




RAPPOREUR
International Forum



PREVENCIÓN DE VIOLENCIA
HACIA NIÑAS, NIÑOS Y ADOLESCENTES:
maras y pandillas
y otras formas de violencia



El Salvador
26 and July 27, 2016

Organized by:



Organization of
American States | More rights
for more people



Luis Almagro
Secretary General – OAS

Zaira Navas
President – Directing Council of the IIN

Víctor Giorgi
Director General – IIN

Compilation of Information
CONNA Team – El Salvador
IIN – OAS

Rapporteur's Report
Daniel Claverie – IIN

October 2016



International Forum on Preventing Violence against Children: *Maras, youth gangs and other forms of organized violence*

FINAL PAPER

Presentation

The first International Forum on Preventing Violence against Children, which addressed the issue of “*Maras, youth gangs and other forms of organized violence*” was held on 26 and 27 July 2016, in the city of San Salvador, El Salvador.

The event was organized by the National Council for Children (CONNA) and the Inter-American Children's Institute (IIN-OAS), and was attended by representatives from the States of Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico, as well as by national and international civil society organizations and a number of key stakeholders from the National Comprehensive Protection for Children System of the State of El Salvador.

This paper provides a synthesis of the work carried out at the Forum, summarizing diagnostic elements and proposals on the issue, with a regional perspective. Priority is given to aspects that are considered to contribute to understanding and continuing to measure the scope of the issue, as well as to warnings, obstacles, challenges and recommendations arising from meaningful experiences implemented in public policies for preventing, promoting and protecting rights in the States in the region, which were shared by the participants.

The work methodology included the intervention of national and international specialists with keynote presentations, followed by working panels to address the different aspects involved in the understanding of different types of violence, taking multiple factors into consideration. A round of questions and answers took place after each activity, and open and thoughtful discussion about the issue at hand was encouraged.

The conceptual approaches or perspectives which cross-cut the meeting and formed the basis for the contributions summarized below were:

- **The Comprehensive Protection of Child Rights perspective** based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC – UN, 1989).
- **The Gender Equity and Equality perspective**, understood to mean all of the roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that each society assigns to men and women, with the possibility that this allocation may generate gender inequalities; that is, systematic differences that favour one group above another.
- **The Ecological approach** (Bronfenbrenner; 1987), which suggests that the development of human behaviour is conditioned both by genetics and by its ecological environment in its different levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. These levels range



from an individual's nearest environment to a broader level associated with the culture in which the individual develops. This theory suggests the need to understand the interrelation and interdependence of these levels, which therefore entails analysis and dialogic understanding of them for any diagnosis and design of actions in response to the problem to take place.

This perspective increases the complexity of achieving an understanding of violence, promoting the concatenated identification of a unity between the different forms of violence and its different fields of expression. These forms reinforce each other and interact, so that the extreme forms of violence that shock society are related to other, less visible, and often tolerated forms of violence, expressed in private or less visible settings.

- **The Differentiated approach** in the design of public policies, which suggests a respectful and inclusive approach to each reality, promoting the provision of answers in keeping with the distinguishing features of each population group, based on the identification of each group's singularities.
- **Strengthening Care and Parenting Skills** in the assumption that a comprehensive protection system consists in the shared responsibility of families, communities and State, as the ultimate provider of safeguards for all rights.
- **Strengthening the Community and Child Participation**; it is indispensable to work with local stakeholders to promote their participation and recognizing their territorial potential, involving them at all stages, including diagnosis, design and implementation of public policy. In this respect, it is key to bring national policy into line with local realities, holding discussions and generating support on the basis of an agreed territorial management model. This includes the engagement of the community and the creation of opportunities for discussion, expression, consultation and the exercise of citizenship for children.

