Youth, Peace and Security in the Americas: Risks and Opportunities for Central American and Caribbean Youth

A contribution to the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security mandated by Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015)

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Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean is a region characterized by a long democratic tradition, however, due to the prevalence of violence and the resultant insecurity, the degree to which many of the region's citizens may enjoy the benefits of living in democratic societies is severely jeopardized. This region confronts high levels of citizen insecurity as well as many of the issues that also confront countries in conflict, including weak Rule of Law, security institutions that are incapable or unwilling to respect human rights, the proliferation of small arms and high levels of all types of violence, among other issues. Indeed, fifteen countries, with the highest murder rates in the world are in the Americas (Keng Kuek Ser 2016). A recent study by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) entitled *The Costs of Crime and Violence: New Evidence, New Revelations in Latin America and the Caribbean* argues that "crime and violence are at near crisis levels in Latin America and the Caribbean." According to the study, Latin America and the Caribbean, as a region, accounts for 9% of the world's population but approximately one-third of the world's homicide victims are from the region, making it the most violent region outside of war zones. According to the Human Development Report 2016, based on 2010-2014 statistics, the region as a whole had 21.6 murders per 100,000 people[1] (UNDP (b) 2016). The region with the second highest level of homicides is Sub-Saharan Africa with 9.5 homicides per 100,000 people. For those living in low-income settings, there is a one in 50 chance that they will be killed before they reach their 31st birthday (Muggah & Aguirre 2013).

In this scenario, youth are generally the most affected both as victims but also as prey for the criminal groups to carry out this violence. For example, in Jamaica, about 51% of homicide victims in 2013 were under 35 years old (Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica 2013) and in El Salvador more than 50% of the homicide victims are youth between 15 and 29 years old (OECD, 2017). As shown in Table 1, data for 2016 on homicide rates in the Central American and Caribbean countries under analysis reveal the alarming situation regarding security in this region.

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[1] According to the UNDP in the Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone, the definition of homicide rate is the number of unlawful deaths purposefully inflicted on a person by another person, expressed per 100,000 people.

Table 1: 2016 Homicide Rates in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago

Country	Homicides (Per 100,000 People)
Belize	34.4
El Salvador	64.2
Guatemala	31.2
Honduras	74.6
Jamaica	36.1
Trinidad and Tobago	25.9

Source: 2016 Human Development Report, United Nations Development Program (UNPD).

Young people between the ages of 15 and 29 represent a significant population segment in Latin America and the Caribbean. Numbering approximately 163 million, they comprise about one fifth of the total population. Many of them face challenges that limit their contributions to society and their personal development. Unemployment, poverty, economic and social inequality, lack of quality education, and insecurity are among some of those challenges they face. Apart from a differential access to basic rights such as justice or political participation, for the minority of young people who do participate in violence or antisocial behavior, it is often a result of their experiences and/or perceptions of exclusion and inequality.

It is not all bad news though, as despite the scenario they face, there is evidence that many young people are addressing the challenges regarding security in each of their countries and trying to overcome the high levels of crime and violence in the region. There are also signs that their efforts are having a positive impact in their immediate environs. Not capitalizing on these contributions would be a lost opportunity.

This paper explores the challenges faced by youth in Central American and Caribbean in their effort to be full participating members of their societies and to play a role in building more harmonious societies under the pillars of **participation**, **protection** and **prevention of the UN Security Resolution 2250**. The paper focuses on the situation of youth in the specific contexts of Honduras, El Salvador & Guatemala in Central America; and Belize, Jamaica & Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean; all countries with high levels of violence. Additionally, the study looks at young people's current efforts to build more peaceful societies in these countries by

confronting social exclusion, especially of groups in vulnerable situations. For this purpose, the paper uses secondary sources as well as data coming out of consultations with OAS Representatives in the Member states covered in the study. Data and information emerging from youth organizations in the region themselves are also considered; these came as a result of a virtual consultation carried out for the purposes of this study.

Understanding the context

In Central America and the Caribbean, youth face very similar challenges as a result of the high levels of **inequality**, **unemployment**, **gang violence**. Moreover, both regions serve as **trans-shipment zones** in the drug trade, and there are additional challenges that emerge as a result of the **underdevelopment** of their institutions that are often ill-equipped to deal with crime and violence and are not able to provide young people with adequate training and decent job opportunities.

Inequality in Central America and the Caribbean

Despite recent progress in reducing income inequality, Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole is still the most unequal region in the world. Data from UNDP indicates that 10 of the 15 most unequal countries in the world are in Latin America and the Caribbean and that 220 million vulnerable women and men are at risk of falling into poverty (UNDP (a), 2015). These figures add to the 165 million people living in poverty (28.1% of the population as of 2013), among which, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 69 million live in extreme poverty (ECLAC 2014, p.15). The effects of inequality and exclusion primarily hamper progress in the guarantee of economic and social rights of historically discriminated groups such as the youth[2]. Moreover, historically marginalized populations, such as indigenous persons, persons of African descent, LGBTI youth and youth with disabilities are subject to acute conditions of discrimination and substantial barriers to the fulfilment of a dignified life.

