CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS AS CHANGE AGENTS IN VIOLENT YOUTH GANGS

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SUMMARY

- Youngsters are the mirror of the kind of society they live in. They reflect their problems and bring back an image that we often do not want to see. The kind of violence that armed youth gangs experience and generate is a reflex, a consequence, and leads to the eventual creation of victims who are or can become victimizers.

- We must consider them as combatant children and youngsters. They fight in the war of expulsion, underground cultures where firearms are handed to people who are at the dawn of their life.

- Our hypothesis is that being a member of a gang is a way of living in a city, and therefore we are before a political situation.

- What we propose is that perhaps it is possible to change the explicit and implicit violence in gangs if we approach them by using their own cultural expressions, and allowing the gangs and their members to express their identities. We propose to treat them as people and allow them to emerge in a society that does not know them and that fears them.

- We share examples of cultural interventions taken from experiences applied in the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, with youngsters belonging to different associations, gangs and nations.

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Nelsa Curbelo, August 2004

INTRODUCTIÓN

Many societies in the world are experiencing violent acts committed by both male and female youngsters, who join gangs with hardly known secret codes. These gangs are present in cities, and their members belong to all social status, although they mainly belong to the poorest population. They are members of gangs, tribes and *maras* (organized gangs involving thousands of youngsters). Even though there are differences among the various countries and contexts they live in, there are also certain similarities.

Taking concrete working experiences, researches in Ecuador and numerous information shared with Honduras and Brazil mainly, I shall try to propose some solutions with the help of those cultural expressions used by those youngsters who belong to street gangs at risk, many of them being involved in street violence.

My hypothesis is that being a member of a gang is a way of living in the city. Therefore, we are before a political situation, which has its own codes, alphabets, music, slang, and structures representing a culture where the use of power is always present, even though many groups describe themselves as underground and clandestine.

We believe that it is possible to change the actions of these gangs by helping them —as well as the individuals belonging to them— find the identity they are seeking for, by treating them as people, instead of problems with no face.

So, the challenge is how to rebuild the society with the support of their own strength, by enhancing, at the same time, their skills and ways of expression, using their leadership, their forms of cohesion to revert the discrimination process of gangs and to allow that their proposals are recognized as such by themselves and can lead to the social reconstruction of those citizens who are afraid of them, who stereotype and reject them.

We aim at turning the experiences of those youngsters who belong to armed gangs and underground groups into the plot of their own story leading to their re-integration into society ***from their new cultural perspectives and ways of seeing political construction***. Reverting the processes by leaning on values that we often ignore.

VIOLENCE AND GANGS

We are experiencing processes characterized by their whirl, by the speeding up of time and space, by the hegemony of an empire that is beginning to fall down, and therefore is becoming more dangerous. In our changing society, some people and groups of people are excluded from evolution. That is why they are called "excluded people". They are often expelled from the system where they live, since they are not considered productive or efficient people. Excluded people could try to be re-integrated. However, expelled people experience their reality as a misfortune that prevents them from being themselves. ***This situation leads to their disappearance from public life, to create no-people, individuals we do not care about, individuals who must be avoided, even eliminated, individuals in whom others are not interested and from whom nothing is expected.***
Due to the lack of recognition, to the fact that they are not considered, that they are avoided and even feared, youngsters seek for their mates, their alike, other expelled people, so that together they can submerge in a world, unknown to others, from where they can: act, dress and behave in a way that can make them visible or invisible at the same time; that brings them to light and hides them. They live in underground cultures where life goes on, but it can either implode or explode.

Youngsters are the mirror of the kind of society they live in. They reflect their problems and bring back an image that we often do not want to see.

If we understand that before being victimizers, they were, and still are, victims, we must consider them as combatant children and youngsters, since they fight in other wars —the war of expulsion from society, the war of underground cultures where firearms are handed to people who are at the dawn of their life. And their firearms are supplied by adults. Drug and firearm trafficking networks use and need them. These networks are shielded behind youngsters, who are considered by society as the only criminals, while traffickers hide their faces, their wealth and their interests, and they can walk around our streets, our cities and countries as respected people; a society that is fed by the tragedies of its younger citizens; a society that praises the "god money", the "god prestige", and the "god power" and sacrifices its most sacred thing: the life of those who are trapped in this tragedy —children and youngsters who wake up to the adventure of life with dreadful experiences.

