The politics of gang control

NGO advocacy in post-war El Salvador

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Wales, Aberystwyth

2008
Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed: ……………………………………………. (Candidate)

Date:  30 September 2008

Statement 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Date:  30 September 2008

Statement 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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Date:  30 September 2008
Acknowledgements

As this research is nearing completion I would like to thank everyone who accompanied me on what has been an intellectually rewarding and personally enriching journey. For perspicacious comments, probing questions, and words of encouragement particular thanks go to the members of the supervisory team: Professor Mike Foley and Dr Doug Stokes in the early stages of the project and Professor Hidemi Suganami and Dr Lucy Taylor for most if not all of the PhD.

This research would not have been possible without the funding I received, and my special gratitude goes to all the institutions that provided vital financial support throughout this project. The University of Wales, Aberystwyth provided me with an Aberystwyth Postgraduate Research Studentship, and the British Federation of Women Graduates made generous funding available through the Mary Bradburn Scholarship. The Society for Latin American Studies and the Latin American Studies Association offered valuable fieldwork and conference grants. During the writing-up phase much-needed financial assistance was provided by the Gilchrist Educational Trust, the Sir Richard Stapley Educational Trust, and the British International Studies Association.

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Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to the Castillo family who provided me with a home while in El Salvador and, with much sadness, to Craig Dotson, a lifelong student and inspiring mentor who took great interest in this research, but did not live to see its completion. This work was inspired by Salvadoran activists’ untriring commitment to making their country a better place for all its people. It is my hope that this thesis can in some way contribute to that goal.
Abstract

This thesis examines the advocacy strategies of three Salvadoran non-governmental organisations (NGOs) aimed at contesting the *Mano Dura* gang policy and promoting the implementation of alternative forms of gang control. Introduced by the Flores administration in mid-2003, *Mano Dura* proposed to “crack down” on the country’s street gangs and foresaw the arrest and prosecution of suspected gang members on account of their physical appearance. Locally known as *pandillas* or “maras,” these groups allow marginalised youths to fulfil their need for friendship and respect, but, given their association with crime and violence, have developed into an important public security problem. This research explored how three NGOs sought to persuade the government to provide a comprehensive and rights-respecting response to gang activity and why these attempts remained relatively ineffective.

