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Uncontrolled Urban Growth and COAV – Is there a relationship between rapid urban growth and the involvement of children and youth in Armed Violence?

Abstract

The world is facing a new phenomenon that used to be restrained to the boundaries of Latin America. Youth gangs composed by children and youth in urban areas are currently a worldwide concern. Communities everywhere are subject to stresses which have the effect of reducing the protections available to children. These include rapid urbanization; political instability; environmental insecurity; losses of social cohesion consequent on population movement or dispersal; trafficking of children for work or sexual services; the widespread use of drugs, alcohol and firearms in many settings and children's greater access to them; and the globalization of communications and spread of consumerist, violent images. The rapid urbanization that took place in the city of Rio de Janeiro came together with the emergence of the slums that are approximately 700 nowadays. The disorderly growth that took place just after the appearance of the slums in addition to their total abandonment by the public authorities from the initial phase of the process onwards condemned the slums and their inhabitants to marginalization and the power vacuum was noticed by criminal groups that ended up attempting to fill this gaps, what happened certainly not unreservedly.

This essay aims at pointing to major problems related to the issue of youth violence, the rife circulation of small arms and light weapons in urban areas, an analysis on the hills and the asphalt reality and its consequences to children and youth.

Introduction

No community is free of violence. There are different types of violence, structural violence, armed violence, sexual and domestic violence etc. Structural violence, a term which was first used in the 1970s denotes a form of violence which corresponds with the systematic ways in which a given social structure or social institution kills people slowly by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Institutionalized elitism, racism, sexism, nationalism, heterosexism and ageism are just some examples of structural violence. Life spans are reduced when people are socially dominated, politically oppressed, or economically exploited. Structural violence and direct violence are highly interdependent. Structural violence inevitably produces conflict and often direct violence including family violence, racial violence, hate crimes, terrorism, genocide, and war.

The risk of encountering violence, including *by* as well as *to* children and young people, is much higher in some communities than in others. In some settings, especially those where guns are in wide circulation, this violence has had devastating consequences. These are primarily urban areas in regions with high levels of economic disparity and social inequality; also in many cases with a particular history of colonial brutality, social division, political or economic crisis.

These violence-prone urban areas are usually poor or very poor, and in them young people, especially boys in their teens and above, are at once the most frequent victims of violence and its primary agents. Apart from the US, most of the countries with youth¹ homicide rates above 10 per 100,000 are either developing or experiencing rapid social and economic change.² Rates are highest in Latin America (in Colombia the rate is 85 per 100,000), South Africa, the Russian Federation, and parts of south-eastern Europe; they are lowest in Western Europe, and parts of Asia and the Pacific.

The world context and Rio de Janeiro

Currently, approximately 7,500,000 people live in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.³ Rio de Janeiro is well-known as one of the most beautiful cities in the world, however, it also holds the reputation of being one of the most violent cities worldwide. Robbery, killings and drug trafficking are amongst the crimes committed extensively within the boundaries of one of the most important cities of Brazil. Juvenile crime is part of the city's reality and denotes a state's failure when it comes to ensure the integration of young people coming mainly from disadvantage neighborhoods.

In this context, greatly because of its geography, Rio de Janeiro is presently divided into two distinct worlds, the one of the "asphalt"⁴, and the one of the hills⁵. Unofficial numbers state that more than 1,000,000 of the city population live in the *favelas* that are nowadays, nearly seven hundred spread in the city. Migration and rapid urban growth were very much responsible for the emergence of several slums in the city of Rio de Janeiro and this phenomenon is appointed as one of the reasons for the existence of widespread youth violence not only in Rio, but also in other Brazilian cities. Commentators on urban violence also suggest that globalization has tended to

¹ Youth usually consists of those aged 15-24; wherever possible statistics relating to those under-18 only are used, and the term 'youth' is therefore avoided except in connection to this broader age-group.

² Krug, Etienne et al, WHO (2002) *World Report on Violence and Health*, chapter 2, Youth Violence, p 25.

³ Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), census of 2005

⁴ Asphalt or 'asfalto' refers to the areas of the city that are not considered to be in the favela.