We are therefore in front of unequal violent scenarios, a structural one and a response one. Violent scenarios as a response are easier to see and judge; and those who sustain them are the object of many researches and reports, but scarce proposals of real changes.

It is easier to condemn this kind of response violence than to condemn the kind of violence generated by aggressive and dislocating actions.
Society tends to reject any guilt as a possible root of the conflict.

Today the conditions leading to poverty and its consequences are deeper. The home situation where children are born will have a great influence in their future. ***The biological and social border between childhood, adolescence and adulthood is practically erased in our countries. The need to work ——no matter how or under which circumstances— has no age.***

Society must admit that it kept an undeclared war against children, mainly poor children, before gangs came into the picture.

Violent cultures are also cultures, where citizens are terrified.

And then many questions come up:

Perhaps that rebelliousness of gangs, their physical violence, and the multiple aggressions caused by gangs are a response to a drained dialogue, to the prostitution of words, which no longer say what they mean, which have no sense, which are not symbolic, which do not suggest.

Perhaps the way they dress, they speak, they create new alphabets, they play music, they paint, and they do art is a way of doing protest poetry, which says without saying, which suggests, which is changing the way of making politics by citizens, that is by talking, discussing, confronting, opposing and reaching an agreement into *a way of making politics through their culture and expressions*. A place where the body has a great importance because it is their means of expression, due to the way they dress, the way they tattoo it, the way they dance, the way they turn it into the territory expressing where they belong to or where they are excluded from. Whoever wears the same necklace and uses the same shield is recognized by the same gang beyond country borders.

Perhaps the way of making politics must take into account the reality by which most youngsters identify themselves, no matter their social origin.

Perhaps this is their new and disorientating way of rebelling and questioning, the way they challenge our arguments of change, in order to show us their aims with a language and from a culture that confuses us.

WHAT ARE GANGS, NATIONS AND EMPIRES?

In Ecuador it is estimated that approximately 70,000 youngsters are part of these groups, from which 57% live in the province of Guayas, and the other 43% live in the rest of provinces, the most representative one being the province of Pichincha. It is also known that a large number of them have permanent access to firearms, which are used to make tests, to protect themselves and in disputes with other groups. If this situation does not change, in 2006 83% of them will carry and use all kinds of firearms.

The use of the word "gangs" has a political connotation that stigmatizes youth from poor backgrounds. The phenomenon of "gangs" is not exclusive of discriminated urban sectors, because some members of these groups come from rich backgrounds and are university students.

Gangs are groups of 20 to 30 youngsters aged between 13 and 30. They do not have any chains of command or written rules. They consist of both male and female youngsters who meet in parks to talk, to make plans or to see who passes by (to plan or execute robberies to pedestrians).

Nations, Clans, Associations and Organizations.
They are wider and more organized youth groups who obey a chain of command, chosen according to their seniority and successes.
They consist of a minimum of 100 members and are divided in cells, depending upon the laws of streets. They have a pyramidal and hierarchical organization, quite similar to the army. They have to pass several tests in order to join the organization; some of them are, strangely enough, very similar to "military baptisms". In poor backgrounds, youngsters join the military service for many reasons: to get a certificate that shall help them to find a job, or to have free food and lodging for one year. They are usually sent to the most dangerous areas, such as borders. The so-called laws of belonging, learnt on the Internet from groups (mostly American and Puerto Rican), are enhanced by their practices in the army.
These groups apply very strict controls to those who wish to become members. Their members are at least 13 years old, but when they make their oath of loyalty and unconditional support, they belong to the group for the rest of their lives.
Their leaders usually meet several times a week in order to plan, discuss and execute different activities, many of them related to the HIP HOP culture, which comes from the Underground culture.

Part of these groups have a main goal: to give unconditional love, or to love with no lies or tricks, and to give unconditional support to every member. This is one of the main values to make them join the society.

Their way of showing that they belong to a certain group is by wearing identifiable necklaces and drawings. Their leaders usually have a tattoo of their

organization shield. Some groups have a tattoo of a black tear for every death they have caused.

They make signs with their fingers and the position of their hands, developing a communication code that experts know and can "read" and explain.

The most conservative figures talk about 20% of group members carrying firearms. Usually the top leader (the "white person") does not carry any, but "brown people", those who work as bodyguards, do.

In general, they all wear wide clothes, glasses and caps, and have piercings, tattoos, elements that show the violence they are surrounded by, which becomes their way of expressing and identifying themselves.