Adopting an ethnographic approach, the study analyses how both the domestic context and organisational characteristics shaped the advocacy strategies, and ultimately the policy influence, of a legal advocacy organisation, a peer rehabilitation group, and a Catholic development NGO. It traces the evolution of the gang policy under two administrations and considers mass media coverage of both the street gangs and official gang programmes. The research suggests that contemporary El Salvador remains characterised by historical patterns of economic and political dominance which neutralised efforts to reorient gang control. Three specific contextual factors constituted critical advocacy barriers: elite influence over the state, the ruling ARENA party’s elite-protective nature, and the absence of a pluralistic media system. NGO strategies—legal and policy advocacy, gang empowerment and rehabilitation, and modelling a gang programme—differed in their tactical style, but all failed to generate sufficient pressure to motivate policy change. The ethnographic analysis of gang-related NGO advocacy permits a holistic understanding of these organisations and highlights the possibilities for, and limits of, activism in post-war El Salvador.
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# Acronyms and abbreviations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEIPES</td>
<td>Asociación de Ex Internos Penitenciarios de El Salvador (Association of Ex-Prisoners of El Salvador)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMILAT</td>
<td>Asociación Amigos para Latinoamérica (Association of Friends of Latin America)</td>
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<td>ANESAL</td>
<td>Agencia Nacional de Seguridad Salvadoreña (Salvadoran National Security Agency)</td>
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<td>ANSP</td>
<td>Academia Nacional de Seguridad Pública (National Academy of Public Security)</td>
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<tr>
<td>APES</td>
<td>Asociación de Periodistas de El Salvador (Association of Journalists of El Salvador)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARENA</td>
<td>Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance)</td>
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<td>ARPAS</td>
<td>Asociación de Radios y Programas Participativos (Association of Participatory Radios and Programmes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAFÉ</td>
<td>Central American Fingerprint Exploitation Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAM</td>
<td>Cuerpo de Agentes Metropolitanos (Metropolitan Police Force)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CARECEN</td>
<td>Centro de Recursos Centroamericanos (Central American Resource Centre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAT</td>
<td>Centro Antipandillas Transnacional (Transnational Anti-Gang Centre)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBC</td>
<td>Christian Base Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCPVJ</td>
<td>Coalición Centroamericana para la Prevención de la Violencia Juvenil (Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>Cambio Democrático (Democratic Change)</td>
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<td>CDC</td>
<td>Centro para la Defensa del Consumidor (Consumer Defence Centre)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CECOH</td>
<td>Centro de Estudios Constitucionales y Derechos Humanos (Centre for Constitutional Studies and Human Rights)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEDFI</td>
<td>Centro de Desarrollo y Fortalecimiento Institucional (Centre for Development and Institutional Strengthening)</td>
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CEPES   Centro de Estudios Penales de El Salvador (Centre for Criminal Law Studies of El Salvador)
CIDAI   Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (Centre of Information, Documentation and Support for Investigation)
CIDEP   Asociación Intersectorial para el Desarrollo Económico y el Progreso Social (Intersectorial Association for Economic Development and Social Progress)
CIIR    Catholic Institute for International Relations
CNJ     Consejo Nacional de la Judicatura (National Council for the Judiciary)
CNSP    Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (National Council of Public Security)
CODEFAM Comité de Familiares de Victimas de Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos “Marianella García Villas” (Committee of the Relatives of Victims of Human Rights Violations “Marianella García Villas”)
COENA   Consejo Ejecutivo Nacional de ARENA (National Executive Council of ARENA)
COMADRES Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados Políticos de El Salvador “Óscar Arnulfo Romero” (Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Politically Assassinated of El Salvador “Óscar Arnulfo Romero”)
CRC     Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRISPAZ Cristiano por la Paz (Christians for Peace)
CRS     Catholic Relief Services
CSJ     Corte Suprema de Justicia (Supreme Court of Justice)
CSO     Civil Society Organisation
DHS     Department of Homeland Security
DOS     Department of State
ECA     Estudios Centroamericanos
EDYTRA  Fundación Salvadoreña Educación y Trabajo (Salvadoran Foundation for Education and Work)
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<tr>
<td>ERIC</td>
<td>Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación (Reflection, Research and Communications Team)</td>
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<td>European Union</td>
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<td>FAES</td>
<td>Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador (Armed Forces of El Salvador)</td>
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<td>FARC</td>
<td>Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia)</td>
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<td>FBI</td>
<td>Federal Bureau of Investigation</td>
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<td>FDR</td>
<td>Frente Democrático Revolucionario (Democratic Revolutionary Front)</td>
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<td>FESPAD</td>
<td>Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (Foundation for Applied Legal Studies)</td>
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<td>FGR</td>
<td>Fiscalía General de la República de El Salvador (Office of the Attorney General of the Republic of El Salvador)</td>
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<td>FLACSO</td>
<td>Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences)</td>
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<td>FLETC</td>
<td>Federal Law Enforcement Training Centre</td>
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<td>FMLN</td>
<td>Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front)</td>
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<td>FUNDASALVA</td>
<td>Fundación Salvadoreña Antidrogas (Salvadoran Anti-Drug Foundation)</td>
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<td>FUNSALPRODESE</td>
<td>Fundación Salvadoreña para la Promoción Social y el Desarrollo Económico (Salvadoran Foundation for Social Promotion and Economic Development)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCS</td>
<td>Global Civil Society</td>
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<td>GN</td>
<td>Guardia Nacional (National Guard)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GOES</td>
<td>Gobierno de El Salvador (Government of El Salvador)</td>
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<td>GTA</td>
<td>Grupo de Tarea Antipandillas (Anti-Gang Task Force)</td>
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<td>GTZ</td>
<td>Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit (German Development Agency)</td>
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<td>HRV</td>
<td>Human Rights Violation</td>
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<td>HU</td>
<td>Homies Unidos</td>
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<tr>
<td>IACHR</td>
<td>Inter-American Commission on Human Rights</td>
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<td>ICD</td>
<td>International Cooperation for Development</td>
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<td>IDB</td>
<td>Inter-American Development Bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDESO</td>
<td>Instituto de Encuestas y Sondeos de Opinión (Survey and Polling Institute)</td>
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<td>IDHUCA</td>
<td>Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (Human Rights Institute of the Central American University)</td>
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<td>IDIES</td>
<td>Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (Institute of Economic and Social Research)</td>
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<td>IEJES</td>
<td>Instituto de Estudios Jurídicos de El Salvador (Institute of Juridical Studies of El Salvador)</td>
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<td>ILEA</td>
<td>International Law Enforcement Agency</td>
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<td>IML</td>
<td>Instituto de Medicina Legal (Institute of Legal Medicine)</td>
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<tr>
<td>INL</td>
<td>Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs</td>
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<td>IPDL</td>
<td>Instituto Pro Libertad y Derecho (Institute for Liberty and Law)</td>
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<td>ISNA</td>
<td>Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (Salvadoran Institute for the Comprehensive Development of the Child and the Adolescent)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITOE</td>
<td>Instituto Técnico Obrero-Empresarial (Technical Institute for Entrepreneurial Workers)</td>
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<td>IUDOP</td>
<td>Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (University Institute of Public Opinion)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LAM</td>
<td>Ley Antimaras (Anti-Gang Act)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LAPD</td>
<td>Los Angeles Police Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>LASO</td>
<td>Los Angeles Sheriff’s Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>LCHR</td>
<td>Lawyers Committee for Human Rights</td>
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<td>LPG</td>
<td>La Prensa Gráfica</td>
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<td>MD</td>
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<td>MESARES</td>
<td>Médicos Salvadoreños para la Responsabilidad Social (Salvadoran Physicians for Social Responsibility)</td>
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<td>MOJE</td>
<td>Movimiento de Jóvenes Encuentristas (Movement of Young Discoverers)</td>
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<td>MPI</td>
<td>Migration Policy Institute</td>
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<td>MS</td>
<td><em>Mara Salvatrucha</em></td>
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<td>NACLA</td>
<td>North American Congress on Latin America</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<td>NGTF</td>
<td>National Gang Task Force</td>
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<td>NPO</td>
<td>Non-Profit Organisation</td>
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<td>Oficina de Apoyo a la Justicia Juvenil (Juvenile Justice Support Office, now “UJJ”)</td>
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<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organisation of American States</td>
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<tr>
<td>ONUSAL</td>
<td>Misión de Observadores de las Naciones Unidas en El Salvador (United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador)</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPS</td>
<td>Organización Panamericana de Salud (Pan American Health Organisation)</td>
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<td>ORDEN</td>
<td>Organización Democrática Nacionalista (National Democratic Organisation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAHO</td>
<td>Pan American Health Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCN</td>
<td>Partido de Conciliación Nacional (National Conciliation Party)</td>
</tr>
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<td>PDC</td>
<td>Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party)</td>
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<td>Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson)</td>
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<td>PH</td>
<td>Policía de Hacienda (Treasury Police)</td>
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<td>PN</td>
<td>Policía Nacional (National Police)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNC</td>
<td>Policía Nacional Civil (National Civilian Police)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNUD</td>
<td>Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (United Nations Development Programme)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PVO</td>
<td>Private Voluntary Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>RIA</td>
<td>Red de Infancia y Adolescencia (Network of Childhood and Adolescence)</td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td>Save the Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIU</td>
<td>Special Investigative Unit</td>
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<td>SJ</td>
<td>Secretaría de la Juventud (Youth Secretariat)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMD</td>
<td>Súper Mano Dura</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAG</td>
<td>Transnational Anti-Gang Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>TCS</td>
<td>Telecorporación Salvadoreña (Salvadoran Telecorporation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNC</td>
<td>Transnational Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>TSO</td>
<td>Third Sector Organisation</td>
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<td>UCA</td>
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Introduction

