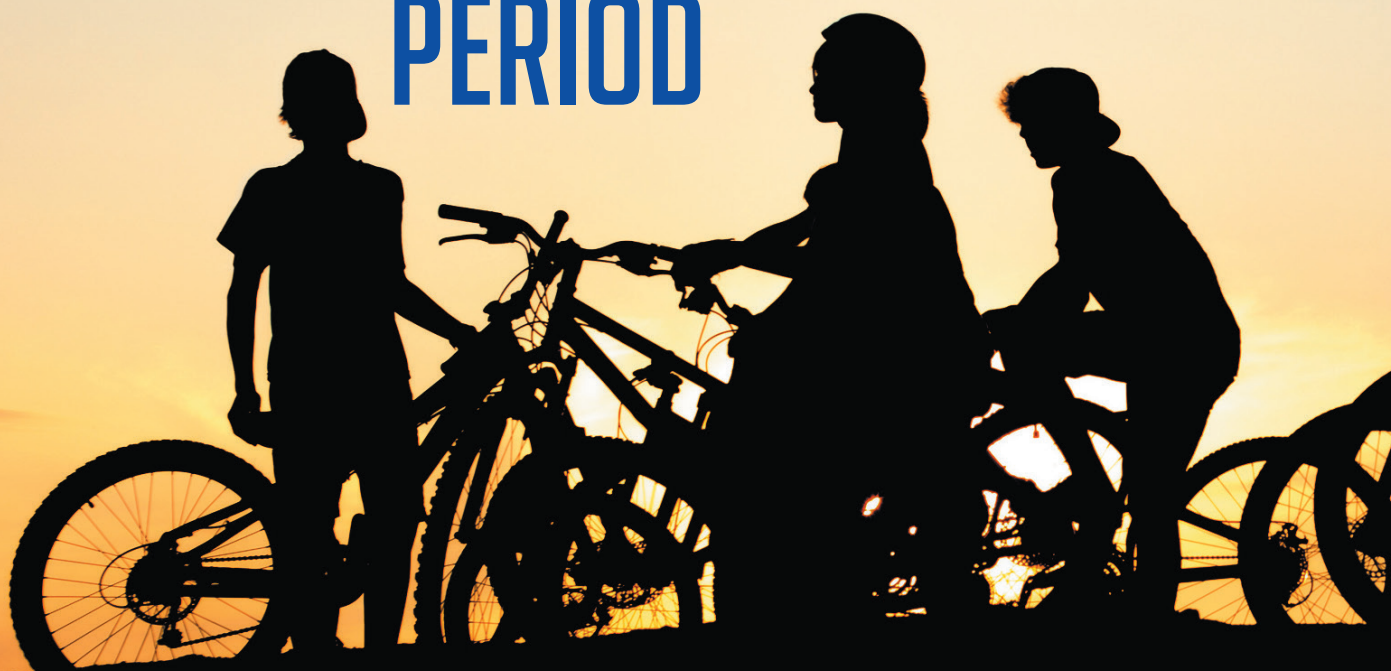


YOUTH INCLUSION: A CHALLENGE FOR COLOMBIA IN THE POST-CONFLICT PERIOD



The social, economic, and cultural diversity of youth is reflected in the current proliferation of city gangs. Many vulnerable youngsters join gangs as an expression of their longing for social recognition and inclusion. This phenomenon could escalate if society only responds with repressive methods, concludes an exploratory study led by Professor Éric Lair of the Interdisciplinary Study Group on Peace, Conflict, and Post-conflict (JANUS).

At a time when the promise of a sustainable peace could end half a century of armed conflict, Colombia must take on multiple challenges. The so-called “post-conflict” period is not exempt from risks and uncertainties, including the possibility of violence. Among the major concerns facing the country is the inclusion of youth in life as part of an increasingly-urbanized society. A quarter of the population today is between 14 and 28 years of age, people defined by Law 1622 of 2013 as youths.

“Colombia is a young society and one of the tests it faces is to manage youth inclusion while embracing the cultural diversity of the young. Gangs, so often stigmatised through an association with delinquency and crime, testify to this



diversity. Many social sectors are unaware of or in denial of the complexity behind the growth of this phenomenon which is exponential in some large cities,” says the professor.

For the last two years, French-born Professor Lair, who has 15 years of expertise in questions concerning violence in Colombia, has been carrying out an exploratory study with vulnerable youths, primarily in Barranquilla and Cartagena. One of his objectives is to understand the circumstances under which these youth groups called gangs grow and develop, but without limiting his research to violent activities, since these are not systematic.