The empire is the alliance or union of different organized groups. Empires are jointly led by the various leaders.

There are also **criminal bands**, mostly consisting of adults, who are sometimes linked to gangs, and whose main goal is to commit criminal actions.

All the groups above have their own cultural expressions, as well as some common ones, such as graffiti and rap.

Graffiti has an artistic value, and it is an explosion of color and shapes expressing caricatures, landscapes, letters, etc. *Chapeteo* are writings that appear in different parts of the city, which mark territories. They are written with different symbols identifying those groups who made them. Only those who have been "initiated" are able to understand them. In fact, nearly every group has its own alphabet. It is a way of being distinguished, of reaffirming themselves, of creating a look that makes them feel different and that proves they belong to a certain group. At the beginning, they just copied models from other countries. Today, they defend their symbols as theirs and they even export them.

Their language is also unique. They use a slang that is incomprehensible to adults, or to people foreign to their groups. In fact, that is how all languages have evolved. However, this explicit slang hides their participation into society and becomes their own key language.

The adoption of their own slang and a whole body language is a key element of common identity, which will later —when violence is socialized and when they know exactly who are their friends and their enemies— become ways of surviving.

Another kind of youth group, not always identifiable with gangs, are **rappers**, who are divided by singers and dancers. The first ones make samples of rap and reggae songs and compound song lyrics where they express their way of thinking and live. The second ones express their artistic side by performing dance steps and break dance.

KEYS TO UNDERSTAND THIS PHENOMENON

In "new" districts formed in poor communities of big cities, also known as suburbs, "violence" is a cultural pattern, not a circumstantial attitude. The old disputes among neighbors have nothing to do with the new conflicts. An invisible fence was built between such districts and the rest of society from which they feel excluded, aggressed and discriminated. As far as the speed is concerned, this tendency can only be compared to the phenomenon of family break-up that occurred in them. The search for progress and for a personal or family improvement was no longer a social objective, and it was brutally and pragmatically replaced by a fight for survival.

Within this context, youngsters were gradually abandoning their traditional social and cultural links in an accelerated process of giving up their values and identity. Generally speaking, *in the first place there was a break-up of the normal mechanisms of integration to society —education and employment—,* later there was *an affective separation* from families (which were mostly already disintegrated). Finally, they experienced *an indifference towards their own lives.*
Their norms of respect and the way they make others respect them are completely different from traditional ones. The kind of socialization they have been submitted to is spoliation, aggression, violence, strength, ferocity or fear. A fight is not solved with an apology, but with another fight, crueler than the previous one.

The most important thing for members of a gang is their group, and they are willing to die for it. Being injured during a fight to defend their people is an honor. Once youth gangs are structured, their members must adapt to and be socialized in accordance to the patterns established by their founders.

Schools and teachers, which had a great influence in the old model of "communities", have been replaced by the street and by youngsters who become the instructors of secret codes and languages. Living in the streets and submitting to the laws of the street is for many a way of feeling like an experienced man; it constitutes a way of finding a sense to life.

However, there is something more: inside the physical "district", as an spatial unity, another "district" was created, that is the organized space of youngsters, which is represented by gangs and nations. This "district" is always with them, and it has more affective links than geographical links. In the inner "district", symbols have their own interpretation codes. For instance, with their tattoos, members of a gang pay a tribute to their memories, such as their defeated friends. Many tattoos are names or crosses implying unsettled revenges, which, contrary to traditional concepts, will not be focused on the directly involved person. Instead they generalize them and make them permanent. In both "districts" —the physical and external one and the emotional and internal

one— reputation and leadership are achieved while values and expectations of gang members are reached. [1]

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS WITHIN GANGS[2]

Leadership, as well as mental agility, ability to adapt and response to risk, are won in the streets. The leader is the one who directs assaults and robberies; he is the one who makes plans, he is like the captain of the troops. He must be brave, respected, furious, be able to give orders, armed, tattooed, smart, and firm in the community. He needs to be assertive, the strongest one and the one with the most experience in the community.

As the self-esteem of gang members —who see themselves as "soldiers", "combatants" or "warriors"— grew bigger, they began to apply some codes of honor, which tend to isolate them, instead of integrating them back to society. When leaders (or "veterans") get tattooed up to their faces, they are condemning themselves to exclusion. That is the reason why they shelter in the depths of their community, and they do not come out. They only emerge when circumstances are under their control. The rest of society only sees them in videos or in pictures when they are in the news. They hardly ever show their symbols in the streets, or in public transportation. They do not like being observed. They are often condemned to be seen with both repulsion and fear.