The Elements of Diagnosis

From the keynote addresses and the sharing opportunities, the following diagnostic elements emerged, which contribute to the continued dimensioning of these issues:

- "Maras" or "youth gangs" are one of the forms of criminal organization that generates the most serious distortions and rights violations in the communities where they operate.
- They constitute a problem that is strongly present in the public agenda of some of the States in Central America.
- Although this violation of rights is often enacted by children and juveniles, it directly affects "*children and adolescents as the silent victims of the violence of these criminal groups*" (Zaira Navas, CONNA).
- It is a "*complex and multicausal phenomenon which violates different types of rights, and there is, therefore, a pressing need to understand the issue comprehensively, visualizing these multiple types of violence in an interconnected and related manner, as they multiply from one to the other.*" (Victor Giorgi, IIN/OAS). As the IACHR's latest report states: "*The limitations adolescents face in exercising and enjoying their rights, in conjunction with the lack of education and work*



opportunities that would enable them to develop an independent life project with dignity, further expose them to criminal organizations and their activities. The Commission believes that children and adolescents linked to criminal groups is an outgrowth of the lack of State measures to guarantee the rights of children and to protect them from the rights violations, exclusion, and violence that they face at each turn.”¹

- Work on strengthening a comprehensive system for the protection of the rights of children affected by these problems implies a need to establish and formalize clear and permanent mechanisms for measuring the problem, identifying quantitative and qualitative elements that will subsequently enable us to evaluate the outcomes in each intervention. It becomes necessary to have indicators in order to carry out this evaluation and thus strengthen any action implemented or make changes or corrections in established policy.
- It is reaffirmed that the State must ensure the observance of rights and address these ongoing issues, generating conditions to promote the enjoyment of rights, seeking a social change in the conditions identified.
- One of the fundamental factors identified in the creation and consolidation of these criminal groups is the weakening and withdrawal of the State in its role as guarantor in generating conditions for protection. This gap deepens the deterioration regarding access to public services and widens the trust gap between the population and the State.
- There is a social demand for security, which is generally translated into coercive responses involving increased punitive action, and which seek short-term results without achieving structural transformations.
- While citizen security systems become tougher and increasingly militarized, new models of policing also emerge with a community-based focus, which bring traditional actions into question and propose other, more complex ways of interpreting the problem, giving priority to prevention, participation and conflict resolution as a basis for improving quality of life and strengthening democracy.
- In addition, there is also evidence that in territories where the presence of the State is weak, the recruitment of children by organized criminal groups is greater.
- There are many indicators showing that *maras* and gangs consider it easy to recruit children and they currently show that recruitment occurs at an increasingly early age (10 to 15 years).
- A further fundamental factor in the formation and consolidation of these criminal groups is the weakening of families' capacity for care and parenting. A good performance on the part of mothers and fathers, the development of bonds of affection between parents and children and positive and non-violent discipline help to protect children from violence, both in the home and in other environments, preventing them from becoming victims as well as aggressors. A containing family environment in which dialogue prevails can protect children from the possibility of their joining criminal groups.

¹ Report on Violence, Children and Organized Crime; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; Organization of American States; November 2015; p 221.



- These criminal groups seek to exercise power in territorial terms in their neighbourhoods, controlling passageways, entrances and exits, based on fear and terror.
- This leads to a rationale which is summed up in the social slogan, “see, hear and remain silent”, as a means of self-preservation and social response to extreme violent activities such as the disappearance of persons, murder, extortion involving the payment of revenue, and the recruitment of persons, especially of children and adolescents.
- *Maras* and gangs display a number of identifying elements (language, music, clothing, tattoos) that strengthen the stability of the organization.
- Joining a group should often be understood as an act of inclusion rather than social exclusion. It is an opportunity for socialization among peers that provides a sense of identity and belonging that individuals do not achieve in other settings. Inclusion within a group relieves feelings of not being somebody.
- Once inside an organized criminal group, it is extremely difficult to leave without suffering consequences.
- In *maras* or gangs, the gender stereotypes generated in society are carried to extremes, with the roles and functions allocated to males and females very clearly differentiated. Males are in the majority among the members of these groups. The gender mandate they receive makes it necessary for them to demonstrate their “manhood” on a permanent basis, since the exercise of violence is “a man’s job”. The codes associated with manhood which are embedded in the processes of socialization leads males to be more prone to violence, whether as its agents, or as victims. Homicide rates among boys between the ages of 15 and 17 are almost three times higher than among girls of the same age. The inclusion of girls and young women in gangs and *maras* generally occurs because they develop relationships with members of the group and as a result of traditional gender roles, such as caring for others, or involve activities such as transporting or concealing drugs or weapons, and surveillance activities. In addition, women suffer violations when they are sexually abused, and this is associated with the reproduction and permanence of the organization.

Regional Exchange

Some notable elements have been selected from the work conducted in the Working Panels composed of representatives from the States in the region and civil society institutions, which are related to **meaningful experiences** in promotion, prevention and the comprehensive protection of rights.

