

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Central American youth gangs – A transnational social conflict

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Youth gangs are by no means a new phenomenon in Central America, but have substantially changed their shape and gained new socio-political relevance in the 1990s. Today's maras are characterized by both a high degree of violence and a transnational spread.

The prevalence of maras embodies a structural change of insecurity in Central America after the end of the conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s: Social and criminal violence becomes prevalent while security threats related to the long-lasting civil wars have lost importance. The emergence and spread of maras shape threat perceptions in the region considerably, and therefore have a major impact on national policies and bilateral and regional security cooperation. The mainly repressive approaches by states against maras might affect the consolidation of democratization processes in the region. Moreover, security-focused approaches fail to address the deep-rooted causes of this social conflict. This paper shows that existing schemes of violent non-state actors insufficiently capture the central characteristics of maras and critically evaluates Central American states' reactions towards this security threat.

The emergence and spread of maras in Central America

Youth gangs are not a specific Central American phenomenon. The Central American maras are a specific kind of gang which predominates in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and expand increasingly trans-regionally and trans-continently throughout Central America, Mexico, the United States, Canada, Spain and Peru. According to UNODOC, maras have 70,000 members in the region [1]. Others estimate the number of gang members in the region at up to 600,000 members [2].

The emergence of maras took place in the specific social and political context of the 1990s and can be traced back to deep-rooted socioeconomic inequalities as well as the direct consequences of violent conflicts in the region. With poverty rates of 50% to 80% Central America is one of the poorest regions of the world. Its Gini-index lies between 47 and 58, indicating enormous inequality in income distribution. The Central American civil wars had great impact on family structures and social capital as they took the lives of hundreds of thousands and forced the migration of about 10% of the total population. The peace accords which ended the Central American wars in 1990, 1992 and 1996, respectively, stipulated amongst other things disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants, the reform of armed forces, and the transformation of police forces into independent civil forces. Despite these ambitious plans, the accords did not result in a containment of violence in the region. Most statistics emanate an increase in violence in the years following the peace accords both in El Salvador and Guatemala, but also in Honduras, a country only indirectly affected by the wars. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras all have extremely high annual homicide rates of 51.8, 45.2 and 60.9 per 100,000 inhabitants [3]. Researchers relate this development to the insufficient

and only slowly implemented reintegration of ex-combatants and the failure to fulfill the expectations of the demobilized [4]. Additionally, the availability of small arms in the region remains high, a fact that builds a fertile ground for transnational arms traffic.

Moreover, re-migration flows from the United States and a spillover of North American gang culture have affected the emergence and quality of maras in Central America. Maras like Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha were founded by Central American and Mexican migrants in Los Angeles, spread across the region and influenced existing gangs. This process was reinforced by the Immigrant Responsibility Act passed in 1996 by the United States Congress which declared that non-citizens sentenced to more than one or two-year jail terms are eligible to be deported to their country of origin. Ongoing legal and illegal migration further enhances the transnational spread of maras.

Main characteristics of Central American maras

Maras differ from traditional, smaller and more fragmented gangs called pandillas that exist in Central America since the 1960s and 70s and faded in significance during the wars of the 1980s.

A main characteristic of maras is the strong identification with a certain territory, mostly a neighborhood or quarter. Defending and controlling this territory is a key feature of the rivalry between antagonizing gangs. Single groups called clikas often have a highly developed internal organizational structure, a rigorous code of conduct and honor and an elaborated system of rituals. Building on this, maras create strong identities based on a specific symbolism (mainly expressed by graffiti and tattoos), own codes of communication and strong solidarity among members.

Maras are characterized by a high potential for violence, mainly used against antagonizing maras, as well as criminal activities. Both are essential for mara identity and intragroup dynamics. They serve, for instance, as initiation rites or as sanctioning measure against the perpetration of rules of the mara. The most common criminal activities are theft, assaults, extortion and murder, but maras are said to commit racketeering, contract murder and drug trafficking, too. This points to economic purposes of crime.