To them, their "communities" are the best place to be, a place where they need to stay for their own safety and survival needs. They look for an area where they can walk around safely, a place where they can create an unknown structure.

The way gang members understand the violence that surrounds them is different from the way the rest of society understands it. ***What was initially explained by increasing inequalities, by the pressure that young men and women had to face, or by the consolidation of a society ruled by mass media and consumption, is now linked to sociological and cultural perceptions that have their own flow, and that respond to a logical growth and reproduction.***

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[1] Preliminary Report on the Violent Death of Boys, Girls and Teenagers in Honduras. Analysis of the context *Maras* or gangs in Honduras: keys to understand their context. - Leo Valladares Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras. http://www. Casa-alianza.or/ES/newstuff/informe_especial/análisis.shtm 04/03/03

[2] Most of the following text has been taken, hardly untouched, from Dr. Valladares' report, since it coincides and supports our own researches made for COAV.

The wish of having a job, a salary and material goods of youth is no longer attractive when they join a gang. Their favorite clothing does not respond to fashion, but to the organization. Owning a pair of shoes of a certain brand gives them more self-esteem than a perfume or a nice shirt.

All the above leads to recognizing that it is at the beginning of childhood when cultures print key orientations, such as trust, assertiveness and feeling efficient within the social community they belong to. *In this sense, gang members belong to a whole generation that has been submitted to traditions, unattachments and permanent inequalities since they were little. Their conflict with society comes from an infant socialization marked by a rough life, by hardships and lack of love.*

Who is a friend? Who is the enemy? Solidarity among them is not free; it leads to a dependency and to a submission to the leader. All these roles become a mixture of confusion. Under such circumstances, living in a violent environment, ignoring their rights and being completely excluded becomes their cultural pattern forever.

A nation can eventually allow one of its members to quit, as long as he/she becomes a practicant member of a church, or when he/she gets married. However, this condition does not save him/her from the enemies of that particular "nation". Both parties may accept the validity of church, but they won't allow him/her to make use of "the right to asylum". The identification with a certain gang or nation is forever. Accepting to join one of them is like getting a permanent tattoo. Personal matters are dissolved by group matters, by what is socially accepted. Culturally speaking, gangs and nations have common interests and values. They live in perfectly delimited territories, where they find similar responses and can share the same interests and actions. Somehow, this explains why the counterculture to gangs and nations is also violent and has its own aggressive mechanisms, codes and impunities.

The rest of society did not care about the fate of these youngsters, until the problem affected them directly. Even now, society prefers to eliminate them, than to find a real solution. That is why all proposals to solve this conflict were always inadequate.

The level of fraternity and the links that brought those youngsters together under a new organization was a mystery for previous generations. Protection concepts and parameters radically changed. The formal protective shield was no longer the family or smaller groups. Instead, it became a much more powerful structure, a nearly clandestine structure with its own codes and defense mechanisms. The old concept of family was replaced by a "new" one. The transition was favored by a systematic deterioration of affective bonds between parents and their children. This situation was provoked by the increasingly weak bonds between parents and by the break-up of families. The

real moment when these youngsters broke up with their families is different in each case. However, the break-up usually takes place before they join a gang; it can even take place when they are still living with their parents. It is really amazing how many siblings are members of a gang. In other words, this is not an exceptional case, it is very common.

When youngsters join a gang, they feel protected and, at the same time, they protect their gang members. Their own interests are melt in the interests of "all". They found in their colleagues the parents they needed to structure their individual and group personality. This search becomes permanent during adolescence.

In this sense, a remorseless personality is brutally and quickly consolidated within a context marked by an extreme mimetism: their rival gang incarnates evil, whereas their own gang incarnates good, unless they reach an agreement or they are part of an empire. The vast majority of these youth comes from violent environments, but they did not reject it. For many, punishment was constant, normal and incomprehensible, even when justified. Their parents and other children made them used to high levels of intolerance at home and in their communities.

Coming from totally unsafe environments, the search for safety, at all costs, was an appealing offer and made them join a gang. If we understand this concept, we shall also understand why neither dissuasive methods nor legal or repressive rules used by society did not work. In this turmoil, both gangs and the State, or gangs and the rest of society are forced to adopt some increasingly aggressive defense mechanisms and association responses.