The recent projections regarding economic growth for the region also present a challenge. According to the World Bank, the economy of the region is expected to expand by 1.2% in 2017, followed by 2.1% in 2018. While the region is finally emerging from the grips of an economic recession, the reality is that most of the region's poor will not benefit much from this economic recovery. That, combined with the fact that 71% of the wealth in the region rests in the hands

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[2] This also applies to other groups in vulnerable situations such as women, children, indigenous people and populations of African descent.

of 10% of the population, does not bode well for the poor and extreme poor. According to the Human Development Report 2016, the countries under analysis rank as follows:

Table 2: 2016 Human Development and Poverty Rates in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago

Country	Human Development Index Ranking	Human Development Index	Poverty Rate CEPALSTAT
Trinidad and Tobago	65	.780	n/a
Jamaica	94	.730	n/a
Belize	103	.706	n/a
El Salvador	117	.680	41.6
Guatemala	125	.640	67.7
Honduras	130	.625	74.3

Source: 2016 Human Development Report, United Nations Development Program (UNPD).

The World Bank has documented that violence is a major consequence of the inequality that affects, in a more direct sense, the security of the common citizen, and in a broad sense, questions the viability of a democratic system. It generates a sense of injustice among people at a disadvantage that leads them to seek compensation through other means, including criminal activities. In September 2014, the World Bank produced a study that shows the correlation between an inequitable income distribution and increased violence and crime rates in two thousand Mexican municipalities. The study highlighted that criminal activity can be explained by a cost-benefit analysis: "the poorer the economic opportunities for the poor, and the greater the income gap between classes, the economic benefits of crimes such as robberies or kidnappings - which often end in homicides - tend to be greater" (Winkler 2014). In the specific case of Mexico, it was found that inequality resulted in an increase in crime even when comparing municipalities that have experienced a reduction of the poverty rate. That is, there was an increase in inequality due to the rich getting richer while the number of poor did not increase, which contributed to a rise in the homicide rate in some municipalities in Mexico.

Along the same lines, a recent study by the Inter-American Development Bank has demonstrated that for nine countries in the region, those workers who do not perceive the benefits of being included in the formal labor market (collective bargaining, holidays, Christmas

bonus, and health insurance) have a negative image not only of their employers but also of the State as a whole. These same employees consider that the latter does not protect their rights, and therefore feel less obliged to respect their responsibilities as citizens (obeying the law, paying taxes, and voting) (Ronconi & Zarazaga 2014). The link between inequality and social exclusion and violence is therefore crucial to understanding some of the challenges the region faces.

Unemployment & Inadequate Education

A large number of youth in the Hemisphere implies a potentially large workforce. However, according to the OECD Report, *Latin American Economic Outlook 2017: Youth, Skills and Entrepreneurship*, **"**about one-fifth of the 163 million youth between 15 and 29 living in Latin America work in informal jobs, and another fifth are *neither working nor engaged in education or training* (NEET)."

Table 3: Youth not in school or employment in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago

Country	Youth not in school or employment % ages 15-24
Belize	27.9
El Salvador	5.7[3]
Guatemala	29.8
Honduras	41.4
Jamaica	28.8
Trinidad and Tobago	52.5

Source: 2016 Human Development Report, United Nations Development Program (UNPD).

The OECD Report goes on to highlight that the number of NEETS unable to find work in the employment sector is very high among the most disadvantaged sectors of society, and also specifies that youth from poor and vulnerable households leave school earlier than their peers

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[3] Refers to population ages 16–24.

in better-off households, and when employed, they mainly work in informal jobs. Based on findings by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in their publication entitled *"The 2016 Labour Overview of Latin America and the Caribbean*," the average youth unemployment rate for Latin America and the Caribbean is continuing to increase, and will rise from 15.7% to 17.1% between 2015 and 2017.

In addition to unemployment, due to pervasive inequality and poverty in the region, an overwhelming number of youth in the Americas face challenges regarding access to education, the quality of education that they have access to and completion of education levels which undeniably affect their developing the required skills to have access to decent work opportunities later on. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Education calls on countries to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have been striving to improve access to education and have made remarkable progress between 2000 and 2015 in improving literacy rates and increasing access to and completion of primary and secondary education, and also in increasing learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2015, p. 17).

