Territorial gangs and their consequences for humanitarian players

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Abstract

Territorial gangs are among today's main perpetrators of urban violence, affecting the lives of millions of other people. They try to gain control of a territory in which they then oversee all criminal activities and/or 'protect' the people.

Such gangs are found to differing degrees on every continent, although those given the most media attention operate in Central America. The violence that they cause has a major impact on the population in general and on their members' families, as well as on the members themselves.

Humanitarian organizations may find themselves having to deal with territorial gangs in the course of their 'normal' activities in a gang's area, but also when the humanitarian needs per se of people controlled by a gang justify action.

This article looks at some courses of action that may be taken by humanitarian agencies in an environment of this nature: dialogue with the gangs (including how to create a degree of trust), education, services, and dialogue on fundamental issues. Such

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* The views expressed in this article reflect the author's opinions and not necessarily those of the International Committee of the Red Cross. This article was written prior to the publication of the Small Arms Survey's Yearbook 2010 on 'Gangs, Groups and Guns' (Cambridge University Press). The reader can find there a photo essay on gang life and seven chapters on the various aspects of the phenomenon (pp. 68–253).

action only makes sense over the medium to long term; it may have a very positive impact but only allows the symptoms of a deep-seated problem to be treated.

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Gangs are one of the key players in urban violence. That has been the case throughout history, but the urbanization of our societies is making them more visible and increasing their numbers. Today, hundreds of thousands of people belong to territorial gangs, affecting the lives of millions of others. In many countries, humanitarian workers come face to face with that reality, not only in the fields of health, education, and development but also in connection with refugee work and protection work in prisons.

The word 'gang' is often misused in media reports; some gangs, whose members indicate their membership by tattoos on their faces and who can be extremely violent, provide excellent material for sensationalist reporting. Some years ago, one American writer went so far as to suggest that gangs are a new form of insurgency against the state, or even against the states in an entire region.[1]

It is important to define what is meant by the word 'gang', particularly when the gang is described as 'territorial'. Etymologically, a 'gang' is a team or a group. In English, the word has in turn designated a group of convicts chained together and then a group of individuals engaging in criminal activities. The nature of those criminal activities is often ill-defined: whereas some use the word 'gang' for any kind of group of adolescents hanging around on street corners, others do not hesitate to apply it to transnational organizations such as the Italian or Russian mafia.

We will begin by giving a broad typology of the perpetrators of armed violence in order to position gangs with regard to other organizations and to shed light on some of their specific features. We will then study the main characteristics of gangs, and some elements that suggest that they are more likely to survive or even to grow than to die out. We will conclude by considering the humanitarian implications of their activities and the courses of action that may be taken by humanitarian players working in communities affected by gangs or among gang members.

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1 Max G. Manwaring, *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency*, March 2005, available at http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub597.pdf (last visited 7 June 2010). One can go along with the author when he says that gangs are a serious security problem for states, but not when he goes on to assert that they seek to topple them. That takes no account of the fact that the gangs to which he refers have no political programme, or of the fact that they present no real threat to the states even if they are more numerous than the uprisings that preceded them. Manwaring states that the gangs in El Salvador have 39,000 members, which represents more than ten times the number of combatants in the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) during the war (approximately 3,500); the FMLN gained control of 20% of the national territory, far more than these '*maras*'. Even if account is taken of the fact that there are two dominant gangs, those *maras* would be powerful enough to topple the state if they really constituted an insurgency.

Armed perpetrators of internal violence

In situations of internal violence,[2] parties are more diverse than the parties to non-international armed conflicts. Before we focus on territorial gangs, it is useful to establish an overview of the perpetrators of internal – frequently urban – violence. The police and/or the army may find themselves dealing with some players who do not resort to organized armed violence and others who make systematic use of it. Among the groups that only resort to armed violence in exceptional circumstances, reference may be made to trade unions, student groups,[3] indigenous movements and/or landless farmers' associations,[4] unorganized mobs, and groups with minimal organization.[5]

The players who habitually resort to armed violence may be divided into five categories, based on the rationale behind their activities: armed opposition groups, armed pro-government groups, 'community' groups, territorial gangs, and 'criminal' groups. Their activities and often their very existence place all these groups in conflict with the national law.

There is no broadly accepted definition of these categories. For want of genuine definitions, we will make use here of ideal types. The main goal is not to seek the perfect definition but to determine the operational rationale of a given group, which then guides our understanding of the phenomenon and helps when devising the strategy to be pursued by a humanitarian player. It is enough to bear in mind that a given group may present characteristics found in several models or – more frequently – may shift from one to another.[6]

Typology

Armed opposition groups

Armed opposition groups take part both in internal conflicts and also in situations of internal violence. They set themselves up in opposition to the state or its administration, by contesting either their existence or some of their decisions. Their political aim may be vague but they generally have at least one slogan. They are found in both urban and rural areas. Examples: the Movement of Democratic

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2   This is not a legal category, unlike the categories of non-international armed conflict, internal disturbances, or internal tension. It is used here to cover non-conflict situations in which organized violence is used by at least one of the parties.
3   The events of May 1968 in France are a good illustration.
4   In Bolivia in 2009, for example.
5   The youth gangs in the French suburbs should be included in this category, although some of them seem to be trying increasingly to procure firearms or even war weapons.
6   Bandits blocking roads in Central Africa, the Aryan Brotherhood (an American prison gang), and Cosa Nostra are thus midway between territorial gangs and criminal groups. Arkan's Tigers, who were originally supporters of Red Star Belgrade, became a pro-Serbia armed group in the conflict in Bosnia; their leader had a previous criminal record.

Forces of Casamance (MFDC) in Senegal, the Sabaot Land Defence Forces (SLDF) in Kenya until 2008, the remnants of Shining Path in Peru after 1999, the Huthis in Yemen.[7]

Pro-government armed groups

These groups are active in non-international armed conflicts, as well as in situations of internal violence. They set themselves up in rivalry to armed opposition groups, although they do not work directly under state control. They are frequently created with the agreement and the support of the states or of some of their agents. They exist more frequently in rural areas. Examples: the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) in Colombia, the Civil Defence Forces/Kamajors in Sierra Leone.