Borders —inside out and outside in— have been broken. Although violence becomes even worse, up until now they have only been faced with violence; there are no negotiation or mediation elements involved in order to find permanent and effective solutions. The very few social and productive rehabilitation programs are not complementary measures to an agreement, but they try to be an answer to the crisis. The general tendency is to promote intolerance, to send an authoritarian and severe police response, instead of promoting conciliation.

Media and violence

The way media deals with this subject is wrong and incomplete, from professional, technical and ethical points of view. We must point out that their participation in generating and supporting violence is not determinant, but it does not go unnoticed. Newspapers, radio stations and television channels, as well as other influencing audiovisual resources, are the first violence socialization screens children have access to. Media teaches them that the kind

of society surrounding gang members allows a deeper social exclusion and an investment on negative values. Good news is not news[3].

LOOKING FOR A SOLUTION

No matter how serious the situation is, in order to channel different solutions, it is necessary to make little consensus, which shall represent the various sectors, including gangs and youth organizations. Such consensus should lead to mediation and reconcilement, and they should promote a reconstruction of those communities involved in the conflict. To succeed through negotiation, it is necessary to achieve at least two main objectives:

Definition of a national program that would count on all the necessary resources to rebuild the community (district) and to re-integrate gang members into productive, educational and social activities by breaking up their pattern of isolation or discrimination.
It is a matter of building a culture of peace, to create new alliances or civic networks (original and supportive), with the contribution of communities, schools, churches and media, as well as youngsters themselves.

KEYS FOR A BETTER INTERPRETATION OF FACTS

- The reaction of youngsters, their organizations, their excesses and their needs go beyond the interpretation of blaming families and schools, due to their failure as educators.
- The body is very important for street gangs. Tattoos, the way they dress with different identifying colors, shoes being part of their identity, wide trousers, haircut and style represent their way of responding to exclusion and stigmas with street culture.
- Their necklaces and their names are a symbol of their particular and different identities. Territories are marked with *chapeteo*, the first manifestation of graffiti[4].
- Initiation rites are very similar to baptism rites experienced in the army, provisional homes or prisons. They take this kind of punishments, they make them even worse and they apply them to their codes.
- These rites are related to their concept of values, to the macho man, to authoritarianism. Those who do not pass the test are not worthy of becoming members of the gang, nation or group.

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[3] *Ibid*

[4] See Cervino, Imágenes e imaginarios de la conflictividad juvenil. Seguridad Ciudadana, [Images and imaginary elements of youth conflict. Citizens' Safety] FLACSO, pages 417 et seq. June 2002.

- Women have a highly masculine behavior, except in the way they dress, which is often tight and provocative.
- Territories that gangs mark as theirs exclude rival bands. Transgressing those territories can lead to serious confrontations.
- Leaders are usually those who prove to be more aggressive and strong. They may have been in prison several times, which adds more merits to their capability of resistance, and turns them into people who know life. There is just one leader per group; the other members are subordinates.
- Leaders are often guarded by bodyguards, the so-called hidden leaders, who carry firearms.
- Some members of the group are armed, but not all of them. They know how to get firearms. They usually take them from institutions in charge of keeping order.
- Gangs are emotional communities, especially for young men, who are not used to showing their feelings in public due to their image of a strong and aggressive macho.
- There is a high level of drugs, which include alcohol. Both boys and girls are expert consumers of these substances.

SOME ACTIONS TO REVERT THE SITUATION IN ECUADOR.

Supportive elements to take a cultural action in order to improve conflicts, bring youngsters to the open, re-integrate them to society and allow them to contribute with their own values and symbols.