It should be noted that the sizeable attendance of key stakeholders from different agencies of El Salvador’s comprehensive protection system generated a great deal of information about the host country.

From information shared by **El Salvador**, we highlight:

- Public institutions and care agencies implement a strategy for the prevention of early school leaving, in coordination with the ministries of health and education. When cases involving



students with school performance issues are identified, they are referred to the appropriate department in order to determine whether the problem involves learning or psycho-social issues. It is sought to develop resilience within community settings that generate violence, and thus prevent the incorporation of children and adolescents to groups of *maras* and gangs.

- There are actions to strengthen skills, capacity and competence in the field of child rights; in particular, in promoting the exercise of the right to participation, with a view to enhancing life skills, leadership and democratic citizenship as protective factors.
- Work is conducted with children and adolescents on the promotion of equitable gender relations and new masculinities, both at community and local levels. Awareness-raising is sought regarding the importance of reporting abuse or threats to physical and sexual integrity.
- Mechanisms for prevention and care in cases of abuse or the violation of the physical and sexual integrity of children are promoted, encouraging reporting and the prosecution of cases of sexual violence, providing care and integrated and comprehensive services for the restitution of the rights of victims.
- The Ministry of Health's "Familias Fuertes" (Strong Families) strategy is implemented, targeting the 50 priority municipalities in the *Plan El Salvador Seguro* (A Safe El Salvador Plan) This strategy aims to strengthen the care and parenting skills of fathers, mothers and children aged between 10 and 14. One of the purposes of the strategy is that families should be able to determine whether children are involved in *maras* or gangs, or whether they are being the victims of some form of violence.
- Protection Boards issue measures that include mothers, fathers or caregivers in order to engage them in one of the orientation programmes developed by public bodies or other institutions on parenting, family therapy, support for drug and/or alcohol addiction rehabilitation, non-use of violence.
- Specialized Children's Courts look for support for the fulfilment of their measures among care institutions and bodies, as well as the Psycho-Social Care Centres of the Supreme Court of Justice.
- For its part, the National Council for Children (CONNA) implements a radio show "Habla Conmigo" (Talk to Me), which provides guidelines for parenting and guidance to families so that they can exercise positive and constructive discipline.
- In some of the municipalities in the country, a child protection model based on families is promoted and developed. This model encourages treating children well, positive discipline, play, and the detection of and protection from abuse.
- There is also a project for strengthening attachment in early childhood, with a focus on single mothers, through which they are supported by means of an educational and financial package, and training on key topics such as positive discipline, play, breastfeeding and vaccination.
- The "Ciudad Mujer" (Woman's City) initiative conducts formative activities and processes with women on parenting guidelines, their human rights and guidance on how proceed when they are victims of some kind of violence.
- In compliance with the guidelines issued by the National Policy for the Comprehensive Protection of Children (PNPNA) and its National Action Plan, CONNA carries out various actions to strengthen institutions: working with municipal councils, designing policies, strategies and local



plans, in coordination with the PNPNA, coordinating the National Board in Support of Local Committees, producing guidelines and regulations on specific subjects and conducting departmental and local coordination.

- Programmes and projects are executed which aim to create and strengthen social centres and community homes, early education, daycare centres, family strengthening. They seek local stakeholders to implement various projects, particularly those related to education, involving the community; as well as capacity-building for young people so they can join the labour market, and care for children living in the streets.
- The National Police Department (PNC) works directly with children in order to generate attitude and behaviour changes with a view to preventing their involvement in gangs; Athletic Leagues are formed (a sports component) in order to prevent drug consumption and to promote mental and physical health. Work is also done on bullying, cyberbullying and other issues, with teachers, and fathers and mothers. There is a strategic care line for children, with guidelines for the identification of risk factors in adolescents. Preventive plans are being designed in coordination with social stakeholders; domestic violence is identified and monitored; preventive treatment is provided at points of conflict; preventive plans in schools are being strengthened; there is coordination with appropriate agencies for the production and implementation of care programmes, and coordination is promoted with relevant local and national bodies.
- The Salvadoran Institute for the Comprehensive Development of Children (ISNA) is strengthening the technical capacity of personnel intervening on the field and improving skills related to providing care for victims. They are also developing care programmes for children at risk, developing violence prevention projects, and managing technical and financial resources to strengthen capacity.
- The Ministry of Justice and Public Security conducts social prevention of violence based on the municipalities and the Municipal Committees for the Prevention of Violence. Their work is synchronized with government institutions through the Safe El Salvador Plan; technical assistance is provided to government institutions, and municipal plans are designed for the prevention of violence.
- CONNA is strengthening the technical capacity of 15 protection boards in order to respond to at-risk groups; they create specific guidelines on how to respond to a breach of rights; provide protection to children involved in *maras* and gangs; strengthen field work; design local risk maps; have security plans in place to coordinate with local actors in each area, in order to reach children and adolescents through safe mechanisms; provide services to issue appropriate protection measures, and coordinate work at department level.