'Community' groups – for want of a better term

'Community' groups see themselves as taking part in a struggle but do not set themselves up as rivals to the state; their adversaries are other similar groups. They oppose them to protect 'their own people' or to harm 'others'. Although they are very diverse in nature, what they have in common is that they act in defence of their own interests, or rather those of the community to which they belong. The clashes are often motivated by the desire to gain physical or symbolic territory but sometimes also property such as livestock. These groups are rarely permanent and, once an operation is over, their members generally merge back into the community. They are found in urban and rural areas. Examples: the *lashkars* (tribal armies) in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, the so-called Arab groups in Darfur, the armed 'citizen's defence patrols' in Guatemala, European football hooligans, landowners' militias in the Philippines, 'youth gangs' in French *banlieues*.

As a source of more or less ready-made 'troops', they are often instrumentalized by the parties during a non-international armed conflict and fairly easily become pro-government armed groups; among the best known examples of this shift are the Kamajors in Sierra Leone and the Awakening Councils in Iraq.[8]

'Criminal' groups[9]

The aim of these groups is to get rich by means of illegal activities. They may specialize in one particular illegal activity, such as drug trafficking, burglary, or

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7   At different times in their history, most of these groups have been parties to a non-international armed conflict and to a situation of internal violence; some of them have changed several times: they were not set up at the official start of a conflict and have frequently not been disbanded at the official end of a conflict.

8   They may also act as an environment fostering the development of armed opposition groups, such as some tribal militias in Darfur.

9   All groups described carry out activities that are prohibited under national law and may therefore be qualified as 'criminal' by an external observer. However, we all instinctively recognize that there is a difference between a group of bank robbers or drug traffickers and the other categories listed.

racketeering. They may be very small or spread out over an entire country or region, city or rural area. They do not need to have physical control of a territory and they think more in terms of controlling the markets; rather than challenging the state, they try to infiltrate it if they can, so that they are, to a certain extent, left in peace. Examples: the Russian mafia, the Chinese triads, the Afghan narcotics smugglers, the Somalian pirates.[10]

Territorial gangs

These groups are midway between criminal groups and community groups: they try to gain control of a territory to oversee all criminal activities in that area and/or to 'protect' the people living there. They only question the authority of the state (or of some of its representatives) when it gets in the way of their activities or interferes on their territory. The phenomenon is mainly urban and prison-related.[11] Examples: the Bloods and the Crips in the USA,[12] the Seven Seven in Timor-Leste,[13] the Numbers in South Africa, the Mungiki in Kenya,[14] the *maras* in North and Central America.

10 Although crime is governed by national law, some types of criminal activities are also subject to specific rules under international law; these activities include piracy, which is defined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea; drug trafficking – United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988 (Vienna Convention); and human trafficking – Annex II of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

11 See American National Gang Intelligence Center, *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009*, Washington, DC, which distinguishes between three categories of gangs operating in the United States: street gangs, prison gangs, and motorcycle gangs. Including the last category makes sense from the perspective of criminal repression and because they share a fair number of organizational features. However, their dynamics are different from those of the other two categories in the sense that they do not control any physical territory and do not aspire to do so. That constitutes a major difference for humanitarian agencies, although that way of viewing things may seem strange to security forces. Readers interested in motorcycle gangs may refer to the writings of Arthur Veno on such gangs in Australia and to a recent article by John Bruni, 'Cycles of violence: Australia's outlaw motorcycle gangs', in *Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 2010, pp. 38–43.

12 Two gangs that comprise mainly Afro-Americans and that are involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activities. The Bloods have between 7,000 and 30,000 members in the USA, spread over 123 towns in 33 states; the Crips have 30–35,000 members in 221 towns in 41 states (see *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009*, above note 11, p. 25). These two gangs are more a collection of subgroups with the same culture than a centralized organization.

13 For Timor-Leste, reference may be made to James Scambary, *A Survey of Gangs and Youth Groups in Dili, Timor-Leste*, 2006, available at: http://www.etan.org/etanpdf/2006/Report_Youth_Gangs_in_Dili.pdf (last visited 7 June 2010) or to Austcare and Small Arms Survey, Timor-Leste Armed Violence Assessment (TLAVA), *Groups, Gangs, and Armed Violence in Timor-Leste*, TLAVA Issue Brief No. 2, April 2009, available at: http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/files/portal/spotlight/country/asia_pdf/asia-timor-leste-TLAVA-IB2-En.pdf (last visited 7 June 2010).

14 This group is often described as a sect because of its religious beliefs; however, it behaves like most of the gangs in the world in terms of controlling territory and relation to the state. See Commission of Inquiry into the Post Election Violence (CIPEV), *Final Report*, 2008, p. 27, which refers to 'Mungiki, which up through the 1980s had been largely a cultural cum religious cult in the Kikuyu inhabited parts of the Rift Valley. Later it metamorphosed into a Mafioso style gang that grew and eventually became a shadow government in the slums of Nairobi and in parts of Central Province'. Like the gangs in Jamaica and Timor-Leste, it is partly supported by politicians in exchange for services (*ibid.*, pp. 104, 121–123).

Some territorial gangs provide a protection service for criminal groups, and particularly for drug traffickers, which makes it difficult to distinguish between them.

The phenomenon of territorial gangs

Having situated them in the environment of internal, frequently urban, violence, we can now consider territorial gangs as such. 'Gangs' are not a new feature of the landscape of violence: the sociologist Frederic Milton Thrasher counted 1,313 of them in Chicago in 1927.[15] 'Gangs' are found in all societies throughout the world. They mainly flourish in the disadvantaged and marginalized neighbourhoods of large cities, where the police provide little security and where the state services are not very effective. Many of them are no more than very short-lived youth gangs, but a certain number of them have become permanent enough to allow them to control an area and enforce their law there, thus changing from being an ordinary gang to a territorial gang. The best known of these currently exist in Central America, in Brazil, and in the USA,[16] but every continent is affected, albeit to differing degrees.[17]

A gang responds primarily to two needs: the sense of belonging to a group and personal status. Territorial gangs are primarily made up of young people[18] with no economic or social prospects, for whom gang membership opens up the perspective of a more enjoyable or more exciting life, even if it is shorter, and provides a sense of purpose. The decision to join a gang may be perfectly logical when other economic and social prospects are limited. In Brazil, the hallowed expression defines the choice as living '*pouco como um rei, ou muito como um zé*' ('a little like a king or a lot like a nobody').[19] Poverty and marginalization are at one and the same time the causes and the consequences of gangs, and a culture of violence in the youth environment may be an aggravating factor in terms of their emergence. That culture of violence often includes domestic violence, violence linked to an armed conflict,[20] or a culture that glorifies the power of

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15 For an overview of some gangs in Chicago from 1904 to the present, see John Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2008, pp. 65–83.