However, according to UNESCO's Education for All 2015 Regional Review for Latin America and the Caribbean, despite the overall improvement, the completion of primary school remains a challenge in many countries although average country drop-out rates have fallen from 21.5% to 11.8% between 2000 and 2012. With regard to completion of secondary education, enrollment of students at this level continues to be a great challenge, as there was very little improvement from 2000 to 2013 rising from 62.7% to 74.1% during that period. Additionally, according to a study that UNESCO conducted in 2010, 53.3% of 20 to 24-year-olds completed secondary school, a mere 9 percentage points higher than those born 10 years earlier (UNESCO 2015, p. 21).

Despite the progress made in increasing enrollment and reducing dropout rates, the main challenge now is the quality of education that young people in the region receive in comparison to their peers in more developed regions. As a result, young people from the region are ill-equipped to adapt to a rapidly evolving world dominated by information and technology. Ministers of Education of the region, realizing this deficiency in the education their citizens receive, met in Argentina in January 2017 to work towards improving the quality of education available to the region's young people. Similarly, in the Inter-American system, Ministers of Education of the region met in The Bahamas and approved the Inter-American Education Agenda and committed to ensuring "that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes." (CIDI, 2017, p.1)

Due to the challenges they face, youth with limited educational and employment opportunities, oftentimes feel hopeless and presume that their only recourse to escaping the vicious cycle of poverty and finding some level of financial security is through criminal activities, often associated with violence, such as theft, or more serious crimes linked to the drug trade, human-trafficking, or joining a gang.

Gang Violence

Another major contributor to the high level of violence in the countries under study in Central America and the Caribbean is associated with the presence of gangs. Gangs are criminal groups generally composed of members ranging in age from 12 to 24 that have a name and some sense of identity, which can sometimes be indicated by symbols such as clothing, graffiti, colors and hand signs that are unique to the group. These groups may be involved in criminal activities ranging from graffiti, vandalism, petty theft, robbery, extortion, and assaults to more serious criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, rape, and murder (Seelke 2016, p.2), and have indeed become one of the key security threats to the region, especially in Central America, and some countries in the Caribbean. According to an International Crisis Group Report in April 2017 (International Crisis Group 2017), *"Central American gangs are responsible for brutal acts of violence, abuse of women and forced displacement of thousands. Governments must go beyond punitive measures and address the social and economic roots of gang culture, tackle extortion schemes and invest in communities."* It is believed that about 85,000 young men are members of gangs in the region; it is argued that they turn to gang membership in order to feel a sense of belonging and to survive where there are limited options for them to earn a decent living.

Gang activity in Caribbean nations has largely been ignored despite the fact that "gangs in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago have become so ubiquitous that they represent a challenge to state sovereignty" (Johnson 2013). Overall, the gang problem is not at crisis levels in the Caribbean as it is in Central America; however, it is a major challenge to authorities in Belize, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and several other Caribbean territories. In the Caribbean, gangs are closely linked to politics where politicians prey on disadvantaged young people and gang members to do favors for them in return for lucrative government contracts to create employment for locals in disadvantaged and neglected neighborhoods (Vice News 2014). This has resulted in violent turf wars in many Caribbean countries. It is estimated that approximately 74 per cent of homicides in St Kitts and Nevis, 52 per cent of homicides in Jamaica and 35 per cent of homicides in Trinidad and Tobago are officially recognized as gang-related (Hill 2012).

"Location, location, location"

Central America is a prime transshipment point in the drug trade connecting drug producing countries in South America with consumer nations in North America. With the US' focus on Mexico and the Caribbean as major transshipment points in the drug trade, drug traffickers trying to get drugs into the United States have relocated to Central America. As a result, the region is home to both transnational and local crime organizations that facilitate the movement of drugs northward.

Just as in Central America, the drug trade has had a major influence on the level of crime and violence in the Caribbean. Belize, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago are known transshipment points in the drug trade (News America Now, 2016) facilitating the shipment of drugs to North American countries as well as to Europe and West Africa. This results not only in elevated drug use in these countries and the resulting violence, but also in desperate youth, with limited or no opportunities coming their way, turning to crime as a means of survival.

Gangs in both sub-regions benefit from the drug trade and gang members play a key role in transiting drugs through their territories. They are paid in cash, weapons and drugs which further assists in fortifying the violence and criminality in the regions.

Governments' inability to address the security problem

Generally, a wide array of laws, policies and strategies exist or are being planned in Central America and the Caribbean to reduce crime and violence. However, the institutions and leaders of these countries very often are unable to deal with the high levels of criminal activity due to a myriad of complex factors. These may include financial limitations, improper training and the effects of corruption of law enforcement and legislative officials. According to a backgrounder entitled "Central America's Violent Northern Triangle" by the Council on Foreign Relations approximately 95 percent of crimes go unpunished. In the case of the Caribbean, leaders' response to violence reduction has been primarily to focus on the decreasing the number of victims rather than addressing the root source of the violence: providing opportunities and basic necessities for their citizens.

