

Can gangs play a role in providing relief?

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The thesis is daring, but in the extreme context of urbanisation and violence in Latin America, it deserves to be asked. In this article, indeed, the author analyses the extent to which gangs could play a role in providing relief to populations. More questioning than affirmative, Diego Otegui calls above all to overcome simplistic visions and developing research in this field.

Urban life in Latin America has grown in scale as well as in its complexities. Between 1950 and 2010 the proportion of people living in cities grew from 30% to 85% and it is expected that 90% of the region's population will be urban by 2050¹. As a consequence of this phenomenon, cities have experienced an overwhelming growth in informal housing, a lack of urban planning and a pronounced decrease in living standards. Millions of new inhabitants find themselves deprived of the most basic services. This extreme marginalisation coexists alongside extreme wealth in an often-dangerous convulsed political environment and alternate forms of urban governance² in the form of gangs. Latin America has become the most violent region in the world; representing just 8% of the world's population, it accounts for 33% of all homicides³ worldwide, 30% of which are related to gang violence⁴.

An over-simplistic characterisation

Some of the original literature on gangs described strong correlations between immigration and the increase in the crime rate. Under this approach, gangs could be the final destination of immigrants⁵, as migrants (especially young migrants) find their identities disrupted and their cultural values and practices challenged. Joining a gang becomes a coping mechanism in which their members “rather than remain lost in this aura of marginality, confused and full of rage, they reconstitute a subculture and identity using bits and pieces of the past mixed with the present, but all shaken by the forces of a difficult city reality⁶”. Gangs feed on the despair and tormented spirits of those that feel invisible in the eyes of society and find in them countless faithful accomplices. They provide such individuals with a sense of belonging, with alternative ways to support their families and with a protective and support network.

¹ World Economic Forum, “Latin America’s cities are ready to take off. But their infrastructure is failing them”, 7 June 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/06/latin-america-cities-urbanization-infrastructure-failing-robert-muggah>

² Elena Lucchi, *Humanitarian interventions in situations of urban violence*, ALNAP Lessons Paper, ALNAP/ODI, 2013.

³ “Latin America is the world’s most violent region. A new report investigates why”, *The Washington Post*, 25 April 2018.

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global study on homicide 2013: trends, contexts, data*, 2014.

⁵ Holly Ventura Miller, and Anthony Peguero, *Routledge Handbook on Immigration and Crime*, Routledge, 2018.

⁶ James Diego Vigil, “Urban Violence and Street Gangs”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2003, 32, p.225-230.

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At the core of gang life, the sense of belonging can be quite strong but to survive in this environment, gang members generate unique coping mechanisms such as developing “loco” or crazy behaviour. They find in this way of playing insane, of going in and out of unpredictable behaviour, the necessary attitude and psychosocial mindset to confront daily street situations which “has become a prerequisite for street survival and a behavioural standard for identification and emulation⁷”. Unfortunately, this leads a large portion of them to become involved in activities that could easily be defined as illegal or deviant.

Like any other complex social phenomenon, gangs have evolved over time. While research in the 1960s did not find a large level of hierarchical structure⁸, this has changed in the past decades as gangs became increasingly similar in their behaviour and structure to more complex criminal organisations, due especially to their involvement in drug trafficking⁹. This hierarchical format has contributed to the evolution of their role in the communities, where they increasingly represent the interests of different groups¹⁰. Consequently, “any work carried out by humanitarian actors in a city neighbourhood, or in an area within a prison, that is controlled by a gang will be subject to discussion or authorisation 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 command¹¹”.

Their violent leadership has become famous and it works as a disincentive for humanitarian workers. Humanitarian theory and practice encourage establishing strong liaisons and joint coordination with local groups as the best strategy for serving those in need. But working side by side with local gangs is perceived as a dangerous endeavour. It is not easy to enter an unknown reality in which the possibilities of being hurt are high. Their violent and unlawful behaviour usually results in the assumption that their interest in the well-being of the community where they live is marred by a presumed (and probably real) intent to control power and receive the benefits of managing the distribution of aid.

However, such characterisations are often over simplistic. The fact that humanitarian action has mostly taken place in conflict situations might have helped promote a biased interpretation, putting two or more parties in opposition. It promotes an incomplete idealisation of gangs in which their members are somehow left untouched by the crisis and become guardians with whom the distribution of aid must be negotiated. Their role in the community before a crisis is thought to transfer to humanitarian negotiations which creates complications in relief operations and a reluctance to make gangs an active member of the humanitarian community, leading to an under-served vulnerable population.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.236.

⁸ Malcolm W. Klein, and Lois Y. Crawford, “Groups, Gangs, and Cohesiveness”, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, vol.4, n°1, 1967, p.63-75; G. Suttles, *Social Order of the Slum*, Chicago University Press, 1968.

⁹ Cheryl L. Maxson, “Gang homicide”, in Dwayne Smith and Margaret Zahn (ed.), *Studying and Preventing Homicide*, Thousand Oaks, Calif, Sage, 1998. p.197-219.

¹⁰ Robert A. Stallings, and Enrico L. Quarantelli, “Emergent citizen groups and emergency management”, *Public Administration Review*, vol.45, 1985, p.93-100.

¹¹ Olivier Bangerter, “Territorial gangs and their consequences for humanitarian players”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol.92, n°878, 2010, p.387-406, p.400.