16 To a lesser extent in Canada and the United Kingdom.

17 In Russia (and the USSR, historically), they are referred to as the 'Kazan phenomenon', following the studies by Alexander Salagaev of that town. See, for example, Alexander Salagaev, Alexander Shashkin, Irina Sherbakova, and Elias Touriyanskyi, 'Contemporary Russian gangs: history, membership, and crime involvement', in Scott H. Decker and Frank M. Weerman (eds.), *European Street Gangs and Troublesome Youth Groups*, AltaMira Press, Oxford, 2005, pp. 169–191. For China, reference may be made to the studies by Lening Zhang: for example, Lening Zhang, Steven F. Messner, Zhou Lu and Xiaogang Deng, 'Gang crime and its punishment in China', in *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 1997, pp. 289–302.

18 Frequently, but not exclusively, young men.

19 In the words of a popular piece of rap music, quoted by Pablo Dreyfus *et al.*, *Small Arms in Rio de Janeiro: The Guns, the Buyback and the Victims*, a study by the Small Arms Survey, Viva Rio and ISER, December 2008, p. 116.

20 The role of demobilized combatants is obvious in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and also in Sierra Leone.

warriors;[21] but music and film productions, as well as video games and magazines,[22] also glorify criminal violence or that of gangs.[23]

Evolution

Although gangs that control a territory are not a new phenomenon, several developments have been observed that alter the problem and seem to predict long life for them.

First, the urban population is increasing (representing 50% of the world population in 2008[24]), thus creating more and more densely populated agglomerations, which are as many recruitment areas, especially when essential services are not – or only inadequately – provided. Second, the weapons used are increasingly powerful: the gangs have graduated from using steel weapons such as flick knives to the systematic use of handheld firearms. At present, war weapons – including assault rifles such as the M16 and the AK47 – are regularly used or seized. Various indications suggest that the development will not end there and that heavy weaponry could become more widespread among both the gangs and criminal groups: in France, anti-tank missiles and explosives have been used in some robberies;[25] and in some *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, heavy machine guns have been used against police helicopters.[26]

Moreover, the largest gangs extend far beyond the limits of their town of origin. Fairly centralized organizations may operate on a countrywide scale (Bloods and Crips in the USA) or even across a whole continent (*maras* in Central and North America). They may also have thousands of members, often more than the police force. Two extreme cases may be cited: according to some estimations, in Timor-Leste the gangs outnumber the police, the army, and the United Nations

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21 When a young man is immersed in a culture in which he is taught that the use of violence is one way (or the only way) of gaining respect and of becoming respectable, there is a considerable risk that he will consider violence as the norm.

22 The American magazine *Don Diva* is an interesting example, despite the formal denials by its editors.

23 The influence of these items is very real but has more to do with the type of violence than with the emergence of violence as such (interview between the author and a researcher on the causes of extremist violence, Geneva, Switzerland, January 2009).

24 United Nations Population Fund, *State of World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth*, New York, 2007, p. 1.

25 Such as on 30 May 2002 against a cash transport vehicle belonging to Brink's at Penne-sur-Huveaunne (RPG) and on 3 July 2008 in Cassis against another cash transport vehicle, this time belonging to Loomis (explosive).

26 Including on 17 October 2009, when a helicopter was shot down over the *favela* Morro dos Macacos. The state head of military police, Mario Sergio Duarte, said after this affair that the police had already seized grenade launchers, .50 calibre machine guns (12.7 mm) and anti-aircraft missiles. The percentage of machine guns among the weapons seized by the police in Rio de Janeiro increased almost fourfold between 1981–1992 and 1993–2003 (0.32% to 1.2%), and the total number of weapons seized has also increased; see Patricia Silveira Rivero, 'The value of the illegal firearms market in Rio de Janeiro city: the economic and symbolic value of guns in crime', in P. Dreyfus *et al.*, above note 19, p. 65.

mission taken together;[27] similarly, the MS 13, a gang originally from El Salvador, is said to have 10,000 members in the United States and 20–40,000 others in Central America.[28] In both cases, those figures may be exaggerated, but the phenomenon has clearly assumed a dimension that goes far beyond that of most guerrilla forces.

To conclude this list, the predominant position assumed by narcotics in gang activities has helped to boost potential profits and hence to raise the level of violence.[29] It also proved to be a tremendous opportunity for gangs who needed resources to finance a higher level of activity.

Structure and identification

As we have already mentioned, there is no agreed definition of a 'gang'.[30] All existing definitions are, to an extent, intuitive and are, moreover, often too broad to be of any use to humanitarian agencies, for which the territorial – or non-territorial – nature of a gang has a direct bearing on their operational ability. The definition proposed by the anthropologist Dennis Rodgers goes a fair way towards meeting their needs. He states that gangs are:

> *definite social organizations* that display an institutional continuity independent of their membership. They have fixed conventions and rules, which can include *initiation rituals, a ranking system, rites of passage and rules of conduct* that make the gang *a primary source of identity for its members.*
>
> *Gang codes* often demand particular behaviour patterns from members, such as adopting characteristic dress, tattoos, graffiti, hand signs and slang, as well as regular involvement in illicit and violent activities. … their relationship with local communities can be *either oppressive or protective* (indeed, this can shift from one to the other over time).[31]

Territorial gangs have an organized structure, often with a clear hierarchy that is sometimes pyramidal in form. A member must prove himself; if he is

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27 Estimates of the number of members in the largest gangs in Timor-Leste, particularly the Seven Seven and the Persaudaraan Setia Hati Terate (PSHT), vary between 20,000 and 50,000 members. In every case, the Timo-Leste army is said to comprise 1,500 regular soldiers and 1,500 reserves, the police perhaps 3,000, and the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) 1,552 men in uniform plus a thousand civilians (source: United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO)). Gang members therefore far outnumber the security forces present in Timor-Leste.

28 See *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009*, above note 11, p. 26.

29 Nicaragua is just one example among many: see Dennis Rodgers, 'An urban gang moves from social to economic violence', in José Luis Rocha and Dennis Rodgers, *Gangs of Nicaragua*, Managua, 2008, p. 83. The most common sources of money among the gangs are drug trafficking, extortion, and the money provided by political players.