The simplest way for many governments to deal with the burgeoning criminal activities is through mass incarceration and harsher prison conditions which fail to tackle the root cause of the problem: inequality. Therefore, after being incarcerated, criminals, many of whom are youth, are released back into society without being rehabilitated and prepared to reintegrate successfully into society through training and education. The society as a whole, and their communities where they come from, are also often ill-prepared to receive them back.

Challenges range from prejudices and bias to the fear of providing opportunities for educational or labor inclusion in exchange of more violence. Faced with stigmatization, upon their release, many of them simply continue along their criminal path. For example, programs such as "the "Mano Dura", or "Iron Fist" in El Salvador, the Plan Escoba (Sweep-Up Plan) in Guatemala or Cero Tolerancia (Zero Tolerance) in Honduras, criminalized gang membership and, as a consequence, youth who were even remotely associated with a gang were arrested and incarcerated, and then were discriminated against upon their return to the community after serving prison time. The policy was found to have the unintended effect of increasing gang cohesion and the proliferation of gangs (USAID, 2006)." Even though these policies aimed at suppressing violence have consistent popular support, they have been proven to be ineffective since the levels of violence remained high and also raised human rights concerns due to excessive force and extrajudicial killings (Wade 2016).

One of the main responses of young people to the myriad of the abovementioned challenges is migration, both internal and external, in order to improve their lives. According to the Global Migration Group, in Latin America, "20-24-year-olds represent approximately 53 per cent of the total adolescent and youth international migrant population, while 15 to 19-year-olds make up 47 per cent" (Global Migration Group, 2014). According to a report by the Wilson Center entitled "Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle", nearly two thirds of the migrants fleeing to the United States in 2014 were children and youth attempting to escape the violence and crime in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala *fleeing some of the world's highest homicide rates, rampant extortion, communities controlled by youth gangs, domestic violence, impunity for most crimes, as well as economic despair and lack of opportunity"* (Eguizábal et al. 2015, p.1).

Youth helping Youth: Youth Finding Solutions

In order to tackle the high incidence of crime and violence in Central America and the Caribbean, young people are seeking creative and innovative solutions to address the violence plaguing their countries. As shown in the cases below, youth-led organizations are assuming a key role in addressing the security and peace challenges described above, and are striving to build peace in their own countries.

Belize

Belize, due to its small population, on average has a murder rate of 40 homicides per 100,000 residents according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The largest city in the

country, Belize City, with a population of approximately 57,169 has the highest concentration of crime in the country. However, within recent years, the level of crime in Belize City has shifted to districts in the north, west and south of the country.

The country has also been identified as a major transit country for illegal drugs destined for the United States from source countries in South America. It is estimated that 10 tons of cocaine (with a street value of $500,000) is smuggled through Belize each year (Rayne 2014). According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the drug routes are predominately via sea and via air and smugglers move at night using the innumerable keys, or small low islands or banks composed of sand and coral fragments, to conceal their movement and evade law enforcement. Belize has no air defense systems and limited capability to monitor aircraft at night and the boats of the Belizean Coast Guard are easily outrun by the high-powered speed boats used by the smugglers. The Belizean smugglers are rewarded with drugs, cash and military weapons.

The **Belize Youth Empowerment for Change (BYEC)** is a youth-led organization that works towards the inclusion and empowerment of young persons in Belize, including LGBTI youth. Another one of the BYEC's goals is to strive for the reduction in crime in all its forms, especially drug trafficking and gang-related violence. Through recruitment of individuals, the organization seeks innovative strategies to end violence among the country's vulnerable populations by reducing inequalities and building partnerships with governmental and non-governmental agencies. In 2017, with assistance from the British High Commission, BYEC is providing economic opportunities to 30 young female heads of families of Roaring Creek village, which has the highest crime rate per capita in rural Belize. The six-month long project provides participants with knowledge and skills in clothing and textile production, small business management and sexual and reproductive health. Participants were paired and tasked with producing an item which was showcased at a fashion show on March 25th, 2017. The aim is to, at the end of the project; have a textile cooperative registered to provide the management structure and a sustainable market.

As far as determining the impact of the organization's work in the community, its success can only be measured anecdotally as it is based entirely on youth enrollment in and completion of its programs. BYEC has an active membership of 25 young social innovators that are strategically located and work in positions complementing the work of the youth-led initiative. Since its incorporation in 2013, BYEC has hosted empowerment sessions with youth and young key populations in the capital and rural communities impacting the lives of 490+ youth across the various activities implemented.

El Salvador

The level of violence in El Salvador is well documented. Lack of basic services, unemployment, lack of training and educational opportunities, the resultant feeling of hopelessness which culminates in ongoing violence and a staggering murder rate of 11 murders a day hangs over the lives of the average Salvadorian youth. The feeling of hopelessness and "placelessness"[4] is so great that innumerable youth feel that their only hope for a future is to leave the county.

