REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The Challenges to Peace in Latin America: From Guerrilla Warfare to the Fight Against Organised Crime

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The age of guerrilla movements has come to an end, but homicidal violence has not subsided

The second half of the 20th century was marked by the emergence of guerrilla groups across the length and breadth of Latin America. Most of these groups followed the model of the Cuban Revolution and the “foco” theory used by Ché Guevara, in other words the creation of small groups (or *focos* in Spanish) throughout the region to obviate the need for the right social, political and economic conditions for revolution. Some of these groups used guerrilla tactics in rural areas, from where they planned attacks on towns and cities that would allow them to take power when the time came. Other guerrilla groups, such as the Montoneros in Argentina, the Tupamaros in Uruguay and M-19 in Colombia, fought directly in the cities with dramatic actions [1] .

With the exceptions of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 [2] and the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 [3], none of Latin America's revolutionary experiences were successful, either due to the signing of peace agreements, as occurred in Guatemala, El Salvador, Venezuela and Colombia; because the movements retreated into the jungle, as was the case with the Shining Path in Peru and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico; or because they were defeated or wiped out, for example the Montoneros and the ERP in Argentina, the Tupamaros in Uruguay, and the MIR in Chile, to name just a few [4].

Although the transition towards peace and democracy seemed to usher in fulfilment of the promises of equality and wellbeing, disenchantment soon spread throughout the region. Poverty, inequality and corruption emerged as the main problems in many Latin American societies. This disenchantment led to a wave of social movements in a number of countries, with varying results: in Chile, for example, they succeeded in calling a Constituent Assembly to replace the constitution created under the Pinochet dictatorship, as well as managing to get one of the leaders of the movement, Gabriel Boric, elected as President for the period 2022-2026; the social movements in Colombia, however, were met with police violence and vigilantism, while the Government responded with reactive reforms that increased police powers and jeopardised the rule of law [5].

Crime rates have been rising steadily, and Latin America is currently one of the most dangerous regions on the planet. In 2016, El Salvador and Venezuela were the most dangerous countries in the region, with homicide rates of 81 and 59 homicides per 100,000 people (Hx100), respectively. Chile emerged as the safest country, with a rate of 3.6 homicides per 100,000 people. In 2017 there were no substantial changes, except that Venezuela took first place with a rate of 89 Hx100, while El Salvador dropped to 60. Chile remained in last place, with a rate of 3.3 Hx100. In 2018, Chile continued its downward trend, with 2.7 Hx100, and the overall situation improved slightly, although still without significant changes. In 2019, the homicide rate in Venezuela dropped to 60 Hx100, while in El Salvador it fell to 36, taking the country several places down the list. Jamaica stood in second place with a rate of 47.4 Hx100, seemingly due to the declaration of a state of emergency and the fact that the police were given wide-ranging powers.

Violence in the region declined dramatically in 2020, although this can be explained by the lockdowns imposed to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for the same reason, inequality and poverty increased across the region, with very clear effects on rates of homicidal violence. In that first year of the pandemic, rates in Venezuela fell, but they remained stable in Jamaica. Thus, Jamaica had a rate of 49 Hx100, while in Venezuela the figure was 40. The rest of the countries saw their homicide rates rise, although not to the high levels of these first two. Chile halted its downward trend with a rate of 3.6 Hx100, which is still the lowest in the region.

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Poverty and inequality have increased in the region. Nearly 173 million people were living in poverty in 2015. Due to the economic effects of the pandemic in Latin American countries, the number of poor people has risen to 209 million, close to 37% of the region's population. States have failed to channel resources into mitigating this serious social problem, pouring them instead into strengthening their police forces and defence, making the repressive face of the state the only one known to a high percentage of people in the region. In addition, some governments, such as Colombia's, are set on antagonising their neighbours, as we have seen in the disputes with Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba. To this, we can add the unwarranted intervention of the Colombian president's governing party in the 2020 US elections, with the result that Colombia has lost an important ally in international politics.

Colòmbia: la pau fallida

Colombia is mired in a long-running armed conflict, and despite the multiple peace processes, which have been attempted since 1982, the violence continues to exist and, particularly, to change face. With the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the guerrilla groups turned to drug trafficking, kidnapping and money laundering to fund their operations. The war became the ideal backdrop for criminal organisations to carry out their activities, while organised crime and the drug trade made it possible for guerrilla groups to survive.