From information shared by **Costa Rica**, we highlight:

- A programme entitled “Academias de Crianza” (Parenting Academies) is under way, providing education in values with families reported for violating rights, families with protection measures



or other families who wish to participate. Training includes model skills and parenting guidelines. Participants are awarded certificates upon concluding the programme.

- There is a programme on “Familias en acción” (Families in Action), through which community leaders are trained so that they can replicate the programme in their communities.
- A pilot project has been launched on “Comunidad yo juego” (I Play Community), through which 5 communities have been given sports, games and artistic expression equipment, requesting them, in exchange, to carry out intergenerational sports and games activities with families.
- The National Children’s Board (PANI) is working in communities and providing support to children, with school grants and life projects. It also promotes artistic, cultural and sporting activities among peer groups.
- PANI has promoted the establishment of a Participatory Children’s Council, which conducts advocacy and negotiation with development associations and local governments, encouraging them to listen to their views and take them into account. This Council has a board of directors and carries out its own activities, produces materials for training and the dissemination of rights, as well as to promote the creation of other participatory councils. They have also petitioned and debated before a Legislative Assembly committee in order to take an active part in cantonal and communal committees related to play, culture, sports and recreation, and they await the approval of the legislative plenary.

From information shared by **Guatemala**, we highlight:

- They are implementing 24 programmes with actions that aim to regionalize centres in order to reach community environments. These programmes include: childcare centres throughout the country, non-residential homes that provide psychological and medical care, workshops for young people, care for families with institutionalized and non-institutionalized children, care for unaccompanied migrant children, workshops to facilitate entry into the labour market, and protection homes.
- The Social Welfare Secretariat (SBS) conducts a Residential Format Programme, with specialized care for adolescents, as well as psychological work addressing the issue of identity, and has 2 halfway homes for adolescents in conflict with the law.

From information shared by **Mexico**, we highlight:

- By means of the National System for the Comprehensive Development of Families (DIF), a system has been created to generate processes and coordinated efforts; there are also homes for adolescents where comfort zones have been set up so that adolescents and young people can engage in various games, as well as recreational and artistic activities.

Challenges and Recommendations: “what to do”



We provide a summary below of the set of recommendations resulting from the various working areas conducted at the forum.

- Promote a revision of public policies, to ensure a holistic approach based on rights and gender, responding to the specific features of children.
- Establish mechanisms to understand the violence we are dealing with, based on a differentiated approach. Understand the types of violence, their actors and their triggering factors, so that any response designed, produced and implemented is attuned to reality and to prevent these issues from being addressed by means of actions borrowed from an understanding of other realities.
- Correctly quantify the phenomenon in order to establish effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.
- Strengthen follow-up, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to determine the impact of public policies implemented, including accountability,
- Avoid the implementation of “hunch-based policies” lacking diagnoses and an assessment of the impact of the measures implemented.
- Have management instruments such as plans, policies or strategies for the comprehensive development of children at local levels, that are consistent with the national comprehensive protection policy for children.
- Favour and empower coordination, synchronization and cohesion for comprehensive protection mechanisms for children, in order to avoid duplicating efforts, with a cross-sectoral, inter-agency, jointly responsible and systemic vision.
- Establish participation mechanisms at all stages of the design and implementation of public policies, engaging organized civil society and citizens, especially the voice of organized children and adolescents, with participation in advocacy areas. Make the community a valid interlocutor at all stages of public policy.
- Generate formal public policy management mechanisms to strengthen the coordinated and synchronized presence of the State throughout the territory.
- Have territorial management models per level, which can discuss issues with one another and contribute to the synchronized and decentralized arrival of the policy in the territory.
- Recognize existing capacity in each territory.
- Achieve wide consensus regarding the public policies designed in order to align actors with a comprehensive protection response understood as a policy of State and not of government. In order to give sustainability and continuity to actions implemented it will necessary to transcend the boundaries of the electoral pace and have mechanisms in place for evaluation, monitoring and reprogramming based on objective and well-founded information.
- Ensure budget allocations in order to give sustainability to all the public policy actions.
- Broaden the dissemination of information on public services and care programmes, in comprehensible and clear language, targeting different population groups.
- Conduct nationwide and local campaigns on the equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women, with regard to care, parenting and family support.