JOVEN360 in El Salvador endeavors to change the lives of Salvadorian youth by helping them see the possibility of a future at home in El Salvador by promoting employment and employability through volunteering opportunities. The organization strongly believes that employment and employability are fundamental in the prevention of violence. For example, for the fifth year in a row, JOVEN360 held the Youth Volunteer Fair, an event held annually as part of the Youth Volunteer Initiative (IVJ)/World Youth Volunteer Day. The fair seeks to promote a culture of volunteerism in attendees, as an option to develop skills focused on the personal and professional environment of young people. The program creates a symbiotic relationship between the young volunteers and the NGOs and social initiatives as it gives young people the opportunity to learn about and connect with volunteer projects and social hours that will promote more than 70 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and social initiatives, and provides the companies such as Banco DAVIVIENDA, TELUS International, Sherwin Williams, Industrias La Constancia (ILC), Crowne Plaza, Laboratorios Paill, among others, with young persons interested in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) experiences and corporate volunteering.

Another notable youth-led initiative in El Salvador, **El País Que Viene**, takes a slightly different approach to peacebuilding in the country. This organization aims to inspire young Salvadorians at home and abroad to play an active role in shaping the El Salvador of their dreams. Through their annual books, dialogues and other platforms, they convey the importance of leadership. Their dialogues, programs, projects and actions mobilize youth participation, and bring young people together among themselves and with their country's leaders to exchange ideas, proposals, and aspirations for their country's development. For example, in November 2016, el País que Viene, with the collaboration of La Prensa Gráfica, a widely read Salvadorian newspaper, held a Forum where the young people who contributed to the publication "El país que viene: Jóvenes en el exterior" held a dialogue with the Minister of External Relations of El Salvador Hugo Martinez and the Deputy Minister of Science and Technology, Erlinda Handel to discuss the future of El Salvador. The following quotation by Diego Echegoyen Rivera, Director

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[4] According to Tobias Roberts, author of "Placelessness: the Underlying Cause of Central American Youth Migration", several youth have decided to migrate because they feel alienated and estranged from the life of the community in which they live.

of the organization, sums up the leading role that youth play in building peace *"Our future is determined by the things we do, by the decisions that we make and by the dialogues that we encourage today."*

Guatemala

In Guatemala, youth have limited opportunities to training, education and employment, just as in El Salvador and Honduras; and, just as in the other countries of the Northern Triangle, youth in this country also turn to gangs to gain some level of security[5] in an uncertain world. The majority, who are not members of a gang, often live in fear of violence as a result of the pervasiveness of gang presence in their country. Further aggravating the precarious situation of youth in Guatemala is the Government's limited capacity to deal with the high levels of insecurity and the high levels of impunity.

According to **Colectivo para la Participación de la Infancia y Juventud, Colectivo Joven (COPIJ)** the justice system does not provide protection to victims of crime and there is no protection for those who defend human rights. They also argue that in Guatemalan Society, many young people have become stereotyped and stigmatized as perpetrators of violence and the feeling that they are deemed 'hopeless causes'.

COPIJ works in the defense, promotion and socialization of the human rights of children, adolescents and youth and politically advocates for the implementation of these rights. They follow up and provide advice on cases of violence, mainly cases of sexual violence committed against youth, and many of its volunteers have received threats, as a result of their efforts.

The organization aims to change the view of young Guatemalans by strengthening youth leadership that is empowered with knowledge in the framework of their human rights, to advocate for the implementation of laws to protect them, and also to become youth multiplying agents spreading among their peers the benefits of violence prevention and peaceful coexistence. COPIJ also works towards strengthening public institutions to improve the implementation of the rights of children, adolescents and youth and to build local alliances in order to generate actions of greater impact.

Colectivo Joven works towards the integral development of children and young people in an environment of equality, equity and respect. Created in 2000, the organization was created by a

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[5] In this context, the word "security" is used to convey the void that gangs fill to provide young people with some level of comfort and safety in their environment. The void that many of them feel is as a result of, social stresses, broken family structures as a result of mass deportation and migration, etc., and institutional weaknesses in countries that fail to distribute adequately wealth among their citizens.

group of children and adolescents concerned about the high levels of child abuse, sexual violence and male chauvinism in their country and took it upon themselves to do something about these scourges. The organization has received several awards for its innovative work in building peace in Guatemala winning the Reconocimiento de la Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos como Héroes Jalapanecos in 2013 and the first place in the competition "Young Entrepreneurs" led by CONJUVE, UNESCO and the Ministry of Interior the following year. Colectivo Joven works on a variety of programs that seek to stimulate children and young people to find their social role and from there to project themselves as positive leaders and transforming agents, thus achieving a substantial change in the social and citizen reality of the country and the world. Recently, on May 16th of this year, young members and volunteers from different municipalities of Jalapa held the "Dialogue for Children and Adolescents" which presented to government and civil society organizations of the region the current situation of young people in sexuality, recreation, education and health, among others.

