a partner – as a legitimate way of maturing out of the gang, and so generally do not punish gang members for leaving in this way.[30] Second, the Church seems to offer a social structure comparable in many ways to that of a gang. Just as gangs are based on exclusive and dense social bonds among members, with a stringent code of conduct to ensure shared expectations and mutual trust, so the evangelical Church is a self-contained, supportive and deliberately separate "community", which operates according to its own social values and strict rules. This institution, it seems, offers for some an effective social replacement for gang membership, whereby – as David, aged 17, suggested: "…*they move away from their friendships little by little.*"

Case study 2: Reducing gang membership through increasing youth well-being: the youth organization, Jovenes Adelante

In terms of successful prevention, the two research communities provided an interesting institutional comparison. Gang activity was widely reported to have increased in one community following the demise of the youth programme, while it noticeably decreased in the other with the introduction of a youth project, Jovenes Adelante.

The broad aim of this project is to "…*generate a community education process, which raises the quality of life of young people, both socially and culturally, as well as economically, and which strengthens family, social and community integration.*" Thus, it operates according to the following broad tenets: teamwork, participation and ownership, achievement and self-esteem, training, and consciousness-raising. The programme is based around three youth centres in different areas of the community, where small groups of young people hold weekly meetings with a coordinator, in addition to other activities they may be participating in. Large workshops are also held on a regular basis according to the various groups' priorities, together with a biannual weekend training course, which is open to all members. The youth centres themselves provide young people with a safe, positive and relaxed recreational space – a valuable resource given the perceived lack of security in public spaces. Associated activities include training young people to become voluntary teachers, student and community organization, technical work-training and scholarships, recreational–cultural education, and family–community integration and development initiatives. A key aspect of the programme is the opportunity for direct employment, with those members who complete a three-year cycle of training eventually becoming salaried coordinators.

Members of this organization noted a wide range of benefits, for both

27. Cleary, E L (1992), "Evangelicals and competition in Guatemala" in Cleary, E L and H Stewart-Gambino (editors), *Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Colorado; text available at http://www.dominicans.org/~ecleary/conflict/conflict09.htm

28. See, for example, reference 27.

29. Indeed, many groups joined with the Reagan administration in support of genocidal counter-insurgency offensives led by General Rios Montt (himself a Pentecostal Protestant) during the 1980s, and worked closely with the military to establish "model villages" to replace those destroyed by the army.

30. Although this was not always the case. Elena, aged 17, described in an interview how her friend was recently killed as a direct result of leaving the Mara 18 and joining the Church.

themselves and the community. The very fact of "belonging" yielded significant emotional benefits in itself. Members noted the value of being in a place where they were trusted and respected and could share their opinions freely with others. In addition, the group actively promotes the potential of young people to be agents of change, and encourages them to realize their potentially powerful collective role within the community. As Antonio, aged 15, commented: "…*it's about seeing that young people know what problems youth have, and see the solution between them, because alone you can maybe have the idea, but to achieve it is difficult – it's easier in a group like this*."

Another member observed that the guidance they were given was useful in terms of increasing their own ability to advise and help others. Ingrid, aged 15, noted: "*I feel happy [belonging to the group] because if anyone asks me for support, I know I can give it. I've got a bit of experience in the group now*."

Another important dimension, and a significant motivating factor for joining, was enjoyment. Some participants spoke of going to a group to relax and have fun with their friends, and indeed to make new friends; others identified youth organizations more specifically as places to go to forget about their problems. In the words of Efrain, aged 18, "…*it's a space where you can forget your troubles, or problems you have at home*."

It was widely reported that gang activity had noticeably declined since the programme was established. Given the apparent benefits of this type of organization, it is perhaps not surprising that the demise of a similar organization in the other research community had led to a marked increase in gang activity, highlighting the importance of sustainability.

VI. BARRIERS TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS

IT IS VITAL to recognize what some young people find attractive about a gang, and also what some find appealing about formal organizations. It is just as important to consider what young people may find unappealing about such organizations, and identify the various factors that reduce the propensity for young people to participate in formal organizations. These have been grouped here according to the four main themes discussed by participants.

Information about services. Lack of information about services and negative information were both found to affect participation. Awareness of the services available varied enormously between young people, largely as a result of varying social networks through which local knowledge about institutions might be shared. Young people with a greater range of social networks had a greater awareness of the functions and services of various community-based organizations. The type of information shared also had a definite impact on how they were perceived, and hence the likelihood of participation. The perceived value of joining an organization was diminished by second-hand negative experiences. Another significant factor was that some parents were highly suspicious of youth groups per se, particularly those which were not explicitly religious, and sometimes did not give their children permission to join. Organizational openness and inclusiveness is thus key to counteracting suspicion.

Stigmatization. The ostensibly positive engagement of youth organi-

zations with the problem of gangs appears to have affected the image of these organizations among some young people, and led to a degree of stigmatization. Young people not involved in formal organizations were rarely critical of them, but they often perceived them to be places for people in need, and so as correctional rather than recreational. This suggests that a greater range of organizations might have reached more young people in both research communities.