After decades of authoritarianism and a twelve-year civil war that a negotiated peace agreement ended in 1992 El Salvador appears in many ways a country transformed. Prior to this watershed in Salvadoran history, the oligarchy had concentrated wealth and political power in its hands and sponsored security forces to violently repress popular resistance against the prevailing social and political exclusion. The persistence of these conditions prompted the guerrilla forces of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) to launch an armed struggle. Concerned to prevent the erosion of their privileges, members of the elite turned to funding death squads and founded their own party, the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance, ARENA). Presidential elections in 1989 brought ARENA into power, and spurred by a war-shattered economy and a military stalemate it embarked on peace negotiations and oversaw the subsequent transition to electoral democracy. Some of the most notable changes the country has since witnessed include the FMLN’s conversion into a political party, judicial reforms, demilitarisation, the abolition of the old security forces, and the creation of a new Policía Nacional Civil (National Civilian Police, PNC). Civil society has enjoyed greater freedom of expression than before, and declining poverty rates point to apparently greater prosperity.

Notwithstanding these undisputed advances, El Salvador’s democracy remains fragile. The media, traditionally the mouthpiece of the elite, have reversed some of their earlier openings and provide only limited space for dissenting voices. The neoliberal policies followed by successive ARENA administrations have preserved economic inequalities, and the poverty reduction that has occurred is due to large-scale out-migration and the associated flow of remittances by Salvadorans abroad. Millions of citizens continue to live in dire social conditions. The judicial system remains marred by a lack of independence and ineffectiveness in dispensing justice. Weaknesses in investigative policing contribute to high levels of impunity, and members of the PNC have been implicated in criminal activities, human rights abuses, torture of detainees, and death squad activities. Violent crime has emerged as one of the key problems in post-war El Salvador. The per capita homicide rate, though fluctuating over the years, is once again increasing and is now among the highest in Latin America.¹

¹ These developments are discussed more fully in Chapter 1.
Some of the public insecurity affecting the country is connected with street gang activity. Locally known as pandillas or “maras,” the gangs have had a visible presence in many marginal communities, which they consider their territory and defend against rival groups. Gang members, who typically use distinct tattoos and graffiti, spend their time “hanging out,” partying, taking drugs, and “fighting” their opponents. In the communities they extort residents and small businesses alike and intimidate residents to avoid being reported to the police.\(^2\) Their ready use of violence creates a threatening atmosphere in these local areas and a sense of apprehension in society at large. Street gangs have existed in El Salvador for some decades. However, it was only in the early post-war period, when deported Salvadoran-born youths imported the US street gang culture and infused it in domestic groups, that the gang problem began to attract greater attention. According to a 1993 survey 47% of the population had already identified a gang presence in the communities.\(^3\) In recent years youths have come to reduce their outward signs of gang membership, but there is no indication that the complexity and severity of the problem has lessened. If anything, gang violence has intensified and become more lethal.\(^4\) Nor has incarceration prevented gang members from conducting illicit activities: the shortcomings of the prison system have permitted them to maintain ties with the outside world and intimidate witnesses, manage extortions and give orders to kill.\(^5\) Targeted violence by gang members has been mounting such that for some Salvadorans, particularly those who have expressed anti-gang sentiment, resisted forcible recruitment or refused to enter sexual relations with gang members, seeking asylum abroad has become the only way to escape gang-related persecution.\(^6\) Although the street gangs are not a new phenomenon in El Salvador, apart from a collection of suppressive activities against them no coherent gang policy had ever existed.\(^7\) In July 2003, just eight months before the presidential elections, the government of Francisco Flores launched with great fanfare a Mano Dura (“iron fist”) gang policy.


\(^4\) María Santacruz Giralt and Alberto Concha-Eastman, Barrio adentro: La solidaridad violenta de las pandillas (San Salvador: IUDOP and OPS, 2001), 60-61.


With it came a proposal for anti-gang legislation, the _Ley Antimaras_, which, once enacted by congress, would permit the arrest and criminal prosecution of suspected gang members on the basis of their physical appearance alone. At the time officials claimed that the gangs were responsible for the majority of homicides in the country, the implication being that tough measures against them would lead to a reduction in the murder rate. This would ultimately prove not to be the case, but given the very real concerns about public insecurity, the dispatch of joint army/police patrols and PNC sweeps of gang areas were widely applauded. The popularity of _Mano Dura_ helped ensure ARENA another victory at the ballot box, and President Antonio Saca continued his predecessor’s initiative with a plan entitled _Súper Mano Dura_. Ostensibly this new measure entailed two additional components, a move that responded to previous criticism of a narrow gang suppression approach. Indeed, ever since _Mano Dura_ had been introduced, opposition politicians, judges, academics, and human rights defenders were relentless in their condemnation of both the abuses it sanctioned and the absence of preventive and rehabilitative programmes that would address the social roots of the gang problem.