“Unlike in some other countries, the growth of these gangs has attracted limited interest in Colombia, particularly in inter-

**MOST MEMBERS
OF GANGS DO
NOT COMMIT
CRIMES. THEY
SPEND A LOT
OF THEIR TIME
WITHOUT
ENGAGING IN
ANY SPECIFIC
ACTIVITY**

mediate-sized cities. This can be explained for a number of reasons, among them the presence of an armed conflict that has monopolized the public’s attention for several decades,” he says.

The perception of youth gangs has been changing for the last 20 years. Although gangs have been slow in attracting attention, a series of policies have been implemented to address the challenge. Nevertheless, increased visibility has not always meant a better understanding of the phenomenon.

“Using the term ‘gang’ is not always helpful, particularly due to its pejorative connotation. In the collective imagination, this word symbolises danger and insecurity. It deserves to be analyzed in local contexts in the light of many different factors,” he explains.

→ Researcher Éric Lair says that responding to the spread of gangs should be a priority for policymakers in the post-conflict period, without giving in to a logic of fear and repression.



Lair has found that these aggregations of young people are structures for socialization, protection, and identity for their members, who feel excluded from society. In banding together, far from living outside society, they find a way to be visible, heard, and respected.

Along these lines, claims the professor, there is no categorical reason to believe that they join gangs as an act of delinquency or for criminal reasons. “They do it because they have no other alternative in the district. Belonging to a gang may be a survival tool. Some get there by chance, unable to provide a coherent explanation for joining. Others cite family ties or friendship. In many cases there is a wish to (re)create a personality—a generally masculine ethos—in a precarious environment in social and economic terms” he explains.

Professor Lair has found that most members of these groups do not commit crimes. They spend a lot of their time without engaging in any specific activity. They may spend their days sitting around or wandering the neighborhood streets “to kill time.” The gang seems to be a structure that allows their lives to have some meaning, be it through artistic expression, the consumption of psychoactive substances, the commission of crimes, or other activities.

“Gangs perform essential functions in daily life. No one can deny that there are sometimes clashes over territory. In some cities, gang members attempt to establish (in)visible boundaries and control delineated spaces. But these conflicts

→ There is no categorical reason to believe that young people join gangs as an act of delinquency or for criminal reasons.



THERE IS NEED FOR A POLICY TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO YOUTH GANGS AND TO YOUTH VIOLENCE MORE GENERALLY

do not take place constantly.” Based on testimony by gang members, Lair says that “in Barranquilla and Cartagena for example, it has been customary to fight during the rainy season when the police are reluctant to come out into the street.”

THE NEED FOR PUBLIC POLICY

According to the professor, the escalation of violence is one of the matters of most concern. Confrontations between gangs can escalate from words to stones, to knives, and now to guns. “There is the risk of violent confrontations that link up with drug trafficking structures and demobilized combatants,” he says.

That’s why the spread of gangs should be a priority for policymakers, without giving into a logic of fear and repression in the post-conflict period. The experiences of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with organizations known as “maras” should



WOMEN AND FAMILY

Gangs are a masculine phenomenon. But while 90% of their members are male, women are also present at all times, as mothers, friends, and romantic partners. Women are the motive behind fights and males' anxiety to get ahead, and they make fathers of them. "Mothers exercise a moral and sometimes idealized authority over them," claims Professor Lair, "There is much room for feminization of gangs." The image of the woman and the role of the family are important to their members. Many people assume that they come from "broken families," but that is not always the case. "Recent studies provide a more nuanced understanding," concludes Lair, and "family ties influence the formation and survival of gangs."

serve as a warning for Colombia. In respect of future youth violence, Professor Lair identifies an element of agitation that the country should neither exaggerate nor underestimate, or it may suffer the consequences.

"That's why we need a policy to prevent and respond to gangs, and to youth violence more generally," says the researcher, adding that "the measures we take should be coherent, and not just short-term but long-term as well, taking all different aspects of the problem into account. The issue should be considered at the highest level of the State so that unresolved social and economic problems can be confronted in coordination with local authorities and with the communities themselves.

According to the professor, we do not necessarily need to consider breaking up gangs which play a role in socialization at the local level. It is possible to exploit their potential to engage youth in different kinds of actions.

They should be completely broken up only when violence is so important to them that becomes their *raison d'être*.

Gangs can channel the energies of young people, but they need educational services (most gang members have little to no schooling), and strategies should be implemented for social, economic, and political inclusion, leading to a more inclusive citizenry. This means offering them activities that go beyond cultural and sports events.

"The gang provides not only a group identity but also dialogue with society. Its members aspire to social inclusion, which is why they make special demands upon the State. There is a general lack of understanding and trust, and a heightening of tension between young people and the rest of society. Thinking about the post-conflict period, it is urgent to reconstruct the social fabric and the civic consensus. The future of Colombia as a cohesive nation is at stake," notes Lair. ■