Honduras

According to the **Organization for Youth Empowerment (OYE),** a youth-led development NGO based in El Progreso, Honduras, violence, corruption, insecurity and poverty are endemic to Honduras, and youth are the ones most affected in this environment. The laundry list of challenges that Honduran youth have to contend with is long: unemployment, lack of economic opportunity, family disintegration, inadequate support and guidance, lack of community trust, discrimination, gang violence accompanied by pressure and extortion to name a few.

Founded in 2005 by two young Americans Ana Luisa Ahern and Justin Eldridge-Otero with ties to the Central American country, OYE aims to provide youth with the knowledge and skills they need to become empowered young leaders and create positive change in their lives and their communities. Ana Luisa, who spent her childhood living in the Honduran capital city of Tegucigalpa, has a strong bond with the country and felt compelled to contribute to the future development of Honduras by working with youth. For OYE, education improves self-esteem, increases life options, contributes to financial stability for at-risk youth. Working with COPROME, an orphanage for abandoned children in El Progreso, OYE provides young people with education, health, and art programs. Youth also receive high school scholarships and are educated on how to avoid critical health risks, such as HIV/AIDS.

Jovenes Hondureños Adelante - Juntos Avancemos (JHA-JA), established in 1999, pinpoints police corruption, lack of governance and drug trafficking as the root causes of the high levels of violence. Based in San Pedro Sula, the non-governmental organization, which keeps a very low profile as a result of the security situation in that city, supports various projects and

processes of public advocacy in favor of Honduran youth, by promoting youth rights in neighborhoods and colonies with high levels of violence. Their members have been victims of countless violent incidents and some have even been murdered for their involvement with the organization, in particular, former gang members. In April 2013, Ronald Jovel, a member of the Executive Committee of JHA-JA was murdered. He was a rehabilitated gang member for 9 years and had become the main animator in the rehabilitation of children and young people linked to gangs. By empowering young people to know their rights and execution of programs on violence prevention, the organization, works in coordination with other youth organizations that address violence prevention, to reduce the prevalence of antisocial behavior among youth and to create more inclusive and cohesive societies within Honduras.

Jamaica

In 2006, Jamaica had a population of 2.65 million and in the previous year 1674 people were killed as a result of homicide. Based on an analysis of statistics from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, although the murder rate has fallen somewhat in recent years, the country still has one of the highest homicide rates in the world due to the high volume of gang violence (UNODC Statistics, 2016)

Members of the LGBTI community are particularly susceptible to being murdered. The country has "buggery laws" which criminalize sex and all physically intimate acts between men in particular[6], resulting in a society that is largely homophobic. According to a survey published by J-FLAG (the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians All Sexuals & Gays) "*deeply homophobic attitudes exist in the country. For example, only 36% of Jamaicans surveyed said they would allow their gay child to continue to live at home. Almost 60% of respondents said they would harm an LGBTI person who approached them*" (Amnesty International Report 2016/2017). As a result the LGBTI community constantly faces bullying, harassment and violence. There are even cases where they have been attacked by police officers and very often police officers fail to intervene in cases where they are being attacked (J-FLAG,et al., 2015, p.6). When studying homophobic violence in Jamaica, Suzanne Persad, a Jamaican–American writer stresses that there is an additional dimension to be considered as it "should be viewed in the context of island-wide

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[6] Contrary to popular belief, it is not actually illegal to be homosexual in Jamaica. Being a homosexual does not contravene any of the existing laws; however, the law makes certain 'homosexual acts' illegal, and these laws are used to persecute gay men. They state that "acts of gross indecency" and buggery [anal sex] are illegal. Although buggery refers to anal sex between a man and another man, a woman or an animal, in practice the law is predominately enforced against two men. Lesbians are also discriminated against in the wider society, however no laws target lesbians or lesbian conduct. (J-FLAG. http://jflag.org/what-jamaican-law-says-about-homosexuality-buggery-law/)

"criminality and instability" linked to persistent poverty" and that the safety of an LGBTI person is strongly tied to their socio-economic status (Mitra, 2017).

However, J-FLAG confronts major challenges in dealing with the topic of discrimination against LGBTI persons directly and there is always a need to mask the sexuality issue and to frame the discussion as a generalized one of promoting equality and inclusiveness. As a result, the organization meets with communities to broach topics such as bullying and acceptance to share their message of inclusion of the LGBTI community.