Male bias of youth organizations. Some young women felt that there was a distinct male bias in Jovenes Adelante. Carmen, for example, used to be a member, but left after just three months, feeling that the women in her group were not valued equally. While this is surprising, given the strong emphasis on gender issues in the workshops and a striking awareness of gender issues among both male and female members, this perception nonetheless damaged the reputation of the organization for these young women.

Lack of time or inclination. Many young people simply do not have time to belong to a group when struggling to combine their studies with work and other responsibilities. This raises the important point that, of course, not all young people either can, or indeed wish to, belong to a formal youth group. As Guillermo commented: "*I'm happy as I am!*" Yet, it is, of course, also important to ascertain whether those young people who would like to join have the appropriate services and resources available to them. As Nancy, aged 18, suggested, "*…sometimes you try to help set up some organizations to help young people, but they don't want it – they don't accept help.*" The type of help offered is, quite obviously, fundamental to programme success.

VII. POLICY IMPLICATIONS: YOUTH AND/OR VIOLENCE INTERVENTIONS

SO HOW DO these issues relate to policy debates on youth violence interventions? A wide-ranging debate hinges essentially on one key factor: the paradigm of youth itself. Differing paradigms have very direct policy and programme implications (Table 3). A second crucial issue, also related to youth paradigms, is whether youth violence is targeted in isolation, or as part of broader programmes aimed at the comprehensive improvement of young people's well-being, through increased social, economic and political opportunities.[31]

Broadly speaking, there seems to be an emerging consensus among researchers and many practitioners across a range of related fields and disciplines that youth is not simply a (risky) path to adulthood but, rather, that young people are agents in their own right and must be treated as such in both research and policy (see Table 3). From this perspective, "successful" youth policy outcomes require holistic, cross-sectoral and community-driven initiatives within which young people are recognized as citizens with rights and as actors within the development process at a range of levels.[32] This approach is supported by the views of the young people taking part in this study, who lamented the lack of respect accorded to them, the stigmatization they faced and the impotence they felt, but who also responded very positively to the opportunity to challenge these processes at a local level. Jovenes Adelante is based precisely on the principle of young people as agents of change, and is at its core a participatory, youth-led organization that allows young people the space to achieve change at a

31. Santacruz-Giralt, M, J M Cruz and A Concha-Eastman (2002), *Inside the Neighborhood: Salvadoran Street Gangs' Violent Solidarity*, PAHO, Washington DC.

32. See, for example, reference 17; also Gilde, H and R Cuellar (2003), "Políticas locales de juventud en la experiencia guatemalteca" in Dávila León, O (editor), *Políticas Públicas de Juventud en América Latina: Políticas Locales*, CIPDA, Viña del Mar, pages 141–163; text available at http://www.cidpa.cl/; Krauskopf, D (2003), "La construcción de políticas de juventud en Centroamérica", in Dávila León (editor) (as above), pages 13–46; text available online at http://www.cidpa.cl/txt/publicaciones/volumen1/dina%20krauskopf.pdf; and see reference 5, World Vision (2002).

Table 3:	Paradigms of youth in different policy and programme approaches	
Paradigm	**Policies**	**Programmes**
Transition to adulthood Preparatory stage	Oriented towards preparation for adulthood Extension of educational coverage Healthy free time and recreation, low coverage Military service	Universal Undifferentiated Isolated
Risk and transgression Problem stage for society	Compensatory Sector-specific (mainly health and justice) Focused	Assisting and controlling specific problems Relevant to urban youth Distribution of resources
Young citizens Period of social development	Articulated through public policy Cross-sectoral Inclusion of youth as subjects of political, cultural, social and economic rights	Integrated Participatory Extension of alliances
Youth as strategic actors for development Period of training and productive support	Articulated through public policy Cross-sectoral Orientated towards the incorporation of youth as human capital, and the development of social capital	Institutional equity and transversal Confrontation of exclusion Youth support for development strategies

SOURCE: Translated from Krauskopf, D (2003), "La construcción de políticas de juventud en Centroamérica" in Dávila León, O (editor), *Políticas Públicas de Juventud en América Latina: Políticas Locales*, CIPDA, Viña del Mar, page 19; text available online at http://www.cidpa.cl/txt/publicaciones/volumen1/dina%20krauskopf.pdf

33. See reference 32, Gilde and Cuellar (2003).

local level.