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Academics have firmly supported that following a crisis there is a strong sense of solidarity in the general population, embodied by an attitude of mutual assistance¹². But in the presence of gangs, it is difficult for rescuers to disregard or deny the presence of deviant behaviours. Humanitarians generally focus on what are considered unquestionable humanitarian needs, such as restoring medical infrastructures and the provision of food and shelter. In their eyes, the priority for the gangs is how to ensure a constant supply of illegal drugs, increase their power by eliminating rival gangs or preventing law enforcement personnel entering into a certain region. This view conceals the fact that certain groups might be driven by different interests even if the issue of whether gang behaviour and interests translate in post-crisis contexts has not been corroborated by research.

Nonetheless, the discussion is not so much related to how to interact with gang members, as it is to understand the profound, intimate and interwoven relationship that gangs have with the places where they operate, and with their people. In one of the first attempts made by disaster scientists to theorise about group behaviour in post-crisis situations, in the 1970s, Dynes developed the emergence model which can help to re-evaluate the role that gangs can have in the distribution of aid. Its four classification types result from the intersection of two variables: the nature of the aid interventions undertaken by the organisations, and their structure. Type I are “established” organisations that have an emergency related mission such as the police, firefighters and local and international humanitarian organisations. Type II are “expanding” organisations which include the Salvation Army or Red Cross chapters whose routine activities are not directly or exclusively related to emergencies but do have a latent emergency function. The third type is called “extending”, and are those organisations that already exist in the community, enjoy some level of formality, and whose main activities are not related to humanitarian response, but after a disaster they perform disaster-related tasks. Type IV or “emergent” are the ones with the lowest level of capacities and expertise related to their lack of formality and organisational structure. The “extending” category allows us to examine how pre-existing societal structures (including those of gangs) can purposefully be used for victims, by forcing us to acknowledge the many ways in which gangs adapt their operations to pursue humanitarian-related needs. Gangs differ in their methods and overall objectives to other groups, but they share some of the basic characteristics of the “extending” organisations.

The preconceived assessment of what they might do during a humanitarian crisis, how they would do it and why, is a powerful lens. It prevents humanitarians from understanding the critical role of gangs in protecting each other and those with whom they relate on a daily basis, including the most impoverished and vulnerable inhabitants. But humanitarians should not let them be deceived by the violence and “marginal ways” that so regularly characterises gangs. Despite their involvement in illegal or deviant activities, these organisations have been documented to be concerned with the well-being of the local population where they reside¹³. Members of these communities are the friends, family members, customers and suppliers, and even the authorities of the schools where gang members send their children. Furthermore, since they tend to provide resources and a sense of security that is lacking from the public authorities, gang members generally enjoy a high degree of support from the local population. Gangs do not just co-exist with the local community: they are the communities. They are merged into one single and

¹² Russell R. Dynes, and Enrico L. Quarantelli, *Helping behavior in large scale disasters: A social organizational approach*, Newark, Del, Disaster Research Center, 1980, Sally Leivesley, “Toowoomba: victims and helpers in an Australian hailstorm disaster”, *Disasters*, vol.1, n°3, 1977, p.205-216.

¹³ Kathleen J. Tierney, Michael K. Lindell, and Ronald W. Perry, *Facing the unexpected disaster preparedness and response in the United States*, Washington, D.C., Joseph Henry Press, 2001.

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extremely powerful living organism. The members of these urban ecosystems share strong values and interpretations of life that are broadly incompatible with those of mainstream, more traditional societies. The theory of the subculture of violence “posits that it is the normative behavioural systems of groups that support, encourage, and condone violence¹⁴”. It proposes that the action depends on individuals’ understanding of right and wrong, which is certainly different in the case of gangs, in the same ways as the value they assign to the rule of law.

This quite different approach changes the way in which we might think about the distribution of aid. It follows the argument presented by alternative lines of research that consider that gangs are not to be so drastically blamed for the widespread violence¹⁵ and that they have been quickly characterised as the “suitable enemy”¹⁶, which conceals the more complex origins of the violence. It does not define the gang as distinct from the community, but as a legitimate and rightful actor that pre-exists the occurrence of a crisis event, that will use its structure for the benefit of their community, in whatever form they choose to define it.

The risk of legitimising gangs?

Despite the broad coverage that the emergence model has received in the past, it has never been discussed in the specific context of the slums, such as those found in most Latin American countries. Additionally, the literature has tended to focus its attention almost exclusively, on organisations that enjoy a certain level of formality and that are driven by values and principles that are deemed beneficial for the more traditional part of society. Furthermore, the traditional characterisation of gangs unwittingly generates a bias in humanitarian research by failing to consider the critical role played by many societal structures that, by definition, operate outside the law. How gangs adapt to humanitarian contexts and how they adapt their rules in order to interact with their environment are questions that still need to be addressed.

However, there is a growing body of literature¹⁷ that is challenging the original research and that considers that gangs are nothing but a social space in which members of a vulnerable population interact with a common purpose. If this was the case, their interest in contributing to the distribution of aid might have been under-estimated.

Most certainly, to consider them as active members of the humanitarian community would give them a level of legitimacy which in some circumstances could be dangerous. But gangs are generally different from other groups in that they do not pursue a political goal. And this is critical because their legitimacy could eventually be used as a mechanism to create a more positive role for their members within society. But this is something that requires further research. At the very least, failure to acknowledge such structures and the powerful place they occupy in Latin America, inevitably limits our intervention strategies among vulnerable populations.

¹⁴ James Diego Vigil, “Urban Violence...”, art. cit., p.228.

¹⁵ Cordula Strocka, “Youth gangs in Latin America”, *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.26, n°2, 2006.

¹⁶ Joe Cottrell-Boyce, “Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Critique”, *Youth Justice*, vol.13, n°3, 2013, p.193-206.

¹⁷ Holly Ventura Miller and Anthony Peguero, *Routledge Handbook...*, *op. cit.*

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