

The effects of the gang truce on Salvadoran communities and development agents

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Abstract

This study analyses how the Salvadoran government neglected its responsibilities to communities during the gang truce process, resorting to short-term, non-transparent, anti-democratic and counterproductive measures that allowed gangs to reorganize and take control of the territories and therefore the daily lives of the civilian population. This article focuses on the role played by the communities and how they sought to develop with the support of social workers, third-sector organizations and other development agents.

Keywords

Communities, development agents, El Salvador, gangs, social work, truce

Introduction

El Salvador began an anti-gang crusade in 2003, with the so-called ‘Mano Dura’, a repressive policy that consisted of the mass imprisonment of thousands of gang members, resulting in an increase in violence and the deaths of civilians, gang members, police officers and military personnel (Aguilar, 2019). Over 9 years later, in March 2012, deaths related to criminal violence dropped significantly. Behind this decrease was a truce between the main gangs: Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Barrio 18 Sureños (B18S) and Barrio 18 Revolucionarios (B18-R) (Bruneau, 2014).

The truce was promoted by the government as an achievement of its administration, and for almost 2 years there were considerably fewer homicides and confrontations. While it and the gangs exchanged concessions (Savenije, 2014), the communities were unprotected from gangs (Sampó and Bartolomé, 2014). Cruz and Durán (2016) warn that the main risk with this type of pact is that criminal groups can manipulate the visibility of violence, as happened in other countries in the region such as Mexico, Honduras, Colombia and Venezuela.

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Despite government neglect and gang control, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social workers and community leaders continued working to develop the territories (Tager and Aguilar, 2013). Using interviews with experts and the life stories of people in these communities, this article analyses the impact of the truce between government and gangs and how communities, supported by social workers and community development agents, sought to develop. We conclude with proposals for the recovery of communities through dialogue, inclusion and participation.

The concept of community in El Salvador

Community is a physical, geographical and cultural concept comprising a series of collective particularities common to the people belonging to it. Marchioni (2007) identifies four substantial elements that characterize community and are indivisible from it: territory, population, demands and resources. The concept of community includes commitment to the collective in organizational terms and social links based on shared interests and needs (Kisnerman, 1990). Its true nature can be found 'in the relations and interactions that occur . . . among the many different agents and social actors that interact' in it (Eito and Gómez, 2013: 13).

Another important element is the *sense of community*, which, following Jariego (2009), can be understood as the subjective experience of belonging to a broad group, which leads the subject to be a part of a network of relationships involving trust and mutual support. This sense of community prioritizes three elements: social interaction among its members, the perception of territorial roots, and interdependence (Sánchez, 2001).

Communities in El Salvador vary according to specific historical moments, and Montoya (2002) places them in three groups: (a) those formed in the late 1980s, that is, in the final stages of the armed conflict, (b) those formed after the peace agreements, and (c) those formed after the 2001 earthquake. The first two groups were formed by large numbers of returnees, mostly from the United States, and the third by large numbers of victims. Communities include heterogeneous neighbours and are inserted into the territory with objectives involving growth, autonomy and development. Following Flores (2016) in this respect, the concept of community in El Salvador is conditioned by historical aspects that the people have had to face: dictatorships, armed conflicts, democratic transition and the eruption of gang violence.

The fate of communities in El Salvador has historically depended on the government's and other actors' interests (Cortez, 2008), and gangs today have a practically ubiquitous influence across the territory (Olate et al., 2012). Community member participation, although theoretically established in Salvadoran legislation, has been very limited in practice. Over the years, this has restricted the participation of actors and made them very passive agents in their development. Gangs, which focus on the perimeters of their territory and what happens inside it, are unconcerned about people who live in the communities. According to Hagedorn (2008), gangs and poor autonomy indirectly collaborate in the internal underdevelopment of these people.

Communities have also had to face the social violence unleashed after the 1992 Peace Accords, distrust towards security forces, especially the National Civilian Police, and distrust among civilians themselves (Santacruz, 2006). All these elements shape a complex society based on mistrustful relationships, with violence as an everyday element and a fragile democratic system (Aguilar, 2019).