- Design and implement policies, plans and strategies catering to and strengthening families' capacity for care and parenting, bearing in mind their new typologies. Promote the empowerment of democratic means of guidance and positive discipline for children, with a view to achieving good maternal and paternal performance. Promote the development of affective bonds between fathers/mothers and their children, in order to protect children from inclusion in criminal groups.
- Strengthen institutions as a key element in the execution of public policies, in view of the current complexity involving the weak institutional and financial situation that the States in the region are undergoing at this time.
- Promote and generate regular training opportunities for technical personnel on the subject of preventing violence according to the paradigm of the comprehensive protection of child rights.
- Implement urban development activities to breathe life back into the territories making public areas usable and accessible. Create more community living and sharing areas.
- Making schools friendly spaces where citizenship and protection can be built must be viewed as a challenge. In the words of the IACHR: *"Therefore, it is crucial for the school to give priority to the creation of safe, violence-free environments that promote positive attitudes and behaviours in children, while fostering awareness of their rights and the development of life skills with a view to their responsible participation in society."* *"Policies that promote school enrolment are one of the most important preventive investments that a country can make in at-risk youth, in terms both of improving their education, and of reducing almost every kind of conduct considered risk behaviour, including violence and crime."*²
- Develop more programmes targeting early childhood, which address children and their environment, as a prevention strategy.
- Establish shelters or exceptional solutions for families besieged by violence.
- Boost preventive work in rural areas in order to halt the migratory flow of gangs to other territories.
- Implement actions to ensure that the approach to a comprehensive protection of rights is conducted without criminalizing and/or stigmatizing children on the basis of prejudices and stereotypes, These prejudices often give rise to the opposite effect and strengthen children's identification with *maras* or gangs, owing to their appearance, clothing and/or socio-economic status.
- In the issue of citizen security, *"...States must ensure that the change in the citizen security paradigm is comprehensive, meaning that the concept of security must be centred on protecting people and their rights. This requires promoting the strengthening of prevention and violence reductions efforts, in conjunction with traditional crime control and repression duties. It is imperative for security policies to meet the security needs of all people, in keeping with the law, in respect of human rights."*³

² Ibid.1; p 206

³ Ibid.1; p 223



- Detecting with precision the responsibility of each child who belongs to a *mara* or gang will be an ongoing challenge, if answers in keeping with each situation are to be provided. It should be borne in mind that every child who belongs to an organized criminal group is both victim and victimizer; has both violated the rights of others and had his/her own rights breached.

In short, the various violence-related phenomena represent, in one way or another, the ways that our societies fail to integrate the new generations and safeguard their rights. Violence as such is a structural phenomenon in societies. “Violence-free societies” are a necessary utopia, but risky when they become the key to dealing with violence as merely involving violent individuals who need to be controlled, regardless of any social determination.

From the work done at the Forum, the need has emerged to consider the *maras* and gangs phenomenon within a broader context, in which exclusion, the States’ weaknesses as guarantors of rights and service providers, together with the flow and feedback of multiple forms of violence which cross-cut all areas of everyday life generate a scenario conducive to making organized crime strong.

From this it is clear that any strategies used to eradicate the phenomenon should be holistic and act upon violence in an ecological sense, by denaturalizing everyday violence, promoting alternative forms of coexistence and conflict resolution and not just act in reaction to the shocking events led by *maras*.

Interpreting these issues in a more complex manner will be the foundation to the promotion of comprehensive, holistic and cross-sectoral policies which will protect and ensure the enjoyment of rights.

Ten years after the World Report on Violence “against Children”, we should recall that “*There can be no compromise in challenging violence against children. Children’s uniqueness – their potential and vulnerability, their dependence on adults – makes it imperative that they have more, not less, protection from violence.*” (...)

“Violence against children is never justifiable.

Nor is it inevitable.”⁴

⁴ World Report on Violence; Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro; UN; 2006; p. XI