30 See the opinion of Anika Oettler, 'Prologue', in J. L. Rocha and D. Rodgers, above note 29, p. 6: 'The term "gang" is generic and non-specific. A quick overview of the literature shows that it can refer to a range of phenomena, from spontaneous youth peer groups to organised criminal collectives'.

31 Dennis Rodgers, 'The gangs of Central America: major players and scapegoats', in J. L. Rocha and D. Rodgers, above note 29, p. 169, emphasis added.

successful, he may be promoted. That change involves new functions[32] and may be signalled by an external mark such as a new tattoo. Decision-making processes may be fairly democratic or very authoritarian; as a general rule, the larger the gang, the less decision-making power is given to its individual members. Some high-ranking leaders retain their influence even while in prison and may continue to give orders to those on the outside. National or regional gangs are often made up of smaller units known as *sets* or *chapters* in the USA and as *cliquas* and *pandillas* in Central America. These units have considerable independence, although they comply with certain rules, which often involve handing some of their gains over to the higher echelon. They may adopt a quasi-military structure in their confrontations with other gangs.[33]

For the members of a territorial gang, there is a clear dividing line between them and the rest of the world.[34] Becoming a member is often the outcome of an initiation process to determine whether the potential recruit has the character required for membership of the group. Some gangs require newcomers to commit an illegal act: often murder,[35] and sometimes theft. In Rio, many gangs merely observe the youngsters that 'hang out with them' before giving them minor tasks to do.[36] In El Salvador, the *maras* resort to the candidate being beaten up by several members.[37] Very young children may be recruited as full members; the socialization aspect of gangs must not be underestimated as it allows young people to form an

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32 In Rio, nine functions may be identified, with different names: *dono, gerente geral, sub-gerente, soldado, fiel, vapor, olheiro,* and *endolador*; see Luke Dowdney, *Children in the Drug Trade: A Case Study of Children in Organised Armed Violence in Rio de Janeiro*, 7Letras, Rio de Janeiro, 2003, p. 48.

33 For figures on a gang's income and expenses related to the war with other gangs, see Steven D. Levitt and Sudhir Alladi Vekantesh, 'An economic analysis of a drug-selling gang's finances', in *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 115, No. 3, August 2000, pp. 755–788.

34 This dividing line is far less obvious for an external observer; the existence of 'wannabees' (an American term also used in South Africa) – young people who copy the cultural codes of the gangs in their neighbourhood without belonging to a gang – leads to some confusion. Some gangs have in-stitutionalized the status of 'prospective member', as sort of halfway stage between civilian life and membership of the gang, such as the Mongrel Mob in New Zealand, for instance, which calls them '*prospects*'. See Tuhoe Isaac and Bradford Haami, *True Red: The Life of an Ex-Mongrel Mob Gang Leader*, True Red, Pukekohe, New Zealand, 2008. The Mongrel Mob is, moreover, one of the current examples of the (slow) transformation of a gang into a criminal organization. In addition, some features of the culture associated with the gang may be shared with a far larger group: rap or hip hop music – even 'gangsta rap' – is also listened to widely outside the gangs; see Andre Standing, *The Threat of Gangs and Anti-Gangs Policy*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS) paper 116, 2005, pp. 10, 12–13. Furthermore, to make the matter even more complicated, there are often a large number of intense connections between a gang (or some of its members) and the police, or the civil society. Some experts estimate that territorial gangs need the complicity of elements within the police force to survive and prosper. These connections may be formed through corruption, but also thanks to support from im-portant political figures.

35 See *ibid.*, p. 2; the gangs in South Africa often require rape or murder to be committed as an initiation.

36 L. Dowdney, above note 32, pp. 123–125.

37 The last scene of the documentary *La Vida Loca* by Christian Poveda shows one instance of such aggressions in the Mara 18. Girls are in principle put through the same initiation, but in some *maras* and other gangs they can avoid being beaten up by agreeing to be 'sexed in', in which case their status is that of a second-class member. One American example is described by Jody Miller, 'Gender and victimization risk among young women in gangs', in *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 1998, pp. 445–446.

alternative identity to that proposed by society.[38] That makes it particularly difficult to leave a gang unless there is another option.

As a corollary to the dividing line between members and non-members, a gang has its own codes, its own values, its own rules, and, ultimately, its own culture. Several groups have a code or sign language. This culture may reinterpret elements of the culture of the prevailing society[39] and often implies ostentation: the choice of colours for their clothes,[40] tattoos,[41] and graffiti on the walls, which is, moreover, one way of marking out their territory.

Gang rules are often simple, the emphasis being on solidarity with other members and an absolute ban on informing the police. Behaviours such as disobedience and desertion are punished because they threaten the very existence of the gang.[42] However, several agree to their members leaving them on good terms if certain conditions are fulfilled.[43] The rules regarding relations with 'civilians', members of other gangs, and the police vary enormously from one gang to another.

Territory and relations with the local population

The notion of territory is fundamental to gang life; it is what defines the gang. Moreover, a number of gangs use street or neighbourhood names in their official designation, even if they have largely outgrown their original location.

Territorial control must first be guaranteed against other gangs. That gives rise to veritable wars, in which a vast array of weapons may be used. A gang generally has more members than a criminal group: it needs them to be able physically to control its territory or to extend it. Control must also be guaranteed

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38 These are not all the reasons for joining a gang; they vary too much from one individual to another and especially from one country to another for us to try to draw up an exhaustive list as part of this article.

39 The use of postcodes to define gang membership is one example; MS 13, one of the *maras* from El Salvador that also exists in the USA and in a large part of Central America, has made use of a hand sign known as 'the devil's horns', which originated in heavy metal culture.

40 Wearing clothes of certain colours allows members to recognize each other, to impress the local people, and to recognize the enemy, all without doing anything illegal that might bring the law down on them. In the USA, the colours are, for example, red for the Bloods, blue for the Crips, and black and gold for the Latin Kings. In Brazil, red is unsurprisingly the colour of the Comando Vermelho.

41 Members of *maras* in Central America (MS 13 and Mara Salvatrucha) often have elaborate visible tattoos – even on their faces – that indicate their membership of the gang and their status. When members of rival gangs are in the same prison, these tattoos become a focal point of conflicts. In South Africa, the Numbers use tattoos to show to which gang a member belongs (26, 27, or 28) and his rank.