Social work, participation and community development

Community development in El Salvador expanded in the 1990s based on the presence and involvement of third-sector organizations, mainly through the spread of social workers throughout the territory. These entities promoted projects to empower communities in exclusion and rural areas, and also to improve the inhabitants' quality of life (Rambaree, 2011). Cortez (2008) outlines the

participation model of Salvadoran communities: a project is designed exogenously, the community is informed of its execution, it is implemented, and sporadically it is evaluated.

The activities of these organizations acquired greater institutional relevance among the population after their involvement in environmental catastrophes and the implementation of social and educational programmes aimed at the development of at-risk groups and highly vulnerable territories (Santacruz, 2006). The presence of gangs and the influence they exert on communities has made social work a high-risk activity. Third-sector organizations that oppose the presence and violence of gangs in the communities are subject to intimidation and violence on the part of these criminal groups (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2010), while social workers who enter gang-controlled communities receive threats (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada [IRB], 2016). Both social workers and third-sector organizations have to deal with the challenges generated by the gangs and the legal limitations set by the government for working with past and present gang members, all of which represent a risk to them (Cruz et al., 2017).

The country's unstable situation requires additional effort from everyone. Salvadoran social workers, third-sector organizations and other development agents carry out a variety of projects and bring social services to the communities (Observatorio de Desplazamiento Interno [IDMC], 2018; Rodríguez, 2014). However, the work they do takes place in a context of insecurity and violence that hinders the population's development. One example of this would be those receiving HIV treatments who leave the project because they have to cross territory controlled by opposing gangs in order to reach the clinics, or those who leave their homes due to threats made by gangs (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2018). Another example concerns social workers who find themselves having to carry out orders issued by gangs (Murcia, 2015).

Social workers' presence invests in the recovery of citizenship and territorial-communal development. The complexity of these geographic areas is huge because, according to Reyna (2017), the perimeter, influence and power extension of gangs has reduced the capacity for exogenous growth. However, the connections and potentialities derived from combining collective interests enable the community to be seized and its inhabitants given a better life quality. Community social work has thus encouraged consistent dynamics in creating a sense of belonging.

Social work that interacts with the victims of the abuse and violence of organized youth groups aims, according to Rogowski (2013), to combine the micro and macro perspectives. It encourages bonds between community members and defends their right to participate in collective decisions, trying to mediate in a very complex, multifaceted conflict. In the case of El Salvador, there are the territorial domain objectives of and between gangs, plus the fluctuations of a fragile democracy with inconsistent, badly designed plans for protecting communities and dealing with the gangs. Third-sector organizations across the different communities reach places where the state cannot guarantee safety, much less welfare. This institutional grievance is assumed by social institutions embedded in the daily life of these territories (Mizrahi, 2001), exercising supervision and promoting a sense of belonging, identity and participation among inhabitants, according to Ohmer (2011), as an opportunity for progress.

The current situation in which the state cannot guarantee the security of all the communities, especially those under gang influence, generates debate on the role gangs play in the collapse of the state. Therefore, state negligence promotes 'government vacuums' (Kruijt and Koonings, 1999) and forces NGOs to increase their presence and the leadership of social workers, which according to Taylor (2016) provides an opportunity for the transformation of these territories. Thus, as Lightfoot et al. (2014) believe, community processes should be organized to enable the community itself to discover its needs, promote social participation in the change process and actively evaluate its achievements as a direct consequence of its endogenous development. However, in El Salvador these processes are conditional on the various different aspects that influence the conflict (Muñoz

and Bolaños, 2011), and this makes it more difficult to achieve the aims of empowerment, self-management and transformative participation for those in the communities.

Social workers and other development agents play a crucial role, acting as mediators with gangs to enable entry into their territory and working in communities considered no-go areas by the police (Truell, 2018). Due to the country's nature and context, the role they play is heterogeneous: they work with the communities on health projects (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2018), they help prevent children and adolescents from joining the gangs, through educational projects and programmes aimed at preventing violence (Cuéllar and Góchez, 2017), and they take part in rehabilitation programmes for present and past gang members (Caldera, 2006).