1. Be supported by the existing **leaders**, and use the capacity to bring people together of groups. Their organization as a network is a milestone, as well as a challenge.
2. **The respect to authority and to hierarchical order** experienced by members of organizations can lead to group leadership with an adequate work.
3. **The creativity** applied to their clothing, dances and painting can generate creative proposals for pottery, decoration, appliances, shoes, jewelry, etc.
4. **Granting them their own areas** where they could show their skills would give them the possibility to come out to the open through proposals, instead of confrontations.
5. **The capacity to adapt**, to assume risks could lead to technical activities related to design, marketing, etc.
6. **Their sense of erotism,** their values and their body language could lead to new ways of relaxing in a very competitive world where affection and tenderness is absent.
7. **Direct the value of love** that gang members have for their colleagues. One of the mystics of masculinity is leaving feelings and tenderness to the feminine side. Their collective unconsciousness actually refers to it as "women stuff". This concept comes from ancient times. Philippe educated his son, Alexander the Conqueror in a huge shield. Love interferes with conquests. One

must not have any friends. One has to fight. Sensibility has been practically removed from social life. Nothing is more fearful than expressing your feelings, because you feel unprotected. Gang members express their feelings easily when they are alone, dancing or in a bar. We must look for the political value of tenderness. Democracy is the exercise of social affection.

AS AN EXAMPLE, WHAT CULTURAL ELEMENTS HAVE WE APPLIED TO DECREASE THE INDEX OF VIOLENCE?

The organization SER PAZ believes in working directly with the gangs, instead of working with individuals who belong to a gang.

❖ After a first stage, consisting on approaching the groups, getting to know each other, and overcoming suspiciousness, we launched a program that was on the local news.

❖ SER PAZ brought together leaders of several groups with whom we had contact and planned a meeting with the provincial governor, who is the authority representing the executive power. The meeting was held in a neutral place, with no media and with no police agents. Leaders asked for two witnesses.

❖ In that meeting they requested the following: that they were not discriminated, that police agents did not arrest them just because they were in the streets, and that they had an area to paint their graffiti and practice their break dance. They also requested some financial support to produce their own CD with rap, reggae and hip hop songs for peace.

❖ In exchange, they committed to keep those parks where they were allowed to dance clean, and to "stop the war in the streets".

❖ The Chief Police Officer offered the walls of the police quarters and hospital as the first area to be painted. Some private companies and embassies offered the necessary paint and equipment. Twelve days later the first graffiti mural made by gang members was inaugurated in the presence of the police music band, the provincial authorities and the media.

❖ Later, eight other murals were painted in different public areas of the city, both downtown and in the suburbs.

❖ This gave visibility to a large group of graffiti artists who belonged to gangs, who worked together even though they were from different groups. They were brought out to the open, which made them feel important and recognized by society through their skills and art, not because of their crimes.

❖   By that time, a group of composers and interpreters prepared their first CD with their own songs: THE PACIFIER (lyrics are in the annexes). Four different groups competed for quality and their work, instead of competing for territories or firearms. Having to record an album demanded a great deal of discipline from them; it meant adjusting to schedules and listening to others. The experience represented a recognition of other people's skills, as well as their own. The album was launched in the auditorium of the Central Bank, in the presence of political and military authorities.

❖   Some private banks offered to treat gang members as businessmen, and therefore they granted a few loans so that they could start a small shoe company. The first contact meeting took place in the bank's meeting room, in the presence of its manager and some credit officers. Never before the leader of an empire —an organization that brings together several friendly "nations"— had been treated that way.

❖   The national university lent the room where the academic board of the Faculty of Psychology usually meets to hold meetings about the capability of leadership with leaders of various gangs. Sixteen leaders attended a course of 20 hours. They were handed a diploma once they proved to be applying what they had learnt into their groups. The fact that diplomas were handed in front of their subordinates —after passing a practical examination— was a big support to both leaders and the organization of these courses.

❖   Several youngsters were invited to local newspapers and television programs. They would appear whether openly or with their voices and faces distorted.

❖   All this process allowed us to deal with the problem of youth gangs from proposals that were not repressive and condemnatory. It enabled an open dialogue in the city. The peak point took place when the peace statement was read in an emblematic park, in the presence of the Nobel Peace Prize, Adolfo Perez Esquivel. This event took place on the memorial date of the city's independence.

❖   Two months ago, the first Ecuadorian Hip Hop magazine was launched. It was made by gang members, university students and businessmen from the city of Guayaquil who assessed them. It was a long and demanding process. Two thousand copies were published. Putting together boys and girls from different origins, with different vocabularies and attitudes was a big challenge, but it proved that tolerance and respect are possible. The magazine includes comics, educative articles on sexuality, music news, graffiti reproductions, etc. The purpose of the magazine is to create a space for education and exchange between gangs and the rest of society. The magazine also includes a section with urban stories, where the history of one nation is published every month.