42 The murder in December 2003 of Brenda Paz, a 17-year-old woman who was a former member of the gang MS 13, can be explained by the fact that she had agreed to work with the FBI.

43 To be expecting a child is often considered a good reason to leave a gang, as long as that does not imply becoming an informer. See also José Luis Rocha, 'The hand that rocks the mortar launcher', in J. L. Rocha and D. Rodgers, above note 29, stating that, in the case of Nicaragua, both conversion in an evangelical church and university studies are often a way out (p. 35).

against the state,[44] but the gangs do not set out to overthrow the authorities; they may even be an offshoot or creation of political players, as is the case in Jamaica, for example, or be used by them for political purposes, as is the case in Nigeria. They then help to collect votes in the elections or to prevent the opposition from campaigning on their territory. In the rare cases of gangs attempting to undermine a state directly, this is in response to a direct threat.[45]

Relations with the people living in the controlled neighbourhoods are more complex than might be thought: the gangs may be predators or protectors[46] and change over from one to the other.[47] Some even use the vocabulary of social justice and present themselves as an alternative to a state that is absent within their limited territory.[48] Even if the group is more predator than protector, it should not be forgotten that the community may derive immediate tangible benefits from it, for example 'protection, status, income, credit, rough justice'.[49] Control of the neighbourhoods sometimes creates a kind of moral obligation towards the in-habitants, who allow the gangs to rule in exchange for security from other threats, or consider them 'part of the family'.

Some gangs view civil society associations that may offer an alternative to their control of the community with little appreciation. Generally, however, assistance and development activities are likely to be received well; activities

44 The state is often absent or represented solely by a police force that is either in collusion with gangs or adept at carrying out large-scale operations for media purposes without having any major impact on the gangs. The emergence of territorial gangs and especially their continuation is also due to the breakdown of the policing system. That does not rule out a nominal police presence in some places or formal patrols, but the stronger a gang feels, the more it will resist even that.

45 The massacre of twenty-eight bus passengers in Honduras on 23 December 2004 was the response by the MS 13 gang to government plans to reintroduce the death sentence. The most impressive example of an attack on the state was given by the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) in Brazil in May 2006: in response to the transfer of its imprisoned leaders (to cut them off from the organization), the PCC organized riots in more than 70 prisons and nearly 300 attacks on public infrastructure in the state of Sao Paulo.

46 It would be wrong to take account only of the statistical view of things. Admittedly, 'where the groups' dominion is absolute, as in the *comando*-dominated favelas of Rio, burglary, mugging, and street vio-lence … become astonishingly rare'. However, the security established by the *comandos* is relative: it concerns common law crimes but is not sufficient for people to feel safe, if only because of the threat of heavy-handed police raids caused by the gangs: according to a former resident, 'This type of security, as in public order, sure, OK. Now, security as in a feeling of physical integrity, the people don't feel safe with the drug trade …'. See Benjamin Lessing, 'Demand for firearms in Brazil's urban periphery: a comparative study', in P. Dreyfus *et al.*, above note 19, pp. 112–113.

47 From the point of view of efficacy, a mixture of the two would seem to be most frequently adopted by the gangs, relying both on violence or threat and the quest for support by means of 'popular' actions in the area of protection or justice; a gang needs at least passive support from the local people, especially during police action or war with another gang. Outside prison, very few gangs try to obtain it solely by terrori-zing the people.

48 On the videos that are said to be from the PCC in Brazil, references are found to Chiapas, to Venezuela, to Bolivia, and to the Indians in Brazil, all of which are referred to as causes that have the backing of the PCC; however, it remains to be shown that this stems from a political conscience. The main or only claim of the PCC's 'statutes', available at: http://www.midiaindependente.org/pt/blue/2006/05/353333.shtml (last visited 7 June 2010), is to change conditions in some places of detention.

49 James Cockayne and Adam Lupel, 'Conclusion: from iron fist to invisible hand – peace operations, organized crime and intelligent international law enforcement', in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2009, p. 158.

relating to human rights, to community empowerment, and demobilization of gang members without the consent of their leaders are often badly perceived.

Humanitarian consequences

The local population may be both direct victims (targets of extortion, rape, or killing to enforce gang dominance) and indirect victims (gang activities disrupt life and do damage to the rare services that are available). When warfare between gangs or against the police is permanent, the phenomenon of victimhood is intensified.

In some countries the level of violence matches, or even exceeds, that observed during a non-international armed conflict, with extremely high homicide rates. To give some examples, the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants worldwide may be estimated as 7.6.[50] It was 57.9 in Honduras in 2008,[51] 51.8 in El Salvador in 2008, and 45.2 in Guatemala in 2006. These figures may be compared with those of countries in conflict in the same region, such as Colombia where the homicide rate was 'only' 38.8 in 2008.[52] Gang members may themselves fall victim to violence, being killed or wounded,[53] and they may also be taken captive by security forces.

The families of gang members who have been killed or imprisoned suffer similar consequences to those observed during internal conflicts in terms of economic security or even of security pure and simple. If the prisoner was the only source of revenue for his family, the fact that the revenue was gained illegally makes little difference: unless support is coming from the gang hierarchy, his family is without an income. While gang members cannot expect to earn a fortune,[54] their absence may mean destitution for the members of their families.

People caught up in a 'war' between gangs or between a gang and the security forces are exposed to forced displacement as a result of the fighting going on close to their homes. Gang activity also disrupts the smooth functioning of services such as health care, drinking water, refuse collection, and education. This may occur because restrictions of movement have been imposed on the

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50 Geneva Declaration, *Global Burden of Armed Violence*, Geneva Declaration Secretariat, Geneva, 2008, p. 71. The rate was calculated for 2004, the last year in which the NGO had access to the data of 201 countries.

51 Broken down as 8.0 for women and 109.5 for men, according to Bulletin No. 13 of the Observatory on Violence, January 2009, pp. 3 and 5, available at: http://www.ocavi.com/docs_files/file_661.pdf (last visited 7 June 2010).

52 These figures are available on the website of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) at: http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Crime-statistics/Criminal_justice_latest_year_by_country.20100201.xls (last visited 7 June 2010) and are based on the most recent criminal data, between 2003 and 2008.

