Towards a new model on mediation with youth street groups: Transgang findings
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INTRODUCTION: The TRANSGANG Project aims to respond to the persistence of youth street groups (the so-called ‘gangs’) and the social discourses that often represent them as “problematic” and suggest other ways to fight the violence

Editors: Carles Feixa-Pàmpols, José Sánchez-García, Adam Brisley and Nele Hansen

Researchers: Eduard Ballesté, Kamal Boucherf, Cándida Chévez, Paolo Grassi, Ligia Lavielle, Juan Camilo Mansilla, Fulvia Márquez, Margot Mecca, Sihem Najar, Maria Oliver, Mustapha Omrane, William D. Ross, Rachid Touhtouh

Gang prevention strategies, community mediation, and the 5 years of research in the three TRANSGANG regions are the focus of this eBook.

We explore the 5 years the organisation has spent in the twelve cities of the three TRANSGANG regions: Southern Europe (Barcelona, Madrid, Marseille, Milan), North Africa (Rabat-Salé, Algiers, Djendel, Tunis) and The Americas (Medellin, San Salvador, Santiago de Cuba, Chicago). Presenting some reflections and recommendations regarding public policies derived from our fieldwork as alternatives to policies based on punitive and a “mano dura” standpoint. Policies travel as much as gangs and imaginaries, but our perspective is focused on experiences of care, mutuality and hybrid mediation models, verifying that other policies for addressing the problem on a local and a global scale are possible.

The models of conflict mediation found in places like Chicago or San Salvador reflect the high levels of violence and homicide that characterize local experiences of gang conflict. Despite such broad ranging differences, models for performing conflict mediations between gangs and/or youth street groups circulate globally, appearing in academic literature and policy documents concerning geographically, economically, and culturally distinct contexts as practical tools with universal applicability.

We draw some broad conclusions and recommendations from across the TRANSGANG dataset, focusing on what can be learned in general from these diverse experiences of gang and youth street group mediation.

Moving to ‘Mano Dura’

Over the past decade, there has been a trend in several of the TRANSGANG areas for gang policy to become more legalistic and authoritarian.

In the European cities where State or municipal supported programs of legalization were happening a decade ago, there has been shifts toward heavier policing and criminalization as a strategy to deal with youth street groups. This
effectively led to the re-criminalization of Latin and Arab groups. The return or emergence of the “mano dura” in these cities is mirrored in the experience of El Salvador over the past decade, where State backed mediation and ceasefires have been replaced with the increasing militarization of the police and the mass incarceration of “gang members” including detained deny having any association with gangs.

While there may well be less violence on the streets of El Salvador, a large underclass of predominantly young men is now subjected to the daily violence of the El Salvadorian prison system. In effect, mano dura does not dispel violence but rather displaces it. An additional problem is that they tend to result in scorched earth in terms of the relationships between local communities and State agencies. Today, however, there are far fewer social workers and street educators in these communities; the work that would be necessary for any future attempts of a mediation-based approach is simply not being done.

In addition, existing relationships between youth street groups/gangs and State/municipal agencies have been severed by increased State repression. Another negative consequence of mano dura policies is that they undermine the possibility of engaging in nonviolent (mediation/legalization-based) approaches to gangs and youth street groups in the future.

**Sustainable mediation?**

This shift in gang policy exemplifies much broader trends in social policy witnessed over the past decades. In the context of neoliberalism policies, State support for welfare and social programmes tends to be subject at austerity model as a consequence of the global financial crisis. We discovered the weakness of models of conflict mediation based municipal and State support. When political support and financing are taken away, the programmes cease to exist.

What we find in the experiences of several of the cities is that when State or municipal financing has been taken away from legalization or mediation programmes, mano dura (or policing as a method of managing youth street groups in general) returns as a default governmental strategy. The gang policy histories in El Salvador, Milano, Barcelona and Madrid demonstrate that, in an era when financing and political support are often time-limited and project-based, policymakers should be aware of how to ensure the long-term sustainability of community programmes, youth street group and gang mediation.

**Care mediation strategies**

Beyond ‘mano dura’, there is other possibilities to mediation programmes that are initiated or initially funded by the different authorities. We
refer to this kind of mediation process as a care model, including all those forms of mediation that are led by or rely on State or local authority services or financing.

In this category, we can include the case of Shansy Circus in Salé, which is an institutional initiative that provides the young people of the neighbourhood with a social benefit. We can also include the cases of Youth Clubs and the Rainbow Coalition and especially the case of Ceasefire in Chicago with the aim of reducing the number of murders with firearms due to clashes between gangs. Finally, we can highlight the process initiated by a local NGO in San Salvador to create the Liberarte Ensemble, an orchestra formed by imprisoned young women. However, the most relevant initiative of this kind is the Barcelona case study, where a short-lived project to pair established residents with young new arrivals led to a meaningful and sustainable relationship of care between anonymous individuals and the members of youth street groups.

The relationships that were established continue to act as “safe spaces” for many of the vulnerable young people involved in these experiences. Importantly, in terms of conflict and mediation, the relationships also provide a safe space and someone to turn to when street conflicts arise. Summarizing, in these mediation programmes, we discover a model with a movement from care mediation to a mutuality mediation process when the official funding was suspended.