Another feature of Central American maras is the establishment of transnational network structures. Most of the prevailing youth gangs are affiliated to one of the two big transnational maras, namely "Mara Salvatrucha" and "Mara 18", but there are several smaller ones, too. Both Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 have built a transnational structure and communication network, a transnational social network and identity as well as a transnational range of action. For instance, clikas host members of the same mara who have emigrated from other countries or support families of detained mareros. Continued transmigration is in fact a common feature among mareros.

Conceptualizing maras as a violent non-state actor

Maras cannot be integrated into existing ideal type schemes of violent non-state actors which differentiate between guerrillas, rebel groups, terrorists, warlords, and organized crime[5]. Comparable to guerrillas, the single clika is territorially based, but in contrast, the mara as a kind of umbrella organization has overcome the principle of territoriality in favor of a transnational range of action and a

transnational identity. Like other private violent actors, clikas are partly able to take over the monopoly of the use of force in certain territories and to establish systems of political order, based on their highly developed organizational structure, territoriality, identity and socio-economic structures [6]. Unlike guerrillas and rebel groups, the most common victims of mara violence are other gang members and civilians but not public security personnel. There is an increased tendency of using violence against civilians motivated by the intention to create a profound sense of fear and panic. Both strategy and psychological effects are comparable to those of terrorist activities. Compared to organized crime, violence exerted by maras is less economically motivated but rather part of their code of conduct and serves to strengthen group identity.

The conflict between rival gangs on the one hand and between maras and the state on the other hand, goes far beyond an ordinary social conflict: in addition to its social aspects, it is characterized by a great amount of violence, it challenges the state's monopoly of the use of force, involves a great number of participating combatants and expands transnationally throughout major parts of the Central American Region.

It is this combination of characteristics that poses a specific challenge for a scientific conceptualization of maras as can be seen with reference to two recent studies. Peetz describes the situation in El Salvador, Honduras and, with reservations, in Guatemala to be war-like and bases his assumption on four arguments: Firstly, there is a high level of fatalities in the context of mara violence and the fight against maras. Secondly, the conflict involves a great number of combatants (mareros, security forces and death squads). Thirdly, the state is involved as a conflict party. Fourthly, territory constitutes a central conflict category [7]. However, the motivation for exerting violence and the combat methods of maras greatly differ from the motives and strategies used in civil wars. On the other hand, Max Manwaring conceptualizes maras as "third generation gangs" [8] and describes this kind of gangs as "the new urban insurgency". However, this concept cannot easily be applied to Central America with its history of brutal repression of insurgencies. A recent study looks into the political and security order maras have established and comes to the conclusion that maras constitute government-like actors who create systems of bottom-up governance [9]. This approach seems to be more promising to adequately conceptualize the mara phenomenon.

The "hard hand" and its regional dimension

Maras are increasingly perceived as a transnational security threat. They are held responsible for rising crime levels and high murder rates in their respective countries. In El Salvador, for example, it is claimed that maras are responsible for 40% of all violent acts [10]. Maras are also blamed for being involved in organized criminal activities and have constantly been suspected of having links to international terrorist organizations. However, these links have not been verified yet and the actual extent of involvement of gang members in organized crime is highly disputed.

Threat perceptions are partly shaped intentionally by governments and the media and have a great impact on threat analyses. These analyses serve as a justification for state actors to use mainly repressive approaches to address the gang problem. Gang laws implemented in Honduras and El Salva-

dor enforce repression against members of youth gangs. Prevention and rehabilitation of juvenile gang members only play a subordinated role.

Most "mano dura" (hard hand) laws do not only contravene the constitutions of the Central American states by violating human rights, but are also incompatible with international agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, the deployment of military against youth gangs in Guatemala offends the peace accord. Obviously the concept of national security has been extended in order to pass the fight against maras off as justified action against a national security threat. Whether this will lead to a gain in prestige for the region's security forces has yet to be assessed.

Recently, the fight against maras has started to enter the framework of regional cooperation agreements. For example, in 2005 El Salvador and Guatemala agreed to build a common force to patrol the common border region to confront the maras. The impulse that this may give to broader regional cooperation initiatives like SICA (Sistema de Integración de Centroamérica) has to be further assessed.