This thesis examines the advocacy strategies of three Salvadoran NGOs aimed at achieving a comprehensive and rights-respecting gang policy. Adopting an ethnographic approach, the study considers the ways in which the socio-political context and the inner workings of NGOs shape their advocacy strategies and ultimately their political outcomes. It asks how these organisations sought to promote alternative ways of gang control and why their efforts remained largely ineffective. It is argued that _Mano Dura_ constituted a populist penal policy designed to enhance the electoral appeal of ARENA rather than to tackle the gang problem. When the measure came under criticism, the government responded by remodelling the initiative, but without abandoning its preference for gang suppression or embarking on serious preventive and rehabilitative programmes. Attempts to reduce gang violence and crime require the eradication of the social marginalisation that facilitates gang emergence, and this in turn makes indispensable a restructuring of Salvadoran society, including its power relations and socio-economic inequalities. Elite resistance to such changes made the achievement of alternative gang control difficult, and since the ruling party defends elite interests it had no incentive to embark on genuine gang control. _Mano Dura_ remained the preferred official response, because it allowed the government to demonstrate that it was acting to generate greater public security without having to address structural factors. The country’s leading media aided this endeavour by fanning a moral panic over gangs,
legitimising *Mano Dura* over other policy options, and giving little space to dissenting voices. The NGOs were largely ineffective in advancing alternative gang control, because their strategies failed to mobilise sufficient political pressure for policy change.

**Why study NGOs?**

At the heart of this dissertation lies a concern with our understanding of NGO practices. This section will initially address definitional issues before considering the relevant literatures and the silences in them that animated this study.

NGOs have proliferated throughout the world, some operating domestically, others conducting activities across borders or even maintaining chapters in more than one country. They differ in size, issue area, and identity – such as humanitarian relief, development or advocacy – and some are membership organisations. The sheer diversity among NGOs has made it difficult for writers to agree on a definition. Debates over what is an NGO and whether the label itself is appropriate have been underway for years, and no resolution appears in sight. Scholars have suggested the use of alternative terms, including private voluntary organisation (PVO), non-profit organisation (NPO), and third sector organisation (TSO). However, these expressions highlight characteristics that are themselves contested. Since many of these agencies are run by paid (and increasingly professional) staff; entities such as private hospitals, schools, and sports clubs are also non-profit; and the state/market/civil society-divide remains disputed, the utility of these descriptions is questionable. Other authors prefer the term civil society organisation (CSO) and reserve “NGO” for those groups that have acquired legal personality in order to facilitate the receipt of funding. It is doubtful, though, whether legal status helps distinguish among otherwise similar bodies.

The problems of defining and labelling an NGO mean that it is bound to remain an “essentially contested concept.” This study adopts the phrase “non-governmental organisation,” as this is the term that features in Article 71 of the UN Charter, and defines it as a private, formally-structured, self-governing organisation with non-profit-

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making aims that promotes a public cause. NGOs are thus organisations that are unaffiliated with government, although they may collaborate with it and/or receive some state funding; maintain a minimal organisational structure, such as offices, permanent staff, and financial income; are autonomously-managed and usually, but not necessarily, have legal personality; do not seek profit; and pursue goals that benefit people outside the organisation.

**NGOs in the civil society literature**

NGOs and their activities have stimulated a considerable number of studies. However, thus far there exists no unified body of NGO literature. Since these organisations are a subset of civil society, it is useful to begin by examining scholarship on that concept. Many writers conceive of civil society in a rather abstract manner, depicting it as a distinct and clearly-demarcated “third sector.” Nerfin has offered the analogy of Prince, Merchant, and Citizen to show how the state, the market, and the associational sphere can be holistically conceptualised. Subsequent accounts have largely endorsed this view. Brown and Korten, for example, argue that institutional reality comprises three discrete sectors with distinctive characteristics. Building on the idea that there exist traceable boundaries between these realms, Deakin has emphasised the autonomous nature of these domains. Scholars generally uphold this artificial separation in their attempts to explain the function of each sphere in political and socio-economic processes, though for the most part this debate has focused on the state/civil society divide. What is striking in these writings is a perception of civil society as a homogeneous and inherently positive force that counterbalances the state. This idealised distinction has received perhaps particular prominence in the context of democratisation and democratic consolidation where numerous scholars accord civil society the potential both to challenge authoritarianism and to strengthen existing democracies.

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This dominant approach to civil society raises several problems that the literature has insufficiently engaged with. Perhaps the most fundamental one is the insistence on a rigid separation of spheres. The supposition that civil society is one of three independent realms makes it possible for scholars to credit it with particular traits. However, social reality cannot be carved up as neatly as is implied by the prevailing conceptualisation. James Douglas points out that the institutional fabric of society instead resembles a “seamless web.” The preoccupation with the contours of an entire sector, and authors’ often uncritical acceptance of the assumptions implicit in that image, conceals some crucial points. In particular, the portrayal of civil society as an idealised sphere with fixed borders captures neither the power relations within it nor the nature and degree of interaction between NGOs and their environment. The rare sociological enquiries, for example, note that actually existing civil societies differ markedly from the uniform, romanticised version that many studies propagate. Few commentators recognise that although civil society can be a site for progressive action, the power structures and class and gender divides that permeate it do not make it an unqualified agent of social change. Conversely, the mainstream perspective on civil society obscures the ways in which the socio-economic and political environment shapes NGO action. These organisations do not operate in a vacuum, but are constrained or aided in their activities by endogenous dynamics of which actors such as the state, the media, and economic groups are but a part. By neglecting the context in which NGOs are embedded, the literature tends to provide us with a superficial understanding of NGO/environment relations and the wide range of factors impacting NGO behaviour.