Despite the risks and threats faced by social workers and other development agents (Cruz et al., 2017), gangs tend to place more trust in these actors because they consider them to be neutral (Aguilar, 2019). At the same time, social workers have a great deal of experience and know both the territory and the gang leaders (Cruz, 2006). Thus, as pointed out by Costello and Aung (2015) regarding the reconstruction of Myanmar after years of internal wars, the presence of social workers in highly conflictive communities is vital, since social work values are linked to the democratization of processes, education, intermediation, people's empowerment, the peaceful management of conflicts and as an opportunity for development. Along similar lines, Spitzer et al. (2014) highlight the role played by social workers through violence prevention, peacebuilding, education and community empowerment programmes in post-conflict Burundi.

Truce: The effects of gangs on Salvadoran communities

The weak democratic transition in El Salvador collapsed with the emergence of gangs. Aguilar (2019) argues that there is consensus among Salvadoran community leaders when referring to gangs as one of the main problems facing the country. However, there is little consensus regarding how they propose to solve the problem: prevention or repression.

Salvadoran gangs should be understood as more complex groups and unlike the elementary definition of gangs; that is, following Olate et al. (2012), they should be understood as more recent groups, more violent and of transnational origin, which differentiates them from the traditional conception of gangs. They are capable of controlling territories, stopping public transport at the national level and attacking security forces.

From 2003 to 2012, Salvadoran governments implemented repressive measures against gangs. These policies aimed to put an end to the gangs, reduce levels of violence and take control of public safety. However, the scientific evidence proves that they were counterproductive. Studies by Aguilar (2006), Savenije (2014) and Reyna (2017) show that these 'Mano Dura' policies enabled the gangs to take control of the prisons after the judicial system collapsed as a result of mass arrests, to contact other gang members on a countrywide scale, extend their territorial control and recruit new members.

After almost a decade of violence and high homicide levels, there was a sudden drastic reduction. This was due to a truce between gangs, supported by the government and made public through journalistic investigation (Bruneau, 2014). According to Cruz (2018), this truce was conceived by the Ministry of Security and endorsed by the president, although the official government version was that gangs had agreed among themselves and the government had acted as a facilitator. There is agreement among authors, including Roque (2017), Reyna (2017), Lessing (2017) and Cruz (2018) that the government was mainly responsible for the truce between gangs and its subsequent counterproductive effects.

According to Sampó and Bartolomé (2014), the first year of the truce resulted in a sustained reduction in homicides. However, the government left control of the communities to the gangs,

which enabled these criminal groups to extend their control over the population's day-to-day life (Savenije, 2014). Other results included the reorganization and reconfiguration of power within the gangs (mainly held by imprisoned leaders).

Methodology

This work is based on qualitative research, the geographical scope is El Salvador and the temporal focus is the period 2016–2017. The research questions revolved around discovering the following: What were the main effects of the truce in the Salvadoran communities? What was the role of social workers and other development agents in the communities? How were the communities organized after the truce? What solutions are proposed to resolve gang conflict? The objectives stemming from these questions are as follows:

1. Analyse the negative consequences of the truce in the communities.
2. Describe how the communities sought to develop with the support of social workers and other community development agents.
3. Present proposals for recovering the territory and communities controlled by gangs.

The techniques used to achieve the objectives were the semi-structured interview and the life story. A total of 16 interviews were conducted with social workers and local development agents. To this end, technical staff from the Vice-Ministry of Development Cooperation and the School of Social Work at the University of El Salvador were contacted to collaborate in task selection, considering their specificity and broad knowledge of the people to be interviewed. However, sample selection was conditioned by the danger and risk generated by gangs in El Salvador. Therefore, following Martínez-Salgado (2012), the context and complexity of the topic determined the sample of interviewees with whom we finally worked. To configure this group, the following inclusion criteria were considered: academic training as social workers or community development agents, experience and professional performance in community activities, daily contact in communities with a high presence of gangs, and gender perspective (50% of interviewees were women).