J-FLAG coordinates **the Youth Social Advocacy Project** which aims to change the culture in Jamaica that tends to condone bullying. According to Christine Clarke, one of the coordinators of the project, the root cause of the discrimination against the LGBTI community stems from a more systemic and cultural norm of exclusion where persons who are perceived as different are ridiculed and abused. Through this project, J-FLAG aims to teach young people that bullying and discriminatory behaviour is not okay. The project brought together 4 young people between 18 and 24 years old from different backgrounds to address the pervasiveness of bullying among children in primary and secondary schools. So far, through the engagement of 300 children and 200,000 social media users, J-FLAG believes that the project is having an impact and that children are receptive to and welcome the information about bullying. However, according to Clarke, from her experience, while the children may be receptive to the idea of acceptance and inclusiveness, adults remain resistant to the idea because in Jamaican society it is seen as important to have a thick skin. The Government sees JFLAG as important and seeks their input on key issues so the organization is encouraged by that.

Trinidad and Tobago

The government of Trinidad and Tobago faces numerous challenges in its effort to reduce crime, including an overburdened legal system, bureaucratic resistance to change, unemployment, disenfranchised youth, the negative influence of gangs, drugs, wide weapons circulation, and the impact of an economic recession. According to statistics from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS), there were 462 murders in 2016, 420 murders in 2015, and 403 murders in 2014, out of a population of approximately 1.3 million people. The TTPS states that the murder rate is driven primarily by gang and drug-related activities. According to the US Department of State's International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), Trinidad and Tobago's close proximity to Venezuela, "*open coastline, and direct transportation routes to Europe, Canada, and the United States make it an ideal location for cocaine and marijuana transhipment*" as well as for the trade in firearms.

Another interesting fact about Trinidad and Tobago is that Islamic youth who feel disenfranchised are leaving the country to join the Islamic State (ISIS). It is estimated that approximately 130 young people from the country of 1.3 million inhabitants have left for Syria and Iraq which means that, in terms of per capita figures, the country has the highest number of recruits in the Western Hemisphere (Ruhfus, 2017). This comes as no surprise once one knows a bit of the history of the country. In 1990, Yasin Abu-Bakr, the leader of the Jamaat al-Muslimeen staged a coup against the government to stop the drug trade and to improve the living conditions of many Afro-Trinidadians who have remained disempowered since slavery. The coup failed, but empowered young Muslims, regardless of race, who firmly believe that their situation has continued to deteriorate over the years as a result of the economic recession, corruption and the drug trade are turning to ISIS to rebel against the government that are holding them back.

Young people living in these conditions where crime and violence are rampant and do not see much hope for themselves oftentimes turn to crime and violent extremism. The government of Trinidad and Tobago has to be mindful of their youth population and create opportunities for them to participate in the decision-making processes of the country and create the country of their dreams.

Nikoli Edwards is a 25-year-old youth advocate in the country who is channelling his energy into empowering young citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to have a voice in determining their future and that of the country. His father had a checkered past, eventually dying in a shootout with police in 2015 when he and other prisoners tried to escape from a jail in the capital city of Port of Spain. Determined not to make the same mistakes as his father and to encourage young people to speak up for themselves and play an active role in determining their future, he became a youth advocate. In November 2015, he was elected to the Commonwealth Youth Council and he is the founder of the Trinidad and Tobago Youth Convention that first took place in August 2016. He advocates for young people to be engaged in solving crime as they are the major perpetrators and victims of criminal activity. Furthermore, he calls for government authorities to provide the necessary avenues for youth to make greater contributions to society. He was named a temporary independent senator in Trinidad and Tobago in January 2017.

Finding opportunity within the challenges

An analysis of the youth-led initiatives highlighted in the previous section shows that all of the youth efforts to combat crime and violence in their countries aim at tackling exclusion in its varying forms: lack of access to education and employment, poverty, and discrimination and

violence against the LGBTI community, women and anyone who is seen as different. They also call for greater and more meaningful youth participation and training them in dispute resolution as critical elements in confronting violence.

Disenfranchisement and alienation of youth is, beyond a doubt, the underlying reason for youth violence and their turning to gangs as, through gang membership, they feel some sense of purpose and belonging, and they see it as a way to gain some degree of security. As a result, it is imperative that Governments in these countries develop avenues for youth participation and offer continued support to programs that are dedicated to youth development, social programs to help alleviate poverty. By doing so, they will help young people from precarious environments to envision a future for themselves where they are productive contributing members to society. This will in turn make the lure of gang membership and other criminal activity less attractive alternatives for them.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago's decision to hire Nikoli Edwards as a Junior Senator, albeit temporarily, where he had the opportunity to have a say on the topics that impact him and his peers is notable. He serves as a role model for other young people who despite their circumstances, are committed to shaping their society. For example, Edwards was among 23 senators who voted for amendments to The Miscellaneous Provisions (Marriage) Bill 2016 aimed at ending child marriages in the country in January 2017. However, as he correctly realizes, his ability to participate is a rarity and he advocates for increased youth participation in Government. In an interview with the Trinidad Guardian on January 21st he says, "My appointment to the Senate is a rare one and I do think that more young people should be given such opportunities because young people will inherit this country, the institutions and the systems of governance, and if we begin to prepare young people for those positions and undertaking from now we would be in good stead."