Much of the literature reflects a growing interest in the idea of a global civil society (GCS), sometimes also referred to as international or transnational civil society. Ronnie Lipschutz and Martin Shaw, among the first theorists who sought to map this concept, view it as a supra-state space populated by NGOs and other pressure groups concerned with issues such as international human rights and the environment. Subsequent writers have mostly attempted to elaborate on the definition of GCS, the conditions that gave

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rise to it, and its activities. Keane, for example, argues that it constitutes a vast, interconnected sphere in which many thousands of NGOs conduct cross-border activities outside the boundaries of governmental structures.\textsuperscript{21} Scholars tend to consider GCS a recent phenomenon, its ascent facilitated by the emergence of worldwide thematic concerns, globalisation, and the concomitant erosion of the state as the sole depository of political authority.\textsuperscript{22} Given these developments, many scholars see GCS as a channel for social and political grievances at the international decision-making level.\textsuperscript{23} Anheier and colleagues have recently added to this burgeoning field with a \textit{Global Civil Society} yearbook, a collection of qualitative studies of GCS activities and quantitative data on patterns of transnational connectedness.\textsuperscript{24}

The popularity of the concept of GCS notwithstanding, this strand of the literature also exhibits certain weaknesses. Like many of the studies that treat civil society in the abstract, the above accounts focus on a circumscribed arena and disregard the influence of contextual factors on NGO action. Analysts convey the impression that the organisations they describe somehow float in this sphere. However, every NGO, regardless of the extent to which it may network with its counterparts abroad or appear in international forums, remains rooted in one country or another and therefore in a particular social environment. The cultural and political knowledge that NGOs acquire in this setting routinely informs their strategies and behaviour, and it does so at every level. Yet, the scholarship tends to overlook this dimension of the NGO world.

One of the key questions is whether GCS does or can exist. NGOs in different parts of the planet may work on common issues, but to interpret this reality as a separate sphere is a highly contestable step. A related point, and one that is of greater relevance to

\textsuperscript{24} The yearbook was launched with Helmut Anheier \textit{et al}., eds., \textit{Global Civil Society 2001} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
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this thesis, concerns the assumption of shared interests and aspirations that underlies these writings. Civil society actors are of course often motivated by mutual concerns, otherwise many of their (international) achievements would not have materialised. However, to view GCS as an unmitigated blessing is to ignore the diversity of agendas among NGOs. As Colás indicates, the social and political conflicts that characterise human relations make agreement on a vision of the common good improbable, and this would seem to render the creation of a GCS difficult. The point, however, is that such disagreement exists both among and within NGOs and that without a more sociological analysis of these organisations one cannot fully grasp why they act the way they do.

Another aspect of GCS writings concerns their ahistorical nature. Through its association with globalisation GCS is portrayed as a novel phenomenon. Yet, as Charnovitz and Colás have shown in separate investigations, transnational civil society activism has occurred since at least the end of the eighteenth century. According to Colás, therefore, civil society actors and their role in world politics are better understood if their activities are placed within a longer time frame. Thus, a further implication for NGO studies is that an historical perspective on their development and behaviour would serve to contextualise their present-day actions.

Another trend in the civil society literature concerns NGO relations with inter-governmental organisations (IGOs), particularly the UN and the World Bank (WB). Scores of studies examine how NGO participation in world conferences and policy processes has led to advances in human rights, environmental protection, and WB policies, but also highlight the limits of NGO influence. Analyses in this genre provide insight into the strategies NGOs have employed and some of the obstacles they have faced. For example, Clark and colleagues find that developing-country NGOs with fewer

27 Colás, International Civil Society, 149.
financial resources and more explicitly political goals than some of the international NGO “giants” have experienced greater difficulties in obtaining UN consultative status. Others make the perhaps obvious point that it is inevitably harder for NGOs to tackle social problems if there is little political will to address the underlying structural causes. This work, however, generally maintains an outsider perspective that does not tell us how the inner life of NGOs moulds their approach and tactics and ultimately their impact.

Development studies research

Another body of NGO literature has grown out of development studies research, much of it stimulated by the concerns of development practitioners. For the most part these contributions focus on NGO relations with specific actors and certain aspects of NGO performance, often with an implicit call for greater organisational effectiveness. One cluster of writings scrutinises NGO/state interactions, including instances in which governments act as donors. Some authors debate the extent to which publicly-funded NGOs resist government cooption. Hulme and Edwards, on the other hand, outline a framework for analysing NGO/state/donor relations. However, this model does not propose to examine other facets of the institutional environment, such as ideas, norms, and values, and their impact on NGO behaviour. A very different question is whether NGOs might constitute a development alternative to the state, an idea largely rejected given the magnitude of many social problems and resources these require.