53 According to many interviews, membership of a gang offers both a form of protection and potential victimization; see, for example, J. Miller, above note 37, pp. 429–453.

54 We have considerable anecdotal evidence of this from interviews; it is also confirmed by one of the rare studies providing figures: see S. D. Levitt and S. A. Vekantesh, above note 33.

population[55] or because the employees in those services no longer feel safe enough in the neighbourhood. It may also be because those services did not exist even before the gang came into being.

The greatest concern regarding the consequences of gang violence for the population is that they affect countries, regions, or communities that have already been weakened by a difficult social and economic environment. Gang activity causes even greater disruption to the *coping mechanisms* that have been developed. The most blatant example of that dynamic has to do with money levied on the income of the economic players[56] in both the informal sector and the rare businesses in the formal sector within the neighbourhoods controlled by gangs. Small shopkeepers have little choice other than to put up with the levies imposed on them, which prevents them from building up their businesses. As for formal businesses, they relocate as soon as they can or cease trading. The loss of these jobs contributes to reducing the number of opportunities for young (and not so young) people, pushing them into the gangs. This phenomenon is all the stronger in that merely living in such a neighbourhood may cause an external employer to turn down an application for fear of the applicant's being a 'gangster'.[57]

Prisons in which members of different gangs are detained are the scene of numerous clashes between gangs and of atrocities meted out to the other detainees (rape, murder, extortion, etc.). The battle for control of the territory is shifted into the prisons. Imprisoned gang members are a factor aggravating prison violence, unlike the situation frequently observed with members of armed opposition groups in armed conflicts, where places of detention tend to remain relatively calm.

Is there a place for humanitarian agencies?

A priori, urban violence seems fairly far removed from the situations in which humanitarian agencies work; this is not a case of armed conflict, natural disaster, or even underdevelopment.[58] Moreover, it could be argued that any external intervention in the neighbourhood controlled by a gang could only contribute to reinforcing the gang's structures or its control and would be in violation of the principle 'do no harm'.

A large number of humanitarian agencies intervene nonetheless in such situations without the legitimacy of their action being called into question. To be convinced of this, it is sufficient to take a look at programmes in the fields of health

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55   The use of human shields is far rarer (or less well documented) than threats by other gangs.
56   By means of theft and/or taxes.
57   A. Standing, above note 34, p. 18, notes that, in Cape Town, identification is both geographic and racial.
58   Although it goes beyond the scope of this article, another challenge presented by gangs should be mentioned here: how should one assess asylum claims caused by, or otherwise related to, gang activities? This has been considered by several organizations, quite recently by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in its document *Guidance Note on Refugee Claims Relating to Victims of Organized Gangs*, UN Division of International Protection, Geneva, March 2010, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4bb21fa02.html (last visited 7 June 2010).

or education carried out by various NGOs and Red Cross or Red Crescent national societies. There are two scenarios in which a humanitarian agency – regardless of whether it is an international organization, a national society, or an NGO – may have reason to interact with a gang.

In the first instance, the organization is carrying out its 'normal' activities in the same area in which a gang is carrying out its own activities. It will, for example, be difficult to avoid detainees belonging to a gang in the course of rehabilitation work in a prison. The gang is present in areas where that organization had in any case decided to act but its presence has no direct connection with the humanitarian impact.

In the second instance, the humanitarian needs of people under the control of the gang may themselves justify action. That is frequently the case immediately after a peace agreement has been reached, when the consequences of the conflict continue to exist and are made more complicated by gangs that have taken advantage of the confusion to organize themselves or to strengthen their position. The presence of a gang is thus a direct cause of problems, with an impact in humanitarian terms.

In practice, the two scenarios are not so very different; it is, for example, difficult to know what situation in some *favelas* in Rio is caused by the activities of the *comandos* and to what extent the emergence of those same *comandos* is the outcome of pre-existing conditions. The main thing is for a humanitarian agency to identify real needs and for it to have the capacity to manage the activities that it intends to carry out, while being aware that this will imply dialogue with gangs and long-term commitment. Not every humanitarian agency is necessarily prepared for that and the decision must be carefully thought through.[59]

Courses of action for humanitarian agencies: contact and dialogue with gangs

It is possible for external players to meet gang members, though that implies serious research before any voluntary meeting, including research into the gang's culture. That research is all the more important because the media and the authorities tend to make scapegoats of the gangs.[60] It is illusory to hope that the gang will spontaneously make contact with a humanitarian player unless the latter has already encroached onto its territory.

Any work carried out by humanitarian players in a city neighbourhood, or in an area within a prison, that is controlled by a gang will be subject to discussion or authorization by the gang, whether one is aware of it or not. An agreement must be given by one or more leaders at the appropriate level of command. The ICRC's prison work (and occasionally the work carried out on the fringes of gang territory)

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59   Dialogue with a gang is no picnic.
60   A. Standing, above note 34, sheds light on the possible gaps between the external image of the gangs and reality.

has sometimes enabled it to establish initial contact, but few humanitarian agencies have that possibility.

Approaches made to individual members, in particular to offer reintegration programmes,[61] have proved limited. They are difficult to carry out when a gang is strong and well structured, and dangerous if they are undertaken without its consent. Moreover, they do not allow the greatest potential problem to be resolved: that is to say, the pressure that a gang may put on its former members to get them to return to the fold.

Entering into dialogue with the gang as a group first involves engaging with the leaders. It is illusory to believe it possible to turn up in a neighbourhood without being invited or tolerated in the hope that an intrusion of that kind will not be noticed.[62] The *top-down* approach is the only viable one, the only one that may allow discussions to take place with any semblance of security guarantees. The leaders may sometimes be approached directly; when that is not the case, intermediaries may enable a meeting with the leaders (or an envoy) to take place or messages to be transmitted. Those intermediaries will often be former members who still enjoy respect. Some political players also have privileged communication channels. It is vital for the intermediary to be personally credible.

Gang members are often prepared to talk to outsiders (to justify themselves, to show off, or out of boredom). It is vital to listen to them and to take time to do so. That is the price to pay for a relationship of personal trust and a better understanding of the gang's culture. However, that must not be at the expense of sound judgement: part of the 'game' for them consists of showing off in front of someone from the outside, if necessary by completely inventing imaginary atrocities. The Comemuertos (dead-eaters) in Nicaragua, for example, developed an appalling reputation as eaters of the flesh of the dead as a result of unfounded boasting that was obligingly taken up by rumour and by some media.

