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SICA and UNDP Partner with Central American Governments to Prevent Violence Against Youth

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Violence in Central America is harshly hitting the region’s children, teenagers and young adults, a population that is particularly exposed to the risks posed by poverty and its harmful components, such as limited access to education, lack of opportunities, and vulnerability to crime.

The scenario is especially critical in the area known as the Northern Triangle, made up of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, where gang and drug-related violence has reached unmanageable levels, with as many as 103 homicides per 100,000 population in El Salvador, making it one of the most dangerous regions worldwide (NotiCen, Jan. 7, 2016, March 17, 2016, and March 24, 2016). The seven countries that make up the isthmus rank well above the world average, which according to different estimates, stands at around seven homicides per 100,000 population.

One cause of the high level of killings in Central America is political and economic violence. A recent example was the March 3 assassination of Berta Cáceres, an indigenous feminist, human rights and environmental leader who, among other causes, successfully led indigenous and campesino opposition to a hydroelectric mega project in western Honduras. Twelve days later, Nelson García, a leader of the organization she co-founded, the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, COPINH), was murdered as well.

Youth gangs and drug organizations
But most of the violence, particularly in the Northern Triangle, stems from the criminal activities of the violent youth gangs known as maras, and of drug-trafficking structures involved in territorial wars. Tens of thousands of mareros in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have taken control of large sectors of different cities, subjecting owners of small businesses, car and bus drivers, and residents in general to illegal actions such as demands for regular payments for security, extortive kidnappings, and appropriation of houses whose occupants are illegally evicted or feel forced to move elsewhere or migrate to the United States.

The aggressive arrival of international drug-trafficking cartels, mainly Colombian and Mexican, in Central America has worsened violence in the Northern Triangle, but the rest of the isthmus has not been immune to drug-related killings. Score-settling by hit men in the territorial wars raging in many cities in the region has become an everyday event throughout the area.

Individual government initiatives to counter criminal violence have proven ineffective. Repression alone is counterproductive, as seen in the case of El Salvador, where maras have harshly retaliated against combined police-military repression.

In Costa Rica, a country that some six decades ago abolished its Army and depends on its civil, mainly preventive police forces, the emphasis has been on police mobilization combined with prevention. In one of its most recent initiatives, the Costa Rican government launched a plan for
youngsters at risk in communities in the Osa Peninsula, an area in the country’s southernmost region characterized by critical social and economic indicators.

The plan, “Emprendiendo para una Vida sin Violencia” (“Enterprise for Life Without Violence”) is implemented by the government in partnership with the local private sector and support from the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (Central American Integration System, SICA) and the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (Spanish International Cooperation Agency for Development, AECID).

It is the local chapter of a regional initiative launched in February 2015 by SICA and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) called “Seguridad integral y prevención de la violencia que afecta a niños, niñas, adolescentes, y jóvenes en Centroamérica” (Comprehensive security and prevention from violence affecting boys, girls, adolescents, and young people in Central America).

**Violence prevention is key**

The framework for the SICA-UNDP project is the violence-prevention component of the Estrategia de Seguridad de Centroamérica (Central America Security Strategy, ESCA). According to Hefer Morataya, director of SICA’s Seguridad Democrática (Democratic Security), “the security strategy is the basic tool that, from a comprehensive perspective, aims at guiding coordinated security actions that the region’s countries may implement within their respective legal frameworks.”

He added that “ESCA’s prevention component envisions a series of strategies and actions aimed at reducing factors that lead to violence and crime.” It also includes intervention when violence and crime occur, he said.

“With this approach, the purpose is to develop policy, programs, strategies, and actions to socially prevent violence in areas seen as priorities in the Central American region,” Morataya said, adding that those areas include “violence that affects youth, drug-consumption prevention, education and training for work, prevention by local governments, prevention of firearm violence, prevention of gender violence, and illicit trafficking in people.”

On a national scale, the project focuses its actions on girls, boys, teenagers, and young people, and contributes to developing policy, plans, programs, and mechanisms for prevention focusing “on the population at risk and on the territories with the highest crime rates,” he said.

The project sets what he described as four operational dimensions—“drawing up, reviewing, and follow up, as well as evaluation of comprehensive citizen safety policies based on evidence and linked with the Central America Security Strategy.”

The regional three-year, US$6-million project is funded by AECID and was launched in San Salvador, the Salvadoran capital, where SICA is headquartered. On its website, the UNDP’s Salvadoran bureau noted that the initiative “seeks to answer to the needs and priorities expressed by the eight SICA member countries,” which are Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic. The project also “aims to draw up integral security policies that are measurable, strengthening institutional capabilities for violence prevention, and creating and promoting innovative solutions and transfer of knowledge, among other results,” it added.

During the launching ceremony, Rebeca Arias, director of UNDP’s Regional Center for Latin America and the Caribbean, pointed out that the initiative seeks to “unite efforts to strengthen and
deepen the prevention of violence” involving children and young adults, and that it “focuses mainly on addressing violence-related factors such as marginalization and social, economic and educational inequalities.”

When the project’s Panama chapter was launched seven months later, the Spanish Embassy in that country explained in a press release that more than 80% of the budget will fund “social, economic, and labor integration and reintegration of the population at greater risk of suffering violence or coming into conflict with the law.”

Thus, the focus is on “prevention measures (...) that have to do with fighting the causes and transforming people’s living conditions,” it added.

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