These discussions tend to concentrate on issues of project implementation and cost-effectiveness, with few writers considering the place of NGOs in evolving state/civil society relations. In the Latin American context, for example, Bosch shows how the transition to democracy prompted certain NGOs to abandon the confrontational stance.

they had adopted under the military regimes.\textsuperscript{34} Pearce identifies a similar trend in post-authoritarian Chile where some NGOs have adapted to the new environment by aligning themselves with the democratic government, while those critical of government performance in the socio-economic realm have remained under-resourced and politically marginalised.\textsuperscript{35} These findings suggest that NGO studies could usefully explore how and why NGO/environment relations change over time, and how these transformations shape the organisations' impact.

The broader theme of NGO/donor relations has prompted scholars to ask whether greater competition for funding might increase NGOs' dependence on donors and erode their autonomy in following their mission and values.\textsuperscript{36} The difficulty of balancing organisational sustainability with independence is a real one and may determine which activities NGOs are able to pursue and what impact they can achieve. However, the literature tends to approach this problem by offering technical solutions, such as a greater reliance on local fundraising,\textsuperscript{37} quite a task in countries where many people are poor and potential philanthropists view NGO work with suspicion! There is a dearth of political and sociological analyses that would examine, for example, how political changes at home affect NGOs’ fundraising capacity or how different kinds of NGOs respond to these challenges. Advocacy organisations and development agencies with a political dimension may face additional hurdles, but existing scholarship glosses over both contextual constraints and NGO-internal struggles over these issues. Similarly, writers have been reluctant to take a look inside the organisations to explore NGO workers’ attitudes to the sustainability/autonomy dilemma. We might ask, for instance, what staff “get out” of the NGO. Do they see it perhaps as a source of revenue, prizing organisational survival over the cause they publicly espouse? Particularly in small NGOs we may find that staff discard the official mission and values rather willingly if expediency requires it.

\textsuperscript{34} Margarita Bosch, “NGOs and Development in Brazil: Roles and Responsibilities in a ‘New World Order,’” in Hulme and Edwards, NGOs, States and Donors.


\textsuperscript{37} Alan Fowler. \textit{The Virtuous Spiral: A Guide to Sustainability for Non-Governmental Organisations in International Development} (London: Earthscan, 2000); David Hulme and Michael Edwards, “Conclusion: Too Close to the Powerful, Too Far from the Powerless?” in Hulme and Edwards, NGOs, States and Donors, 282.
Finally, the development literature has engaged with specific issues that concern NGO activities, that is, performance, accountability, and legitimacy. NGOs long enjoyed an unquestioned public image as the infallible agents of development, but as evidence of poor practice and a lack of professionalism began to emerge academics and practitioners alike turned to criticising NGO capacities and competencies. Much of this scholarship takes a functionalist approach, proposing the professionalisation of NGOs and improvements in managerial leadership as a way of enhancing organisational effectiveness and impact. These accounts seem to assume that more skills will inevitably enhance NGO performance and that NGOs strive to improve their operational effectiveness in the first place. The puzzle, though, remains why some organisations continue to display low levels of competence and professionalism, notwithstanding repeated training efforts. Existing studies tend not to scrutinise the inner workings of NGOs, yet by doing so they could explore how staff view performance-related issues and what they want the organisation to do. Thus one might find that those who run the NGO feel it accomplishes its purposes, even if its outward appearance is one of amateurism.

In this context questions have also been raised about weak NGO accountability. There is widespread agreement that agencies need to be transparent about their activities if they wish to maintain their legitimacy. Parts of this literature are driven by a search for ways of strengthening NGO accountability, but since some writers equate this with accountability to donors the focus rests on measures such as monitoring and evaluation. Others argue that NGOs are accountable to a number of very different constituencies

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40 John Clark, Democratizing Development: The Role of Volunteer Organizations (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1991); Edwards and Hulme, Beyond the Magic Bullet.


and may struggle to reconcile these demands. However, Lister finds that NGOs choose to be answerable to those actors whose opinions and resources are seen as more significant for the organisations’ goals. The broader point to emerge here is that NGO behaviour is better understood when examining the politics within specific agencies.

The concept of legitimacy has itself been widely discussed. Much of the literature addresses the elements on which legitimacy is seen to rest, such as accountability, representativeness, and performance. Assuming that it is organisational characteristics that determine how legitimacy is gained and maintained, writers tend to adopt a technical approach to the problem and suggest that adherence to proper conduct and procedures is all that is required. Lister, however, argues that NGO legitimacy depends very much on external actors’ perceptions of an organisation. Her study confirms that NGO research needs to be sensitive to the interaction between agencies and their environment. A point, however, that is neglected here concerns outsiders’ views of an NGO’s make-up: the social background of staff may itself constitute an obstacle to public acceptance.

In sum, the existing literatures on NGOs address specific kinds of relations and specific aspects of NGO activities. Ahmed and Potter, in what is the first textbook on NGOs, draw together many of the issues that other works consider in isolation. Nevertheless, they maintain an organisational focus. Recently, writers have acknowledged that while organisational characteristics remain important for our understanding of NGOs, these agencies must be situated more firmly within the structural context in which they operate. To date, however, there is little research that takes a composite approach to the study of NGOs, one that would analyse both their inner workings and their socio-political environment. Interest in NGO ethnographies has grown in recent years, and this thesis falls into this category. By examining how context, organisational origins and identity, and daily life within three Salvadoran NGOs shape their advocacy of

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47 Shamima Ahmed and David Potter, NGOs in International Politics (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2006).
an alternative gang policy, this dissertation advances our understanding of NGO practices, thus contributing to the NGO literature and the study of activism in post-war El Salvador. Before I turn to the aims and structure of the thesis I want to provide the background to the research.