Therefore, it is important to invest in training youth so that they may be able to take on participatory roles and play a part in transforming their societies. Youth organizations such as COPIJ and Colectivo Joven in Guatemala are crucial in this regard, as they build young people's confidence, self-esteem and other basic values and a generation of young people who are able to advocate for their rights, and ultimately be social multipliers spreading their values among their peers and the wider society.

There are also young people doing the best they can to protect themselves and their peers since they feel that the protective services and government institutions are debilitated and incapable of or unwilling to protect them. For example, COPIJ in Guatemala follows up and advises on cases of violence, including sexual violence committed against youth, and BYEC of Belize and J-FLAG's Youth Social Advocacy Project in Jamaica fight for the rights of LGBTI youth. Both COPIJ and J-FLAG's Youth Social Advocacy Project have reported being threatened for the

work they do so it is crucial for the governments where they operate to provide them with protection so they may in turn protect their peers. This may be a tall task in these countries as it will require the officials in the respective government institutions putting aside their parochial beliefs on homosexuality, women's rights or youth rights and adopting a more overall human rights approach.

Youth organizations such as Colectivo Joven, Joven 360, BYEC to name a few are also working on filling the void that educational and vocational institutions in their countries have left in helping their peers, including youth from historically marginalized groups who are excluded, receive education and vocational training to better prepare them for the job market and to see a future for themselves in their home countries. For example, later this year, BYEC will be training LGBT young people in LGBT Friendly Tourism and Economic Empowerment through small business generation hosted by Belize Youth Empowerment for Change and COC Netherlands.

In terms of combatting crime and violence, so far in Central America, policies for reducing and preventing gang crime and violence such as Mano Dura in El Salvador, the Sweep-Up Plan in Guatemala or Zero Tolerance in Honduras, mass incarceration and harsher prison conditions provided varieties of punishment that worked for some time but, in the long run, have had very little effect on crime reduction. These policies treated youth as the source of violence rather than seeing them as partners in resolving the high incidences of crime in the region.

In the case of the Caribbean countries, there are a number of laws, strategies, policies and initiatives to reduce crime which have had some effect but not at the levels to drive down crime significantly. In Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, for example, recent policies show a shift from a punitive suppressive approach to a more preventative approach to controlling crime and violence. However, the impact of this new approach on the reduction of crime and violence is still difficult to measure, as many of them are in the early stages of implementation.

There is also evidence that in order to deal with the growing crime situation, some countries resort to imprisoning perpetrators of criminal acts which does not help in crime prevention and adds an additional financial burden to the countries under study. Belize, El Salvador and Trinidad and Tobago all rank highly in their prison population rate. Additionally, while imprisoned, these young people receive very little to no training to help them reintegrate into society and they, as a result of their imprisonment, are further alienated and discriminated against within their societies, further aggravating their exclusion in the community.

Table 4: 2016 Prison Population Rates in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago

Country	Prison Population (Per 100,000 people)
Belize	449
El Salvador	492
Guatemala	121
Honduras	196
Jamaica	145
Trinidad and Tobago	258

Source: The 2016 Human Development Report. United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

Therefore, youth see a window for them to play a role in crime prevention as well through their varying activities in the countries. COPIJ in Guatemala, Jovenes Hondureños Adelante Junto Avancemos of Honduras and the Youth Social Advocacy Project of J-FLAG in Jamaica focus on crime and violence prevention by taking a more "fundamental approach by instilling basic values in children and young people so they find other ways of expressing themselves and learn to resolve conflict through discourse. In the case of BYEC in Belize and OYE of Guatemala, efforts are being made to build peace by developing programs and projects to "grow local economies, and provide youth employment, opportunities and vocational training, fostering their education and promoting youth entrepreneurship…," as stated in UNSCR 2250.

Therefore, as the above-mentioned youth-led initiatives show, there is evidence that young people are doing their part in Central American and the Caribbean to counteract crime and violence, but due to extenuating circumstances such as limitations in the capacity of governments in the region to deal with the heightened levels of violence and criminality, under-developed institutions to support youth security and development, the corruption of the protective and legal services, limited funding and support, the enormity of the drug trade itself and a propensity for alienation and discrimination in the regions' cultures, they often feel that their efforts can have a greater impact with government and international support.

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