**Mutuality mediation strategies**

During the research process we collected some data on mediation processes that do not depend on State or municipal sponsorship and tend to be performed informally; we called this a mutuality mediation process model. It is the case of the GRAFS in Marseille and the role of the rap and hip-hop culture in San Siro. In the first case the big brothers and sisters have established a way to take young people away from the streets and drug trade.

In San Siro, the musical production of several videos of neighbourhoud musicians combat the stigmatization of the quarter and the community. A special positive experience is the case of Casa Kolacho, an art and culture centre located in Comuna 13 in Medellin, Colombia. Comuna 13’s new generations of rappers joined together using music and art as weapons against (political, structural, daily, symbolic) violence in the neighbourhood.

The space is now self-managed and self-funded to obtain the sustainability of the project without State help. Finally, the case of Gold Sellers in Bachdjerrah in Algeria is a mutuality mediation process that is very typical in the Maghreb region. The sellers formed an interest community to avoid and prevent bribes and confiscation of their wares by the police. This different examples of mutuality mediation remind us that mediation processes are not just a relationship between State agencies and members of youth street groups, but processes that involve interpersonal relationships between community members.

**Hybrid models**

Under the analyses realized, we find a movement from the care model to the mutuality model. This is the case of the pacification process of the Latin Kings and Ñetas in Barcelona as an initiative started by the Latin Kings and Ñetas groups with the mediation of researchers, and it made it possible to discuss the situation
together with policymakers, police agents, social workers and scholars. Also, the DEBO organization in Tunis was born as a project of mutuality but strategically, the group considered creating a legal association to obtain advantages from the Ministry of Culture and ensure the “legality” of various audio-visual productions and the events that they organize in Tunis.

Finally, in the case of Ensemble Liberarte with girls from two Salvadoran “pandillas”, the care in prison, thanks to the initiative of an NGO, was transformed into mutuality and self-management when these women continued the initiative after their release. All these examples show that for the sustainability of mediation experiences, cooperation between different agents is a necessary tool, although it is insufficient.

Cooperate and collaborate: Some final suggestions

Now it is time to present some recommendations guided by the transnational nature of the phenomenon for improving the mediation processes and preventive actions when social work and policy-making is carried out among youth street groups. These recommendations can be applied in different contexts but at the same time, it is necessary to dialogue with the traditional ways of preventing conflicts and to avoid euro-centric mediation processes.

Opening the processes up to the entire community and not dealing with them individually means that the process is in more harmony with the local ways, and thus conflicts and misunderstandings can be avoided. Our attention to mediation processes is supported with the idea that it is the best way to prevent violence. This focus has permitted us to confirm that gang members and ex-members have significant qualities, capabilities and skills for implementing pacification processes. In this line, the role played by positive leaders, who emerge from the groups themselves, and whose participation as intercultural and intergenerational mediators is usually beneficial for resolving conflicts within the groups, between them or with the social environment.

However, the model based on the “right hand” of the State has been proven to be insufficient and, in fact, to provoke more violence. On the other side, the “left hand” of the State includes the initiatives managed by public bodies and has been proven to be insufficient, undynamic and reproduce the management deficits of public administrations.

Overall, the policy approaches do not consider the relational and emotional aspects of the mediation process and obviate the need to promote equal opportunities through greater support for the social status of the young people.
involved in youth street groups. From our perspective, the role of public institutions is to provide “packages of opportunity”, promote performative agency and place youth street group members at the centre of the planning, decision-making and management of the youth associations as a key element for promoting and supporting social entities at the local level. The relationship of youth street groups with the administration and the State must be based on social intervention and social services. Finally, public policies at local, national and international levels can work to facilitate synergies between governments, social work professionals, researchers and youth street groups.

We firmly believe that it is necessary for academia, the groups, and the rest of the actors to work on policies with a left-hand approach, to cooperate and collaborate in the long term, as this would be beneficial for both the young people themselves and for society as a whole.

**The TRANSGANG Decalogue**

The main findings of the project could be synthetized in this Decalogue:

1. Recognize that the members of youth street groups have the same rights and duties as any other citizen or group, including the right to freedom of association, meeting and expression. Avoid short-term actions in favour of mid- and long-term application perspectives in public policies on youth street groups to obtain positive results.

2. Change the policy orientation from institutional top-down governance to a bottom-up strategy to ensure better conditions for providing cultural and non-formal education services for the members of youth street groups.
3. Youth policies and street group policies should be based on the principle of subsidiarity, that is, the priority of the local level in the implementation of these policies.

4. Promote the active participation of the group members and ex-members in the mediation and reform processes and in the creation of spaces for sociability, cultural creation and non-formal learning.

5. Achieve the involvement of civil society and/or local communities in providing tools and spaces to become involved in the proposals of youth street groups.

6. Develop, in collaboration with local entities/institutions/young agents, a professional training programme (with official/non-official title according to the possibilities) for “intercultural mediator” and/or “positive leadership”.

7. Create spaces to facilitate young people’s transition to adulthood without going through the itineraries proposed by the gangs because youth street groups are spaces of resilience and adaptation to the transition from young life to adult life.

8. Implement a gender perspective to change and challenge roles based on hegemonic masculinity in the social intervention with youth street groups.

9. Avoid and restore the image of youth street groups in the media due to its central role in the production of criminalizing imaginaries and the construction of “public enemies”.

10. Promote Youth Networks in which the different sensitivities (members, ex-members, researchers, social workers, educators, NGOs and policy makers) can cooperate to produce models and protocols to improve policies concerning youth street groups.

References
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