Credibility of humanitarian agencies

The credibility of every humanitarian agency depends to a large extent on the personal credibility of its staff. Criteria relating to language, nationality, training, and experience must be taken into consideration. That credibility will also depend on the humanitarian agency's not being perceived as a police informant and on its ability to provide useful services for the population controlled by the gang and hence indirectly for gang members.

Isn't that tantamount to reinforcing the gang's structures or its control over the population? That question is sometimes raised but takes little account of the 'services' on which that control is actually based. If coercion is excluded, the reasons given by communities to explain why they accept being controlled by the

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61   For example, through educational or vocational training or through social programmes.
62   The gangs have several ways of gathering information; the simplest and the most systematic is to post lookouts throughout their territory; the arrival of an external player is very unlikely not to be reported.

gang are not related to services such as water or electricity but to security and justice. In particular, the population benefits from gang control by being protected against enemy gangs, the police, or violence by the gang itself. The contribution made by a humanitarian agency does not reinforce a gang's ability to provide that protection.[63] As its intention is not to replace the state, a territorial gang has very little to gain in terms of legitimacy if it allows humanitarian players to carry out their activities.

By contrast, an external contribution tends rather to be seen as a threat to the gang, which until then had a monopoly as the only contact to which the local people could appeal, and which has to ask itself whether those outsiders are not working for its opponents. It is vital for the humanitarian agency to be credible if an atmosphere of sufficient trust is to be created for work to be carried out in acceptable conditions. In that process, trust is first placed in an individual and only then (and not always) in the institution that he or she represents.

Courses of action for humanitarian agencies: education

Community assistance is certainly the area in which humanitarian agencies can have the greatest impact. It is not without difficulties, however, if only because of the material resources used and the wealth that these represent. Blackmail and robbery are more than likely occurrences.

Another area of difficulty is often overlooked when the aim is to give gang members an alternative through education or vocational training, for example. Most young people in a neighbourhood are not gang members and do what they can to avoid having to join a gang.[64] An over-generous offer made to gang members would ultimately amount to rewarding them for having taken part in criminal activities, favouring them over people who have kept out of such activities. It would violate the principle of non-discrimination. The ideal situation would be to give members and non-members the same opportunities, even if they are offered by different agencies, which implies the need for effective co-ordination.

A humanitarian agency cannot really give a comprehensive answer for the reasons why gangs develop; poverty, the lack of social prospects, or the lack of state services cannot be alleviated by NGOs, however numerous and effective they are. It is just as illusory to hope to change the cultural features in the medium term.

An approach that sets out to prevent young people at risk from joining gangs seems more promising but is not without difficulties. It can be achieved, for

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63 Unless the gang is given enough money to buy weapons, combatants, and alliances, but that is outside the humanitarian field.

64 *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009*, above note 11, p. 12, estimates that, in the neighbourhoods most at risk, 29.4% of girls and 32.4% of boys consider themselves members of a gang. That is the highest estimation of which we are aware and it leaves a sizeable majority of 70% for those who are not members.

example, by offering alternative activities to unemployed young people.[65] Humanitarian agencies may at best address some consequences and not the causes for the gangs' existence,[66] thus making a major difference in the lives of the people whom they are assisting. To an extent, it is possible to provide an alternative to gang culture: for example, by arranging sports activities.

Literacy and vocational training are another area where humanitarian assistance may bear fruit and even provide an alternative to involvement in a gang. Young people who can read, write, and do arithmetic have a greater chance of finding paid employment. If they have also completed a course of vocational training, involvement in a gang becomes even less attractive: unless they rise very quickly in the hierarchy, they will not earn more money in the gang and will be exposed to greater risks.

Courses of action for humanitarian agencies – provision of services

Access to essential services, particularly to drinking water and health care, is often a critical issue in neighbourhoods controlled by gangs, because such services either are not available, are poor in quality, or cost more than the inhabitants can afford. This is an area in which the involvement of humanitarian players may fill a gap that cannot be tackled by anyone else. On the other hand, there is a risk that this will result in total substitution of the usual service providers, leaving the inhabitants even more destitute if the NGO has to stop its work.

From 2004 to 2007, the ICRC engaged in a regular dialogue with gangs in Cité Soleil and Martissant, two shanty towns in Port-au-Prince. It was not particularly difficult to make contact with the leaders, although the approach had to be cautious and methodical. At the end of 2007 in Martissant, the ICRC had established direct regular contact with the leaders of five gangs and had made contact through an intermediary with the leader of a sixth gang.

The ICRC's work focused primarily on two areas in which it was convinced that it would be able to have an impact on the population of those

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65 The NGO Fight for Peace arranges sports activities, particularly related to boxing, but also runs vocational training and courses and provides support for youth councils in the *favelas* in Rio (see http://www.fightforpeace.net, last visited 7 June 2010). The ICRC and the Honduran Red Cross organized art classes for 2,000 young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Tegucigalpa in 2008 (ICRC, *Annual Report 2008*, ICRC, Geneva, p. 315). This is involvement in social work rather than humanitarian emergency relief, which requires very different methods.

66 The solution to the problem of gangs requires concerted action by the state, which ensures decent conditions for all inhabitants and effective long-term security by the police. Heavy-handed approaches, such as those dubbed by the authorities in El Salvador *Mano Dura* and *Super Mano Dura*, appear only to have a short-term positive impact and seem, conversely, to increase the level of violence over the medium term. In Haiti, the United Nations mission finally disbanded the gangs as the result of a long-term intelligence campaign; see James Cockayne, 'Winning Haiti's protection competition: organized crime and peace operations past, present and future', in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2009, pp. 77–99.

neighbourhoods. First, it repaired the water system, while at the same time working to convince the gangs to allow the employees of the water board safe access to the neighbourhood. It had also ensured that the inhabitants would have access to drinking water without having to pay the gangs for it. Second, together with the Haitian Red Cross, it introduced a system for evacuating wounded and sick people and established first aid stations. That made it possible to evacuate 1,500 people from Cité Soleil between 2005 and 2007 (of a population of 250,000) and to treat around 200 more each month at the first aid stations.