Such an approach is not, however, convincingly reflected in national youth policy in Guatemala. National-level youth policy in the country tends to construct young people as the passive beneficiaries of services (and also the targets of repression). Despite the existence of the Consejo Nacional de la Juventud (National Youth Council), with the role of coordinating public policy on youth, there remains a lack of actual cooperation, openness and power-sharing.[33] The majority of public policies firmly subscribe to the paradigm of youth as a transitional and risky life stage, and fail to take into account a contextual variety of conditions and the agency of young people. Attempts to reduce gang membership and associated violence through focused (often repressive) interventions has led to a sector-specific, isolated approach to gangs, which panders more to public opinion and the welcome visibility of security measures than to grassroots needs and research-based evidence of these needs. While a considerable challenge, coordination between the institutes and departments that are responsible for youth programmes is crucial at a macro level, together with effective and committed cooperation with local grassroots organizations and NGOs. Broadly speaking, successful local-level youth programmes reflect the multiple needs of young people in situations of multiple exclusion. It is useful here to mention the recommendations of a FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales – Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences) report to the IADB (InterAmerican Development Bank) on effective youth gang interventions. Successful interventions, it suggests, include four key components: a human component, aimed at creating a positive collective and individual identity through collective workshops and activities; an

academic component, to assist those in school and to provide economic assistance to those who cannot afford to go; a labour component, providing technical job-training; and a recreational component, to offer young people the space to use their free time positively. It is notable that only two of the 75 projects identified in the FLACSO survey in El Salvador contained all four elements. Jovenes Adelante, identified in the current research, covered all four of these components. The fact that Jovenes Adelante is not aimed specifically at gang members but, rather, at improving the quality of life for young people in general, suggests that such recommendations can apply equally to preventative and rehabilitative interventions. Participants in the current research placed a very strong emphasis on the importance of building social capital through such formal organizations. Again, this underlines the importance of contextual awareness and of approaches which, while far-reaching, are also responsive to local conditions (and in this case, also responsive to the particular nature of gangs).

Perhaps as important as the type of intervention, however, is the agent responsible for its implementation. Young people did not have much faith that the government would act to implement any of the measures they suggested; especially, as Carlos, aged 21, commented, when existing government assistance continues to help anyone but young people. Many young people felt that for Guatemala as a whole to move forward, what was needed above anything else was a responsible government, one with a "social conscience". Without the support of complementary government policy, the impact of alternative interventions is likely to be weakened. One gets the sense that the significant and very positive changes at the local level, promoted by some small, community-driven programmes, are generally seen to occur in spite of the government agenda.

However, the election of Oscar Berger as president in January this year offers an unlikely glimmer of hope. During his election campaign, he appeared to be turning towards the "heavy hand" gang policy adopted by Honduras and El Salvador, which penalizes mere membership of a *mara* and lowers the age at which minors can be tried as adults to 12. Yet, since taking office, he has instead pledged support for Guatemalan NGOs, which have had remarkable success in rehabilitating gang members. A step in the right direction, certainly.[34]

34. *Latin News Security Update,* 10 June 2004.

VIII. CONCLUSION

THIS PAPER HAS explored the recommendations of young people directly affected by youth gangs, with regard to the actions and interventions they consider most useful in reducing gang membership in their communities. Of crucial importance is that the broadly successful programme Jovenes Adelante did not focus specifically on gang membership but, rather, formed part of a community-wide youth-focused development initiative. Increasing youth well-being, therefore, is perceived as being preventative *per se*. It is important from this perspective not to focus on youth as potential deviants but, rather, to take a holistic and committed approach to youth welfare. Particularly notable in this sense was the value members of this organization attached to the recognition of and increase in their agency.

However, the successes of the evangelical Church in rehabilitating gang members cannot be discounted, despite its rather less progressive approach to youth. It could be argued that these successes stem from a factor inherent in both Church groups and gangs: "pocketed" social capital, based on

strong internal social bonds and norms that are exclusive rather than inclusive. Yet, this very exclusivity is in fact detrimental to overall well-being within the community, not least in terms of social divisions and rivalry, both of which were often commented on by participants. This does, however, underline the finding that young people in general saw both the causes of and solutions to gang membership to be very strongly social, and indeed structural. Participants prioritized causal factors that generated violence, rather than those that merely promoted or facilitated violence,[35] again highlighting the need for far-reaching interventions. Moreover, the barriers to youth participation in formal organizations outlined above signal a need to consider not only the number and quality of youth projects but also their diversity. This is especially important given the fact that young people assigned formal organizations a definite role in providing social support for young people, both directly and indirectly, through stimulating informal social support among young people.

The emphasis on community-driven interventions is not, however, to suggest that the government has any less responsibility when it comes to youth policy. On the contrary, the challenge lies in establishing effective networks of cooperation and collaboration between civil society groups and various levels of government, through which young people are able to articulate their preferences and priorities. Within this wider challenge, the current research highlighted a number of specific challenges: first, that gang membership cannot be reduced successfully or sustainably without cross-sectoral and multi-level commitment to improving young people's access to social, economic and political resources; second, that decision-making must be participatory and context-specific, involving and responding to local priorities; and finally, that none of the above is possible without a universal paradigm shift through which young people cease to be seen as a liability, and become recognized as agents with rights in both theory and practice. In theory, the proposals of the new president are indeed a welcome break from the past: it is now important to ensure that this shift is translated into a sustained and progressive reality.

35. See reference 15.