With the demobbing of para groups in 2002, it was hoped that paramilitary activities would be brought to an end. However, despite the fact that some 25,000 fighters were demobilised, some groups simply threw over their communist ideology and went fulltime into the drug trade. These groups were referred to by the Government as 'criminal groups', and by social organisations as 'neo-paramilitary groups'. In fact, they are both of these things—they are groups with wide geographical control and social control over entire areas of the country, to the extent or more of the former United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, and they are also criminal organisations that control the illegal markets in the areas where they operate.

As occurred with the paramilitary groups, the demobilisation of the FARC-EP did not bring Colombia's armed conflict to an end, but rather led to the emergence or escalation of five non-international armed conflicts: four between the government and the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC), and dissident splinter groups of the former Eastern Bloc of the FARC-EP; as well as a fifth conflict between the ELN and the EPL in the Catatumbo area near the Venezuelan border [6].

At the same time, the daily violence in the cities is rising, the presence of Mexican drug cartels is growing stronger, and the co-optation of the state by criminal organisations is

becoming ever more visible. The relationship between the armed conflict, corruption and organised crime has recently been analysed by the Chamber for Recognition of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), which shows how extrajudicial executions falsely presented as combat casualties—known as 'false positives'—responded not only to a body count policy, but also to the need to show results so that military commanders could remain in the area and thus continue to work with criminal organisations. In this way, economic interests made use of the armed conflict in order to perpetuate criminal activities.

The challenges to peace in this country are enormous. They include rampant corruption, the violence of a range of different armed groups and the de-institutionalisation of the state through a clear model of delegative democracy in which the executive branch has power over the four control bodies, allowing it to continue contravening the peace agreements and thus maintain the situation of political instability that is so favourable to the interests of organised crime.

> Colombia must face rampant corruption and the violence of a range of different armed groups. At the same time, inequality and poverty have triggered widespread social protests across the country

Inequality and poverty have triggered widespread social protests across the country. Social movements are gaining momentum, and discontent is being manifested on the streets. The response from the State has been violent. The police have been criticised for their violence and the use of civilians to attack demonstrators. Proposals have been quick to appear for reforms to limit their powers and, above all, to demilitarise them and turn them into a civil force subject to the rule of law. Such reforms have not been possible, and the Government's response has been to increase police powers in a way that contravenes the Constitution and to pass a citizen security act that violates people's right to protest and to express their discontent.

Mèxic: la violència dels càrtels posa en perill l'estabilitat democràtica

Mexico was governed for close to 71 years by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), once referred to by Vargas Llosa as the perfect dictatorship, as it involved electoral competition and the illusion of democratic change. The PRI's presence in the different areas of the country led to understandings between the police forces and the drug cartels, which kept the peace and ensured that the black markets continued to be dominated by these illegal groups.

On 18 January 1994, Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) made a call to arms and established a new form of revolutionary politics. While he did not have any great military success, he did manage to put the discussion of racism and

the historical exclusion of indigenous peoples in Mexico on the national agenda. Despite the fact that the country now has a left-wing government under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the EZLN distrusts the fulfilment of the agreements made with the Mexican State and therefore prefers to continue working with the communities in the areas where it has influence, in the highlands and the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas.

When the PRI left power, a new government led by Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) came in and broke the old agreements between the Mexican government and police and the criminal organisations. This meant that this time the dichotomy of peace verses the fight against crime shifted its focus to the fight against organised criminal networks, with support and pressure from the United States. The increase in homicide rates has been such that there has been talk of the emergence of an international armed conflict in Mexico between armed Government forces and the drug cartels. This has led to crimes against humanity being committed by the various actors in this conflict, in the form of the systematic and daily assassination of human rights activists, social leaders and journalists.

For Raúl Zepeda Gil [7], there are seven theories to explain the emergence and expansion of violence in post-PRI Mexico:

1. The actions of the government, as the armed forces and police have begun to focus their attention on criminal groups that were previously left alone.

2. Criminal conflict, as the capture or assassination of the heads of organisations has resulted in either unified groups with greater strength and geographical dominance, leading to organised violence against the State; or in fragmentation and, consequently, new forms of anarchic violence. A second dimension of the criminal conflict is that occurring between organisations that are fighting not only against the government but also against each other for dominance over illegal markets that have been deregulated due to the absence of the State, in regions where the national and local governments had previously made agreements with these criminal organisations to allow them to operate.

3. Lack of coordination between the bodies of government, leading to the abandonment of regions with strong criminal control or the co-optation and capture of local governments that enter into regulatory disputes with the federal government.

4. The weakness of the State, which is precisely what has allowed it to be appropriated by criminal organisations. In any case, critics argue that Mexico is not a failed state, insofar as it has control over its territory. However, the fact that the State is efficient does not exclude its lack of legitimacy and the presence of what we have termed zones of state fragility, to replace the problematic expression of a ‘fragile’ or ‘failed’ state [8].