Regarding life stories, this technique was introduced as a complementary and contrasting element to the interview results. The research team believed that using a different technique meant a more objective, rigorous investigation, making it possible to analyse specific episodes with informants socialized with violence. Ten life stories were obtained: three with active gang members and seven with community leaders and representatives.

The life story technique is constructed from a phenomenological perspective, which visualizes human behaviour, what people say and do, as a product of the definition of their world (Santamarina and Marinas, 1995). We focus on the distinction that Bisquerra (2004) makes between life history and life story, differentiating between 'history' (in a broad sense) and 'story' (focusing on a specific scenario or period, in this case the truce).

In selecting the three gang members, since gangs are complex social groups subject to some secrecy, we followed Patton's (2002) criteria and used 'snowball' sampling, based on a specific case in which a third-sector organization acted as an intermediary. Thus, we contacted a member from each of the three main gangs (MS-13, B18S and B18-R) who had been involved in the truce process. With these three interviewees there were various security difficulties, so the stories were obtained using Skype. For the seven leaders and community representatives, snowball sampling was also applied with the help of social workers and community development agents.

To add scientific rigour and improve the analysis and interpretation of the results, methodological triangulation was applied to the research techniques (Denzin, 1970). Table 1 details the

Table 1. Interviews.

	Area/institution	Interviewees	Codes	Conducted through	Duration	Date
1	Social worker	Health promoter	PRS-1	Skype	1 h 29 min	September 2016
2	Development agent	NGO worker 1	TONG-1	Skype	50 min	September 2016
3	Development agent	NGO worker 2	TONG-2	In person	1 h 15 min	October 2016
4	Development agent	NGO worker 3	TONG-3	In person	1 h 23 min	October 2016
5	Development agent	NGO worker 4	TONG-4	Skype	1 h 18 min	October 2016
6	Social worker	Social worker 1	TSO-1	In person	52 min	September 2016
7	Social worker	Social worker 2	TSO-2	In person	1 h 42 min	September 2016
8	Social worker	Social worker 3	TSO-3	In person	1 h 25 min	October 2016
9	Social worker	Social worker 4	TSO-4	Skype	1 h 37 min	October 2016
10	Church	Truce mediator	RPT-1	In person	2 h 12 min	September 2016
11	Media	Journalist	PER-1	In person	2 h 25 min	October 2016
12	Human Rights Inst.	Human Rights Director	DH-1	In person	1 h 48 min	January 2017
13	Ministry of Justice	Police officer	POL-1	Skype	2 h 5 min	January 2017
14	Ministry of Justice	Soldier	FA-1	Skype	1 h 7 min	February 2017
15	Ministry of Justice	Public server of the Ministry of Justice	MJS-1	In person	2 h 17 min	February 2017
16	Ministry of Justice	Public attorney	FIS-1	Skype	1 h 27 min	March 2017

Source: Own elaboration. NGO: Non-governmental organisation.

interview process: interviewee's origin, code, date and duration, while Table 2 details the life story process: belonging to X gang, role in the community, code, date and duration.

In order to guarantee the objectivity of the process, the categorization of information was not carried out by the researchers who developed the research techniques. The empirical procedure was rigorous, meeting the standards for qualitative research. During the procedure to collect the findings, we used COREQ reports – COnsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research (Tong et al., 2007) – which consist of a rubric of 32 items grouped into three domains: (1) research and reflexivity team, (2) study design and (3) findings, data analysis and research report. This is a useful tool in the empirical process, completed by researchers who are not participants in the implementation of the techniques to ensure objectivity (Online Appendix 1). The research team submitted the findings to a reflexive process with the help of logbooks (Nadin and Cassell, 2006), although it was also thought important to give the study objectivity so that the results could be replicated in other contexts and territories with similar characteristics to the empirical scenario analysed here.

The transcripts were then processed using MAXQDA 12 qualitative data-processing software. The interview categorization was carried out following the Cisterna (2005) approach, that is, based on a script addressing various issues that were finally separated into categories and subcategories. Meanwhile the life story categorization was carried out following the recommendations of Martin (2009); that is, different categorizations were obtained to enable comparison and then the text segments were simplified and catalogued using index and content codes. The results of this process are detailed in Table 3 (for interviews) and Table 4 (for life stories).