Moreover, the United States are heavily involved in anti-gang measures. Based on a threat analysis that describes maras as a security threat within the Area of Responsibility of Southcom, the United States founded a Special Task Force to combat maras in 2004. Moreover, the FBI established an office in San Salvador in 2005 to coordinate the transnational fight against maras. The underlying motivation and role of engagement of this actor needs to be further assessed.

Based on the already available evidence, I argue that not only the extensive level of violence used by maras, but also security-focused and repressive approaches by the states, based on the perception of the mara as a national security threat, might menace the democratic and economic consolidation of Central American States.

Conclusion

Maras constitute a new kind of transnational social violent conflict that urgently needs proper conceptualization. A comprehensive understanding and assessment of the conflict's causes and dynamics are critical prerequisites for finding appropriate means of addressing the conflict.

To conceive the complexity of the phenomenon, comparative country studies on the maras should be conducted. How can variations in the organizational structure and the extent of violence in Central American countries be explained? Why is Nicaragua not as strongly affected by the maras as El Salvador, although both countries suffered long-lasting and violent civil wars?

Maras are a transnational phenomenon and accordingly the responses by the region's governments to these youth gangs take place bi- and multilaterally. There is a need to conduct a long term assessment on state reactions that are mostly repressive and tackle this conflict only one-dimensionally. What effect do these policies have on the development of gang structures? What is the impact of "mano dura" and the deployment of military forces in intrastate affairs on the newly established democratic systems of Central America? The security-focused approach to this social

conflict carries the inherent danger of the militarization of a social conflict and a remilitarization of the Central American region. Apart from that, focusing on security aspects is only partially compatible with the aim of containing the conflict. It is crucial to bear in mind more holistic approaches that take into account the deep-rooted causes of marginalization and poverty and that combine the measures with prevention and social rehabilitation programs.

[1] UNODOC (2007): Crimen y Desarrollo en Centroamérica.

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[2] Johnson, Stephen C. (2005): Testimony of Johnson, Stephen C.: North American Youth Gangs: Pattern and Remedies, before the Subcommittee of the Western Hemisphere, Washington D.C.; p. 280.

http://www.house.gov/international_relations/109/joh042005.pdf

[3] UNODOC (2011): Homicide Statistics

<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html>

[4] Zinecker, Heidrun (2004): El Salvador nach dem Bürgerkrieg, Ambivalenzen eines schwierigen Friedens, Studien der hessischen Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung, Frankfurt am Main; p. 90.

[5] See Mair, Stefan (2002): Die Globalisierung privater Gewalt. Kriegsherren, Rebellen, Terroristen und organisierte Kriminalität, Berlin; p. 7.

[6] Zinecker, Heidrun (2009): Gewaltkriminelle Ordnungen als Bottom-up-Governance - das Beispiel Zentralamerika, in: Weiland, H. et al. (Hrsg.): Good Governance in der Sackgasse? Baden-Baden, p. 97.

[7] See Peetz, Peter (2004): „Maras“ in Honduras, El Salvador und Guatemala. Die Bedrohung der öffentlichen Sicherheit durch Jugendbanden in Zentralamerika, in: Bodemer, K. (Hrsg.): Gewalt und öffentliche (Un-)Sicherheit: Erfahrungen in Lateinamerika und Europa, Hamburg, p. 53-94.

[8] See Manwaring, Max G. (2005): Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency, Strategic Studies Institute; p. 2.

www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/pdf/PUB597.pdf

[9] Zinecker, Heidrun (2009): Gewaltkriminelle Ordnungen als Bottom-up-Governance - das Beispiel Zentralamerika, in: Weiland, H. et al. (Hrsg.): Good Governance in der Sackgasse? Baden-Baden, p. 91-106.

[10] See Carranza, Marlon (2005): Detención o muerte: Hacia donde van los „pandilleros“ de El Salvador, in: Dowdney, L. (Hrsg.): Ni Guerra ni Paz. Comparaciones internacionales de niños y jóvenes en violencia armada organizada; p.18.

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