The street gangs of El Salvador

*Macho Duro* may have turned the spotlight on El Salvador’s gangs, but their current configuration is rooted in a complex mesh of developments both there and in the US. In the Central American country the history of the street gang, that is ‘any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity,’\(^{50}\) dates back to the 1970s. For two decades numerous territorial or neighbourhood-based entities existed under names such as *Gallo, Chancleta, Pinjo, Nosedice, Mao Mao, AC/DC, Morazán* or *Fosa*. They offered socially marginalised youths the means to hang out, party, and “fight” their rivals, but also to engage in a range of illicit pursuits. Tapped by the FMLN during its 1989 offensive, some of these groups acted as guides for the guerrillas and subsequently joined the combatants’ demobilisation and reinsertion process.\(^{51}\) Others dissolved, and the remaining ones would be largely absorbed by two gangs that US deportation practices implanted in El Salvador. The story is that of *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Calle Dieciocho*, and it begins in Los Angeles.

The beginnings of *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Calle Dieciocho*

The United States has itself a long history of street gangs dating back to the early 1800s.\(^{52}\) Over the years these groups have emerged primarily in low-income ethnic minority communities whose members face inadequate living conditions and discrimination that bars them from educational opportunities and higher-income employment.\(^{53}\) After 1920 the continuous immigration of Mexicans into southern California and their marginalisation from mainstream society have played a significant role in gang growth. Mexicans brought with them a tradition known as *palomilla* or “boy gangs,” which

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\(^{51}\) Interview with Milton Vega, Rehabilitation Officer, CNSP, San Salvador, 7 April 2006.


metamorphosed into street gangs following the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots. Over the next decades continued social neglect and ostracism ensured that the street gang subculture would remain an enduring feature of Los Angeles’ Latino community. It was in the city’s densely-populated and impoverished Pico-Union area where Calle Dieciocho (18th Street) formed in the 1960s. This was also the context that Salvadoreans fleeing the armed conflict in their country would find themselves in.

Most Salvadoreans who travelled north in the 1980s were undocumented migrants. While US asylum policy during the Reagan era meant that Nicaraguans could generally obtain legal status and therefore the possibility to better themselves, Salvadoreans were routinely denied refugee status and had to live clandestine lives. Trapped in a neighbourhood devoid of recreational facilities but rife with crime and gang activity, these families not only struggled to overcome the trauma of the war, but also faced culture shock, language barriers, discrimination, crowded living conditions, and underpaid jobs. Combined with the spectre of deportation, these strains often led to conflict, child neglect, and domestic abuse. In response to difficult personal circumstances and gang harassment, some Salvadorean youths joined existing street gangs, notably Dieciocho, or created their own gang, Mara Salvatrucha (MS). Among its founders was Alex Sánchez, currently director of Homies Unidos (Los Angeles). Over the years both groups expanded their membership, and today they constitute the dominant gangs in the United States’ Central American immigrant community.

The origins of the subsequent hostility between Mara Salvatrucha and Dieciocho remain shrouded in mystery. The little that is known stems largely from anecdotes gang members have supplied to researchers and journalists. Some writers have suggested that disputes over the control of the drug trade in Pico-Union heightened the antagonism between the two groups. Others reported that a shooting at a party sparked the enmity.

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54 A zoot suit is a fashion ensemble originally worn by black urban youths and adopted by Mexican-Americans in the 1940s. The 1943 riots involved hundreds of Anglo servicemen and citizens who attacked Chicanos dressing as zoot-suiters. In the aftermath of these violent clashes many young Mexican-Americans began to idolise the gang members who had defended their neighbourhood against the aggressors. See Delaney, American street gangs, 55-56.
55 Herbert C. Covey, Street gangs throughout the world (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2003), 51.
57 Vigil, A rainbow of gangs, 135-136.
58 The name of Mara Salvatrucha is derived from mara, a Salvadoran term for a group of friends; salva, short for Salvadoran; and trucha, slang for “watch out” and also the Spanish word for “trout,” a fish that swims upstream and symbolises the fight for survival. See Vigil, A rainbow of gangs, 141-142.
61 Vigil, A rainbow of gangs, 143.
that characterises these gangs today.\textsuperscript{62} In any case, US deportation policy helped spread their culture and lifestyle abroad. Once the Salvadoran civil war had drawn to a close, the US authorities began targeting offending non-citizens more aggressively for repatriation, and changes in the immigration laws in 1996 further facilitated this process.\textsuperscript{63} Returning youths often felt disoriented in a country they had few memories of and alienated by the humble surroundings they encountered.\textsuperscript{64} Although many of them expected to make a fresh start, disaffection and continued marginalisation prompted some to carry on with what they knew best.\textsuperscript{65} Their comparatively smarter dress, money, and romanticised versions of gang life held a fascination that local adolescents found hard to resist.\textsuperscript{66}