The methodology for this research requires a common thread linking objectives, results and conclusions. Bhattacharyya et al. (2009) propose rationality, clarity and concordance in the structure of empirical works, in accessing the results and in the way these determine the scope of the

Table 2. Life stories.

	Participants	Codes	Conducted through	Duration	Date
1	Neighbours' representative	RV-1	In person	2 h 11 min	December 2016
2	Member of a neighbourhood association	JDV-1	In person	2 h 5 min	December 2016
3	Member of community development Association 1	JDA-1	In person	2 h 15 min	December 2016
4	Member of community development Association 2	JDA-2	In person	2 h 9 min	April 2017
5	Youth leader of a community	LJC-1	Skype	2 h 10 min	March 2017
6	Community leader 1	LCM-1	In person	1 h 52 min	March 2017
7	Community leader 2	LCM-2	In person	2 h 36 min	January 2017
8	Gang member: MS-13	PMS-1	Skype	2 h 5 min	March 2017
9	Gang member: 18 Sureños	PI8S-1	Skype	2 h 13 min	April 2017
10	Gang member: 18 Revolucionarios	PI8R-1	Skype	2 h 26 min	April 2017

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Interview categories and subcategories.

Interviewees	Codes	Categories	Subcategories
Health promoter	PRS-1	1. Negative effects of the truce	1.1 Gangs' strengthening
NGO worker 1	TONG-1		1.2 Gangs' expansion
NGO worker 2	TONG-2		1.3 Short-term politics
NGO worker 3	TONG-3	2. State abandonment	2.1 Rooting and community identity 2.2 Loss of sense of community 2.3 Gangs' abuse
NGO worker 4	TONG-4		
Social worker 1	TSO-1		
Social worker 2	TSO-2		
Social worker 3	TSO-3	3. The role of social workers and development agents	3.1 Social workers and NGOs 3.2 Community identity 3.3 Participation and community organization
Social worker 4	TSO-4		
Truce mediator	RPT-1		
Journalist	PER-1		
Human Rights Director	DH-1		
Police officer	POL-1	4. State's failure	4.1 Loss of territories 4.2 Weak state 4.3 Proposals to recover communities
Soldier	FA-1		
Public server of the Ministry of Justice	MJS-1		
Public attorney	FIS-1		

Source: Own elaboration. NGO: Non-governmental organisation.

objectives and their visual correspondence through interpretative text boxes with the final conclusions. Table 5 shows the coherence between objectives, results and conclusions.

The methodology is driven by ethical guarantees. Those who satisfied the inclusion criteria for the study received the necessary information beforehand (Parsons et al., 2016) and gave consent for their voluntary participation in writing, in accordance with the Fortaleza Declaration (2013).

Table 4. Life story categories and subcategories.

Participants	Codes	Categories	Subcategories	
Neighbours' representative	RV-1	1. Corruption	1.1 Gang pacts	
Member of a neighbourhood association	JDV-1		1.2 Murder reduction negotiation	
Member of community development association 1	JDA-1	2. Privileges for gangs	2.1 Illegal benefits	
Member of community development association 2	JDA-2			
Youth leader of a community	LJC-1			2.2 Massive prison transfers
Community leader 1	LCM-1			2.3 Drop in police control
Community leader 2	LCM-2		2.4 Gang control over communities	
Gang member of MS-13	PMS-1	3. Rupture within gangs	3.1 Gang purges	
Gang member of 18 'Sureños'	PI8S-1			
Gang member of 18 'Revolucionarios'	PI8R-1			3.2 Leadership disputes

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5. Structural coherence: objectives – results – conclusions (Bhattacharyya et al., 2009).