5. External influence, as the war on drugs creates pressure that forces the adoption of repressive measures against criminal organisations and the breaking of the previous agreements for peaceful coexistence.

6. The economic context, as inequality and poverty produce social disorganisation that creates suitable conditions for the emergence and growth of criminal groups.

7. The existence of a criminal war in which, like in Colombia, armed conflict allows the emergence and strengthening of these organisations, which are therefore interested in perpetuating the political and social disorganisation generated by the conflict.

> Peace in Mexico must involve the implementation of a true public security policy and for the State to regain control of the regions currently under the power of criminal groups

The challenges to peace in Mexico are huge. The solutions must involve the implementation of a true public security policy that allows citizens to effectively exercise their rights and permits the State to regain control of the regions currently under the power of criminal groups. This will require a dedicated fight against corruption and the strengthening of the Mexican State's legitimacy. Something that Mexico's current Government is very far from achieving.

Brazil and the criminal triangle of the Southern Cone

The countries that make up the Southern Cone have enjoyed a certain democratic stability since the end of their authoritarian governments in the 1980s. However, both Argentina and Brazil have had right-wing governments that have undermined the social rights enjoyed by people in these countries. In Uruguay, democracy has been consolidated and its economic conditions and public security are among the best in the region. However, the Triple Frontier area, where Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay meet, is one of the areas with the highest levels of criminal activity in the region. It is home not only to drug cartels, with the corresponding effects on state corruption, but is also one of the areas with the highest concentration of money laundering operations. Its location and the fact that it is a kind of 'no-man's-land' or Latin American 'Far West' has attracted a range of criminal groups including terrorist organisations such as Hezbollah, which carries out money laundering and the illegal trading of vehicles, tobacco and counterfeit goods.

Brazil made its transition to democracy in the 1980s with the end of Joao Figuereido's military government and the election of Jose Sarney, who came to power after the death of Tancredo Neves. He was followed by presidents Fernando Collor de Mello, who was impeached for corruption, Itamar Franco, who completed his term of office free from problems, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a sociologist of dependency theory who consolidated the transition.

Cardoso's government, which was characterised by neoliberal policies, saw a rise in social mobility. Then, thanks to the support of the Landless Workers' Movement and the Workers'

Party, the left-wing trade unionist Luiz Ignacio Lula Da Silva was elected president. His government and that of his successor, Dilma Roussef, were affected by cases of corruption that became evident during the Olympic Games and the World Cup. As a result, the 2018 elections were won by Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer who is nostalgic for the authoritarian governments of old and who has tried, without much success, to curtail people's rights in Brazil.

Brazil's guerrillas never represented a risk to the stability of the state and were attacked directly with a heavy hand and serious human rights violations that were condemned by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights [9]. The main challenge to Brazil's stability is posed by criminal organisations, which operate in the country's cities and around the Triple Frontier. They also have a dominant presence in Brazilian prisons, something that poses a risk to the country's democratic governance.

The *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) is the country's largest criminal organisation with close to 11,000 members. The group's activities consist of robbery and drug trafficking, although it has also carried out terrorist attacks and influenced local elections, in the same way as paramilitary groups have done in Colombia. The group has also dabbled in drug trafficking to Africa, Europe and the Middle East, all with the support and collaboration of Hezbollah, and its control of favelas and organised crime networks makes it one of the main challenges to peace in Brazil. The PCC supports left-wing candidates, meaning it can become a focal point for violence against the state. Increasing rates of incarceration have made this criminal group one of the main controlling forces in Brazilian prisons.

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The next elections will be crucial in determining whether Brazil continues its authoritarian drift or whether it is able to tackle its problems by strengthening its welfare state, so that daily violence does not turn into organised political violence.

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1 — In the case of M-19, the guerrillas shifted the fight towards rural areas and Jaime Bateman, their leader, hoped to create a military force large enough to sustain military operations from the countryside. The failure of taking arms into the jungle and, especially, of the taking of Chocó and the south of Colombia, after seizing the Embassy of the Dominican Republic, laid waste to these plans.

2 — On 1 January 1959, Fidel Castro made a victorious entry into Havana followed by more than a thousand fighters, leading the March of Victory, also referred to as the Caravan of Freedom. This was the end of the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, who went into exile in the Dominican Republic and later in Spain, until his death in Marbella in 1973.

3 — On 19 July 1979 the Sandinista National Liberation Front, a coalition of different revolutionary forces, made its final push into Managua and overthrew the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who fled to Guatemala and then to Paraguay, where he was assassinated by a commando of the Argentinean People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) in September 1980.

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