⁵ Flat slums are also part of Rio de Janeiro's scenario; like the *favela* City of God (Cidade de Deus), however, the majority is located on the hillsides.

promote the exclusion of youth, what can certainly lead to involvement in armed violence.⁶

Criminal gangs, organised crime groups, drug trafficking factions, *maras* or *pandillas*, they all figure as an urban phenomenon and as the face of youth violence. Youth criminal groups can be described in many ways and might have different denominations around the world; however it is important to call attention to the fact that children and youth involved in armed violence is a reality nowadays in urban scenarios in both developing and developed countries. The media and the political and social community insist to treat group members who are actively involved in organised armed violence as common delinquents, however, this view does not reflect the reality. Correspondently, they cannot be treated as child soldiers either, as there is no recognised armed conflict - war in these youth violent contexts.

Whereas child soldiers are often associated with militias and armed forces of developing countries, gang violence and organized crime are phenomena that cut across the North-South divide. The main difference between the participation of children in wars as child soldiers and children involved in organised armed violence is the actor's willfulness. In armed conflicts children are normally abducted and forced to fight, torture and kill if they are not killed first. In contrast, children involved in organized crime, such as drug trafficking, are driven by power, economic benefit, and expansion of territory.⁷

Nevertheless, categorising children in armed groups merely as gang members would not reflect their illicit and combat-oriented roles within organised armed violence. Children employed by armed groups, despite the especially economically oriented nature of their actions, have also a strong feeling of loyalty and devotion to the command to which he/she belongs. Moreover, one of the main goals of armed groups and consequently of the children and youth employed by them is to expand their areas of influence. Finally, they face the possibility to kill-or-be-killed in an (urban) armed confrontation as a natural consequence of the activity, and are therefore, prepared to kill or die.⁸

Children in armed groups belong to a grey area, as they possess characteristics of both gang members and child soldiers, however without being appropriately categorised in any of the two. A proper definition is lacking and it entails severe consequences, such as the often non-address of this alarming reality by the international community and the non-inclusion of the elimination of this problem in the international forum.

During the 90's, a relatively similar question arose regarding the case of child soldiers. Graça Machel was asked by the UN Secretary General to carry out an assignment on the impact of armed conflicts on children. In the assignment she emphasized the abuses they normally suffer, human rights violations, and the lack of access to basic resources or the oversight of the own community. This report was a benchmark in the struggle for the recognition of the plight of children who were and still are employed as soldiers, carrying out logistic tasks in open armed conflicts elsewhere. The international community finally understood that girls and boys involved in armed conflicts as soldiers are not only perpetrators of abuses: they belong to both sides, committing crimes as perpetrators and dying or suffering constant abuses as victims.

⁶ Moser et al 2003.

⁷ Dowdney, L., *Children of the Drug Trade*, Viva Rio/ISER, Ed. 7 Letras, Rio de Janeiro, 2003.

⁸ Dowdney L., *Neither War Nor Peace*, Viva Rio/ISER, Ed. 7 Letras, Rio de Janeiro, 2005.

The social reality of several children in diverse regions of the world such as South America, Central America, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, the Balkans or diverse areas of the African continent is characterized by common risk factors such as: impoverished socio-economic contexts caused mostly by migration and uncontrolled urban growth, high unemployment rates, fragile governments, lack of access to sanitary and/or educational system, etc.

In addition to the situation of insecurity and high levels of violence, which happens, amongst other reasons, due to State's corruption, the lack of consolidation of post-war rehabilitation processes, the rife circulation of small arms and light weapons and the loss of safe urban spaces, they all serve to worsen the context in which this reality is breaking out. For instance, when comparing the danger posed to minors by gunfire in Rio de Janeiro with that of recognised conflict situations, the seriousness of Rio's situation is starkly apparent. In the period from 2002 to 2006, an estimated 729 conflict-related deaths occurred in Israel and Palestine. During the same period in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, 1.857 firearm fatalities were reported.

Currently, the involvement of younger children is another troublesome feature of drug trafficking in Brazil. Before the arrival of the cocaine (until the 80's) younger children were not allowed to carry guns and were given only less important tasks and also less risky activities within the drug trafficking scheme. With the arrival of the cocaine and the considerable increase of the profits, the fight among the drug factions also increased significantly and children started to be used in different positions where they carry guns and live (as the grownups) in a kill or be killed basis. The earlier 'protection' disappeared.