Objectives	Results	Conclusion
Analyse the negative consequences of the truce in the communities	Increased gang strength and territorial dominance. The government practically abandoned the communities and formally withdrew from gang-controlled areas	Non-transparent attitude regarding the truce. Salvadoran communities were subjected to gang rule
Describe how the communities sought to develop with the support of social workers and other community development agents	Rooting, community identity and the role played by social workers and development agents were fundamental to generate endogenous development	The presence of NGOs and social workers has always played an important role in the communities of El Salvador. The development processes must be participatory because an important part of the recovery is related to the active involvement of the people
Present proposals for recovering the territory and communities controlled by gangs	Recovering the territory. Dialogue, participation and transparency	The recovery of territories dominated by gangs is fundamental Transparent, inclusive and democratic dialogue The inclusion of a mediator or third party in the dialogue

Source: Own elaboration based on Bhattacharyya et al. (2009).

The anonymization of the participants and the communities studied were ensured using neutral codes (Corti et al., 2000) and avoiding their identification to safeguard their physical integrity.

Results

Increased gang strength and territorial dominance

The informants agreed that the Salvadoran government opted for a truce between gangs to achieve security objectives in order to present the decrease in homicides as proof of the success of their strategies. However, they believe it was a short-term, unplanned measure that enabled the gangs to reorganize and become stronger:

The government should focus its efforts on the good of society, but with the truce its efforts were focused on negotiating with gangs . . . (TONG-1)

Funes¹ thought it was more important to negotiate the number of deaths before recovering the territory overrun by gangs. (DH-1)

Participants in the study believed that the Salvadoran government focused its efforts on maintaining the truce and promoting it internationally as an achievement of its security management. According to the informants, some regional organizations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), gave their support to the government without looking more deeply into the truce and its negative impacts:

Near our community was the event where the gangs handed over lots of weapons in the presence of the OAS . . . we all knew this was a sham, except the OAS. (JDA-1)

Police patrolled less frequently, gang leaders reaffirmed their leadership and gang communications were more fluid due to more flexible prisons. Hence the state granted the gangs control over prisons, communities and the everyday life of the population:

The government created a parallel government: the government of gangs. (PER-1)

You can't give that kind of power to criminal groups that were already powerful! (LCM-2)

Although people believe they strengthened us, I don't think that's true . . . we're affected because not everyone benefitted. (P18R-1)

Rooting and community identity

Interviewees believed that the role played by social workers, third-sector organizations and churches within the communities was fundamental in understanding the dimensions of the conflict and preventing the communities from being left completely at the mercy of the gangs by the state. On the other hand, the interlocutors, that is, social workers, third-sector organizations and other development agents, stressed the fundamental role played by community leaders:

Those who really worked were the social workers and NGO people. They interceded for us. (JDV-1)

Working in the communities became more complex. It's not the same working in a community with government guarantees as doing it blindly. (TSO-1)

People were organized and projects carried out; the same people took over their development. (TONG-2)

The presence and experience of development agents in the communities enabled a strong link to be established and led to the execution of projects. And leadership figures within the communities, which were previously less visible, were vital for coordinating and managing development actions:

The NGOs were there, the social workers too. All we had to do was coordinate our people. (JDA-2)

Recovering the territory: An urgent task

According to the informants, the territory is recoverable. However, they say this recovery depends on the effect of gangs in each community. Gang members, on the other hand, believe that the recovery of the territories cannot be violent:

There are communities that maybe have 20% gangs and others 70%. The government has to individualize cases and intervene differently. (TONG-3)

The government can't 'eliminate' us. We also have families in the communities. Killing us isn't an option. If we're offered future opportunities, we could change our lives. (P18S-1)

The informants consider that taking violent, repressive actions against gangs is counterproductive for the civilian population, who are the most affected in the long term. The interviewees' discourse reflects a nonviolent solution but with firm, transparent, democratic and widely discussed actions with various sectors of society:

The truce had a lot of corruption and impunity and little effectiveness. (TSO-1)

We're willing to talk, but yes, we don't want benefits only for leaders. (P18S-1)

Solution proposals

Through their interviews and life stories, informants presented a series of proposals for a new process, characterized by being the opposite of everything done during the truce. The proposals presented here are not definitive, but outline the roadmap the country should follow to resolve the conflict and recover the communities. The participants agree that the recovery of territories and institutions is the first step:

We can't and won't do anything until we have government support, support that corresponds to us by right. (JDA-2)