❖   The publishing work was done in one of the nations' press. The day it was presented, around one thousand people came, including many rival gangs,

who did not act violently. Later, the magazine was presented in one university, where many students became very enthusiastic with the dances and songs performed by members of various groups.

❖ Another initiative that requires the support of local authorities is finding a public area in the city where they can practice their dances. We have still not succeeded. We believe it would be an important achievement because it would improve their self-esteem. The area could be another tourist attraction, and it could generate other resources, such as the sale of food, T-shirts decorated with graffiti, etc. Dancers would not be allowed to take drugs or alcohol, and they should practice several hours a day. This is one of our most difficult challenges, although it seems easy. Authorities are too busy in repressing and they are not willing to find areas where youngsters could perform their dances, theater plays and rap.

❖ We are asking for the collaboration of Ecuadorian leaders to intervene in problems caused by their "subsidiary" groups in other countries, especially in Spain.

❖ Members of one of the nations are writing their history. They count with 10 years of existence, and they are really enthusiastic with the perspective of filming it. They have proposed to work with other organizations that might be interested.

❖ Another proposal is to send them to the United States to meet with other gangs, such as the one called "Barrios Unidos" in California and other gangs in New York who do not use violence in their organizational processes. We do not have enough resources to pay the trip, but we believe it would be interesting since they venerate the United States. Knowing that some American groups do not use violence would be excellent to create new organization models.

❖ We are working on organizing meetings between family members of victims of youth violence and some aggressors, even if they are not the ones who committed those attacks. We believe this proposal is very important, although it is still on its initial phase. It requires a lot of comprehension and maturity. Aggressors experience huge transformations when they find out the causes of their actions, when they find out how loved people they attacked or killed were. We are founding this initiative on other experiences, but also by listening to other proposals.

Up until now, our achievements have been the following:

• Having been able to put the subject of gangs on the table as a problem that needs to be dealt with by society as a whole.
• Measuring the seriousness of this problem and knowing the approximate number of boys and girls involved in the process. (30 to 40 thousand in the city).
• Having been able to stop the fights between groups who participated in the process.

- Having been able to stop the fights between groups who declared open war.
- Being supported by media.
- Succeeding in increasing gang members' self-esteem.
- Collaboration and respect from authorities.
- Getting national and local authorities involved in the project.
- Collaboration from the police department.

There are also many deficiencies.
- Those gang members who are part of the team need special support because they are experiencing deep personal crisis. SER PAZ supported their permanence into the groups as leaders in order to change the actions undertaken by their groups. They have a hard time identifying themselves in the group because they have experienced deep personal changes, which are hard to handle in the world they belong to.
- It is necessary to make a follow-up, and that requires a lot of highly skilled personnel, to which we cannot pay their fees due to a lack of resources.
- Intervention projects are not self-maintained.
- Some gang members expect to receive, but they are not willing to make an effort.
- The expectations of gang members go beyond the possibilities of SER PAZ. There are no other organizations with similar projects in the city.
- The State is not investing in the problem.

The methodology used in our work is based upon:

- The evaluation of their knowledge and experiences.
- Their knowledge is enriched and reaffirmed, their theoretical doubts are solved, and their experiences are analyzed and transformed.
- Finally, they go through an evaluation of the practical application in every day life of things they've learnt.

It is based upon the following principles:

- Being positive and taking their cultural expressions as a foundation.
- Making proposals and being creative.
- Trusting them, their word is valuable. Making use of words allows youngsters to have access to some symbols that were not used within gangs.

The following are the parameters we use:

- Belonging to a group.
- Competition in the sense of being competent, not competitive.
- Looking at their future. This is a big challenge because they live in the now and they do not have a long-term project.

As a result of these experiences, two support essays were published under the following subjects: self-esteem and tolerance. SER PAZ has the hypothesis that

in order to finish with the violence and the underground state of war that surrounds gang members, it is essential to start by increasing their self-esteem. Financial problems are important and related, but by solving financial problems many of the behaviors of those who believe to be, and are believed to be, no-people do not change.

This debate is open. We must study which are the best proposals on a short, mid and log-term basis; which ones represent the complicated structure of society, and which ones are the best to make people grow.

These processes have their own rhythm. We must respect them, listen to them, and also speed them up. Nothing justifies the fact that a human being is killed by another human being, especially if the killer is a young person who is at the dawn of his life. Letting a person learn is better than teaching him. Nobody learns what he or she never asked. However, we must encourage them to ask questions, and together find the possible answers.

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