A historical absence of the police and an almost total lack of socio-economic investment in poor areas left a power vacuum and opened the way for armed groups, in the case of Rio de Janeiro, drug factions to assume the traditionally state role of social ordering⁹ within the community. High levels of police corruption and a repressive policy has led to a spiral of violence between both sides and fail to deal the root causes and with the socio-economic problems that lead to many children and young people choosing the drug trade as the 'best' of poor options.

Small Arms and Children in Organised Armed Violence (COAV)

The unchecked proliferation of illicit small arms and the easy access to inexpensive light weapons within poor communities across the world has exacerbated the levels of gun violence in those communities, and increasingly exposed younger children to guns on a daily basis. Attention must be drawn to the devastating consequences that the circulation of small arms and light weapons has had on the growth of organised armed violence since the 1980's and its subsequent effect on children, many of whom end up losing their childhood and lives to violence, abuse and the violations of their basic human rights. For example, with less than 3% of the world's population, Brazil accounts for 11% of the world's firearm deaths. It is estimated that between 50% and 60% of drug faction members in the city are minors. These types of small arms and light weapons employed by all sides in the daily conflicts between rival faction and the police in the case of Rio de Janeiro, and in paramilitary groups, militias in other regions are the same found in many contexts of civil war and related conflicts.

The arm occupies a very strong place in the life of this youth group as it corresponds to the obtainment of power. Male youth make a direct correlation between arms and

⁹ Known as the 'law of the favelas' - See Hugueta, Clarissa, "*The Dictatorship of the Drug Trafficking in the Slums of Rio de Janeiro vs. The International and National Human Rights Law*", LLM Thesis, University of Utrecht, Aug. 2005.

virility = power. Women play an important role in the armed violence context. Although they are normally not in high armed ranks positions within the drug trafficking scheme, girls valorise the man who carries a gun, who has power within the community and can give them a “comfortable life” rather than the man who has a paid licit job. Research about the direct involvement of girls in the drug trafficking world is very incipient but it is well-known that they play important roles either in indirect positions within the drug traffic or as mothers, sisters and girlfriends of drug traffickers.

The disturbing presence of arms in urban impoverished spaces such as the slums in Rio de Janeiro is part of this odd reality. There is an obvious correlation between the loss of safe urban spaces due to a lack of state interest in these areas and the increase of violence. The recovery of these areas and the implementation of basic social services emerge as one of the biggest urban challenges that has a direct relation to the decrease of violence levels.

Actions to be taken

Despite several studies appointing to the recover of urban impoverished spaces, implementation of integrated prevention programmes and creation of alternatives and opportunities as the successful path to combat youth violence, governments have tented to focus on repressive tactics to deal with children and youth in organised armed violence. Government repression may occur via legislation that singles out youth groups or their members, repressive and increasingly militarised policing policies and detention and imprisonment of members or armed groups or their summary execution.

A security police that focuses exclusively on repression tends to be ineffective since: it does not deal with the root causes of the problem; the juvenile justice and penal systems in most countries affected by the phenomenon are inadequate, actually worsening the problem; and armed groups tend to become more organised and increasingly violent when faced only with repressive tactics.

To effectively address the emerging phenomenon of children and youth in organised armed violence in the Brazilian case and in several other similar cases, we advocate that there must be a commitment of the (Federal) Union, State governments and the municipalities, but also an engagement of the civil society. The gathering and control of arms, as much from the armed agents as from the civilian population, is another crucial step towards the improvement of the youth violent context. Brazil experienced this during the campaign for the collection of arms and for the approval of the Brazilian Disarmament Statute in 2002/2003. With 460.000 arms collected the country faced a reduction of 10% of the homicide rate in one year, which corresponded to 3.324 spared lives.

Besides that, and complementing it, there is a need for ‘macro’ programs for at-risk areas and at risk youth containing a conjunction of actions, including education, sporting, citizenship classes, computer classes, and most important of all, actions that enable them to recover their self-esteem. This youth need to be finally integrated, considering that this targeted public has been excluded from society since their birth. Counter-influences must be created in the areas dominated by the drug trafficking and safe urban spaces need to be part of these youth lives after all. A wider social inclusion is needed and the effective implementation of social programmes which include the members of this specific group, children and young people mobilized by armed criminality and their families. Nevertheless, one of the biggest challenges is how to reach these people, how to adapt the language and how to make them see that there are alternatives, there are ‘exit doors’ different from jail or death.

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