Another proposal contributed by the informants is for dialogue to be the main tool guiding the process. The interviewees propose transparent, inclusive and democratic dialogue:

We want dialogue, but we want it to be public, we don't want it to be like the truce. (JDV-1)

They also consider the inclusion of third-sector organizations, social workers, health promoters and other development agents in any dialogue process to be crucial. These actors have won the support, acceptance and trust of the population due to their work in the communities. Informants believe these agents know the territory and the demands of the civilian population:

If we're going to start a new process together, the NGOs have to be there. (LCM-2)

We must count on those who've healed our wounds. Social workers helped us build a common identity. (LCM-1)

Discussion

The Global Agenda for Social Work and the Social Development Commitment to Action were approved by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2012) and encourage 'the promotion of social strategies to build cohesive societies and remove the sources of conflicts, focused on the prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts to reduce violence and its consequences' (p. 3). Ironically, that same year the Salvadoran government promoted a gang truce that went against these proposals and had devastating effects on the communities.

As regards our first objective – to analyse the negative consequences of the truce in the communities – the information gathered in the course of the study indicates that participants saw gangs becoming stronger in the territories and communities where they were present. On this subject, Bruneau (2014) observes that the truce encouraged the gangs to become politically active, giving them the ability to influence and determine different aspects of everyday life for the civilian population. Bruneau's approach is related to the contributions by Katz and Amaya (2015), who investigated different truces between gangs and concluded that in many cases these groups try to collaborate with intermediaries not only to reduce violence, but to obtain political influence and to benefit in some way. Roque (2017) says of these murder negotiations:

The halt in homicides ordered by the gangs' hierarchy in prison occurred in exchange for the improvement of inmates' conditions and the transfer of gang leaders from a maximum security prison to other establishments, which was justified as a way to better communicate their orders to members outside the prison. (p. 504)

Our findings show that the Salvadoran government maintained a non-transparent attitude regarding the truce and it was only through journalistic investigation that the population found out about the process. On this subject, Reyna (2017) maintains that, although the government initially denied that it was behind the truce, it soon became evident with the transfer of gang leaders from maximum security prisons to others with minimum regimes plus improved living conditions for imprisoned gang members. This lack of transparency marked the beginning of a series of actions that directly affected the population.

It can be said that, once the territorial control of the gangs increased, Salvadoran communities were subjected to gang rule. The political control exercised by these criminal groups became a bargaining chip when the 2014 elections were negotiated. Savenije (2014) argues that the truce, as a peace process, had no impact on the communities because the decrease in homicides did not mean greater security for the inhabitants. This stands in contrast to positive experiences such as the case of Medellín in 1995, where, according to Cruz and Durán (2016), a Peace and Coexistence Advisory Service was set up to support local pacts – agreed with the mediation of civil organizations – because they were effective in reducing murder rates.

However, participants in this study point out that the Salvadoran government did not use mediators from civil organizations and neither did it consider the positive experiences of other countries in the truce process. Borgh and Savenije (2015) describe how in 2010 a number of third-sector organizations tried to mediate between the gangs and the Salvadoran government, although nothing definite resulted from this. Nevertheless, 2 years later the government decided to go ahead with the truce without the participation of these organizations. Thus the Salvadoran government legitimized gangs as political actors, granting them greater power and allowing them to dominate and

control the daily life of the civilian population (Aguilar, 2019). Cruz and Durán (2016), in a more regional analysis, and Roque (2017), in her specific analysis of the truce, warn of the risks of legitimizing these groups, since they can involve the state in a concession dynamic of incentives in exchange for reducing violence.

As for our second objective – to describe how the communities sought to develop with the support of social workers and other community development agents – our findings are that the presence of NGOs and social workers has always played an important role in the communities of El Salvador. Weiss (2008) argues that the role of NGOs, social workers and development agents has been made visible in war, post-war and humanitarian crises, and Yule (2008) says that the role of development agents has been very visible in today's main Salvadoran problems: violence and gangs. NGOs have also played an important role in warning government about public policies that violate human rights, as pointed out by Wolf (2008). Wells-Wilbon et al. (2015) maintain that social workers play an essential role as actors capable of intervening and providing preventive strategies for populations at risk, mainly those suffering gang violence. This coincides with what the participants said about development agents being fundamental actors in the communities. However, development agents by themselves cannot generate change and development processes. On the contrary, these processes must be participatory, because an important part of the recovery is related to the active involvement of the people (Alipour et al., 2015).