The difficulties encountered in that operation mainly concerned the security of the personnel of the ICRC, the Haitian Red Cross, and the water board;[67] all the gangs contacted gave their assurance that they would respect those people as well as the wounded being evacuated. The few minor incidents were settled fairly quickly, thanks to the huge investment in dialogue with gang members at every level (once authorization had been obtained from the leaders).[68] The two factors that permitted this success were the immediate visible benefits of the activities and an approach based on the principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which was presented as such.[69]

Courses of action for humanitarian agencies: dialogue on fundamental issues

Rather than trying to make the gangs' overall behaviour more 'moral', small but significant changes must be targeted. The area in which those changes seem possible is respect for the medical mission, in particular during the evacuation of wounded people,[70] with, as a corollary, giving the Red Cross or another humanitarian player access to the controlled areas.

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67 CAMEP, a state service responsible for the drinking water supply and hence also for repairing the equipment.

68 After several years of attempts, the United Nations Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) tackled the problem, starting by establishing a good intelligence network. That allowed it to target key individuals in the gangs and to arrest them, thus displaying its superiority over the gangs. At the end of 2007, the main gangs had been disbanded and there was a substantial improvement in the situation of the local inhabitants.

The leaders were being held in the Port-au-Prince prison but the earthquake on 12 January 2010 allowed nearly 4,200 prisoners to escape. Fewer than 200 of them had been neutralized on 10 March, and the gang leaders went back to their neighbourhoods, with differing outcomes: some of them were lynched in Cité Soleil and others given a hero's welcome in Martissant. Perhaps they will take advantage of the confusion following the disaster to try to re-form their gangs and to take control of some neighbourhoods again. Various clashes between groups in February and kidnappings in March suggest that attempts of that kind are being made, although the gangs are still far weaker than they were in 2005; see International Crisis Group (ICG), *Haiti: Stabilisation and Reconstruction after the Quake*, 31 March 2010, p. 10, available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/∼/media/Files/latin-america/haiti/32_haiti___stabilisation_and_reconstruction_after_the_quake.ashx (last visited 22 June 2010). If those endeavours were to prove successful, the ICRC should certainly envisage resuming the dialogue where it was broken off in 2007. At the time of writing (April 2010), this does not, however, seem to be the most likely scenario.

69 Interview with an ICRC delegate returning from a second mission to Haiti, Geneva, 8 April 2010.

70 Provided that there is no obligation on the part of the medical personnel to report cases of gunshot wounds to the police.

The areas in which those changes seem difficult but possible to achieve are the practice of hiding the bodies of killed opponents and some forms of resort to armed violence, when the gangs might be convinced that it would be counter-productive for them (e.g. damaging their control of population[71]) or futile (e.g. ill-treatment of a hostage).

The areas in which those changes seem impossible – unless they are dealt with on a case-by-case basis (without changing the nature of the gang) – are trafficking (including of human beings) and other lucrative activities in which the gang specializes (such as kidnapping), murder (the aim of armed violence being to intimidate the population or the police), and the recruitment of minors.

The notion of humanitarian consequences may be used in discussions but it needs to be borne in mind that a fair number of those consequences are the direct outcome of the gang's activities or of reasons that go beyond them.

Medium- and long-term action

None of these activities will be able to achieve a significant result in the short term; to change dynamics just a little, there must be a commitment over several years or even decades. Some categories of people are even more vulnerable and may need very long-term support; these include orphans (whether related to gang members or not), women left without resources because their partners have been arrested or killed, and gang members who want to leave the gang.

The reintegration of those gang members is a particularly sensitive issue because they suffer from a number of disadvantages: a criminal record, lack of training, outward signs (such as tattoos) that are likely to put any employer off, grudges borne by members of other gangs – or of their own – in their regard but without the protection previously provided by their fellow gang members, active efforts to recruit them back, and the need to learn another way of living. All that should inspire caution before launching a programme of this kind. Continual support must be provided over several years and all dimensions of the problem must be taken into account. That difficulty militates in favour of activities conducted as upstream as possible to avoid young people joining gangs. It also suggests giving precedence to work carried out by local players rather than by organizations from another country, which are more likely to change the direction of their activities two or three years later.

Efficient activities that are stopped too soon may create more problems than they resolve. For example, the establishment of a drinking water distribution system by a humanitarian agency may undermine the coping mechanisms of the communities, who will cease to maintain their makeshift wells. If the humanitarian agency leaves a few years later, the inhabitants will find themselves in

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71 In Haiti, until 2007, it was not unusual for a gang leader to punish one of his men for having 'gone beyond the limits' with the local people. Some punishments went as far as execution.

a situation worse than before anything was done. The same may apply to reintegration activities: former gang members may be given protection because of their participation but that will cease when the programme comes to an end because of a lack of funds or because new priorities have been established. In the 'do no harm' assessment, the capacity to carry out an activity over more than five years seems to be one of the decisive criteria.

Conclusion

Of the humanitarian agencies that may be called to work in an environment of gang activity, the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies have potentially several advantages: first, they have a fairly broad network of volunteers, which will provide them with intermediaries when endeavouring to contact a gang, and qualified people in areas as diverse as law, education, health, local customs and languages, sociology, security, and legal defence. Second, by definition they are required to remain in the country over a very long period, which is not the case for an international NGO, the ICRC, or a United Nations agency; they can thus plan long-term projects without being caught up in annual priority reviews. Lastly, they often carry out activities at the national level whose benefits are also felt in the neighbourhoods affected by gangs; first aid training, health and AIDS education, or the prevention of diseases such as malaria are examples that come to mind.

That does not mean that they are the only ones authorized or able to address the problem of gangs. First, not all of them have the organizational capacities to do so; second, other local or international humanitarian agencies may have knowledge not available to them. That may include security management – which, as we have already mentioned, is vital – as well as the management of complex projects or the ability to be perceived by the gangs as more trustworthy players because of their very local or, conversely, international basis.

Humanitarian action is, however, only one part of the necessary response to the phenomenon of gangs. On the one hand, the very existence of gangs presents problems and, on the other, it is merely a sign of greater problems. The provision of services and security and socio-economic perspectives, which may be the sole means of resolving those problems, is the remit of the states. In Haiti, during the years spent by the ICRC in dialogue with the gangs, the problem in Cité Soleil was as much the lack of security – with its trail violence, killings, rape, and extortion – as it was poverty and decay. That lack of security was caused by the gangs, and the means to remedy it was not solely humanitarian action.