In terms of social justice, following Chenoweth and Stehlikque (2001) it can be said that Salvadoran communities learned resilience through participation, stronger community ties and a capacity for collective work. Social work is the go-to discipline for on-the-spot management of traumatic conflicts (Denov, 2010) and integration processes (Zack-Williams, 2006). Experiences like El Salvador's are practical proof of social work's ability to transform through interaction and mediation with the civil population in a territorial sense.

Conclusion

The Salvadoran government neglected its responsibility to protect the communities and directed its efforts and resources to an unsustainable and non-transparent gang truce. Seemingly, both government and gangs used human lives as bargaining chips to achieve short-term goals.

Despite the main negative effects of the truce, that is, the spread of gang rule and stronger gangs, the communities together with the development agents (social workers, NGOs, etc.) executed different projects and tried to improve the population's quality of life.

The turning point for community development in El Salvador was the presence of NGOs and the revitalization prompted by social workers in the territory. The processes of citizen participation in community development have been fundamental for the progress and expansion of the communities, since the growth of social capital increases visibility and the chances of improving life quality for the whole population.

During the truce, part of the work of NGOs and social workers was to support the population by serving as mediators between the communities, the gangs and the government, which helped to maintain a certain cohesion, identity and sense of community. Other territories and contexts in the region and elsewhere in the world could use the experiences of El Salvador to tackle conflicts caused by different groups and guarantee people's well-being.

In compiling our results, a series of proposals have become clear and serve to achieve our third objective – to present proposals for recovering the territory and communities controlled by gangs. These proposals for overcoming the current conflict arise from the experience of the informants and focus on dialogue, participation and transparency.

The information collected shows that the recovery of territories dominated by gangs is fundamental. The government must return to the communities; it must make the population feel it is supported by its institutions, but not in a violent or repressive manner. Gangs are a part of society and cannot just be expelled. Security strategies must be based on reintegrating gang members and include life and future choices so that young people feel motivated to leave the gangs. Dialogue with gang members is crucial, but real dialogue and not negotiation. In order to be transparent and ensure any dialogue process is not used as a political tool by one party or another, an international mediator or third-party serving as an interlocutor between the government and the gangs must be involved.

The inclusion of a mediator or third party in the dialogue would, in the eyes of the public, give a more transparent picture of what the old truce achieved. Social workers have made it clear in the communities that this is possible. The dialogue should be inclusive and open to the participation of different groups and actors, bearing in mind that gangs directly or indirectly affect a large part of Salvadoran society. Nevertheless, the representatives of the communities are those who should have the greatest presence and space to set out the real situation.

It is important to point out that, in order for all these proposals to be implemented, the starting point must be the strengthening of democracy and the institutions and the participation and involvement of civil society. Whatever El Salvador achieves as regards reducing violence and peacefully recovering territory could become a roadmap for other countries in the region with similar problems. In addition, considering the next 15 years of implementing the Objectives of Sustainable Development, the new Salvadoran government (2019–2024) could follow the positive experiences of other countries in dealing with gangs, recovering territory and boosting development in the communities.

Community participation and joint efforts with social workers strengthened the community's identity and its will for self-development. These elements are fundamental in countries where fragile democracy and institutions affect the most vulnerable sectors. Few studies have looked in detail at the role of social workers when faced with a relatively new violent actor: transnational gangs. It is therefore urgent that more studies explore this area of social work intervention, virtually forgotten in Western societies but ever present in scenarios of war and ethnic and territorial conflict (Spitzer et al., 2014). The results of this study could be replicated in other contexts, mainly those with problems involving identity-based juvenile gangs and violence, for instance Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela and countries that receive migrants from these areas.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. Funes refers to Mauricio Funes, President of El Salvador 2009–2014 and supporter of the truce.

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