Today \textit{Mara Salvatrucha} and \textit{Dieciocho} maintain a presence in large parts of the United States as well as in Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador). For reasons connected with migration patterns, US asylum and deportation practices, and a less suppressive police approach, Nicaragua’s youth gangs are numerous, but smaller and less violent than their counterparts elsewhere in the region.\textsuperscript{67} In southern Mexico, meanwhile, MS members have been known especially for assaulting and robbing undocumented migrants.\textsuperscript{68} Given their geographical reach and perceived criminal activities, the gangs are sometimes portrayed as a transnational phenomenon or, more controversially, as cross-border crime networks involved in drug and human trafficking.\textsuperscript{69} However, although a minority of gang members appear to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) expanded the definition of an aggravated felony, thus triggering mandatory deportation, and was applied retroactively. Any non-US citizen could be repatriated either immediately or after a prison sentence. See Johnson, “National Policies and the Rise of Transnational Gangs.” See also Vigil, \textit{A rainbow of gangs}, 144-145.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Elana Zilberg, “Fools Banished from the Kingdom: Remapping Geographies of Gang Violence between the Americas (Los Angeles and San Salvador),” \textit{American Quarterly} 56 (2004): 765-795.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Marcela Smutt and Lissette Miranda, \textit{El Fenómeno de las Pandillas en El Salvador} (San Salvador: UNICEF and FLACSO, 1998), 36.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Covey, \textit{Street gangs throughout the world}, 117.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Frédéric Faux, \textit{Les maras, gangs d'enfants: Violences urbaines en Amérique centrale} (Paris: Éditions Autrement Frontières, 2006), 128.
\end{itemize}
sustain transnational links and ties to drug trafficking, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that either of these dimensions applies to the street gangs as such.\textsuperscript{70}

The current street gang situation in El Salvador

*Mara Salvatrucha* and *Dieciocho* remain El Salvador’s main street gangs, although other groups, such as *Máquina* and *Mao Mao*, are known to exist.\textsuperscript{71} More than 300 *clicas* (subgroups) are scattered about the country’s 14 departments, but gang presence is concentrated in the marginal communities of Greater San Salvador, particularly the capital and the municipalities of Apopa, Soyapango, Ilopango, and Mejicanos.\textsuperscript{72} The gangs’ influence varies from area to area and in some parts is such that not even police enter certain communities unless as part of a massive operation.\textsuperscript{73}

The PNC puts the number of gang members at around 10,000.\textsuperscript{74} However, attempts to arrive at a global figure are compounded by difficulties in defining and counting gang members. Their actual numbers may well be higher, not least because official statistics reflect only those individuals who came into contact with law enforcement. Socio-demographic data reveal gang members to be predominantly male, young, and low-income.\textsuperscript{75} According to a very recent study, 95.3\% are men and 4.7\% women, while 60.1\% are between 19 and 26 years old, and 8.2\% are older than 30.\textsuperscript{76} For 55.4\% initial entry into the gang occurred between the age of 11 and 15, for 37.8\% between 16 and 25 years, and for 6.1\% between 6 and 10 years.\textsuperscript{77}

Life in the gang

Gang joining occurs through an initiation rite (“brincarse a la pandilla”) in which recruits are tested for their toughness and commitment to the gang. Generally this involves a


\textsuperscript{71} José Miguel Cruz, “Maras o pandillas juveniles: los mitos sobre su formación e integración,” in Óscar Martínez Peñate, ed., *El Salvador: Sociología General (realidad nacional de fin de siglo y principio del milenio)*, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (San Salvador: Nuevo Enfoque, 2005), 115.

\textsuperscript{72} Carranza, “Detención o muerte,” 4.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{74} See *La Prensa Gráfica*. “93 mil pandilleros acechan C.A.” 5 October 2003, 4.


\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 12-17.
beating at the hands of other gang members; females can opt to have sex with one or several of the males (known as the “trenco’’), but those who do often enjoy less respect within the group. Early on youths are then socialised into the street gang culture, its values and norms. Loyalty to the gang and its territory is paramount and supersedes even family bonds, an allegiance that is encapsulated in the phrase “Por mi madre vivo, por mi barrio muero” (“For my mother I live, for my gang I die”). “Status-setting fights” between rival gangs to defend their name and honour are associated with this lifestyle and, like its symbolic features, have long been a visible reminder of the gangs’ presence. Yet, since the implementation of Mano Dura both descriptive traits and gang activity have experienced some notable changes.

Gang identity had been expressed by distinct clothes, hand signs, slang, tattoos, and graffiti. However, the PNC’s suppressive measures apparently prompted some of these behaviours to be modified. While government-sponsored “cleansing” campaigns largely eliminated the gangs’ territorial markers, gang members themselves turned to adopting less visible tattoos, more conventional clothing and hairstyles, and less conspicuous forms of communication, all in an attempt to go unnoticed. Conversely, recent years have seen gang members commit more serious crime. Their earlier image of youths hanging out in the streets and “destroyers” (hangout houses) and “fighting” their rivals with stones, machetes, sometimes pistols and hand grenades, seems now almost obsolete. Instead, gang members are often linked to homicides, extortions, car theft, rapes, drug sales, and possession of firearms. Overall, they have acquired greater logistical capacity to execute illicit activities and, through access to heavy weaponry, are capable of more lethal violence. Interestingly, gang members obtain their weapons not only in exchange for drugs, through theft or purchases from private sources, but also buy them from police. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that not all gang members break the law nor do crime and violence occupy all their time. Rather, their undertakings are perhaps more appropriately described as “el vacil” or the whole range of licit and illicit pursuits that promise fun and excitement in a gang.

78 Carranza, “Detención o muerte,” 12; Cruz and Portillo Peña, Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas, 61-62.
79 See Smutt and Miranda, El Fenómeno de las Pandillas en El Salvador, 143.
81 Aguilar and Miranda, “Entre la articulación y la competencia,” 43.
82 Ibid., 51-52.
84 See Cruz and Portillo Peña, Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas, 59.
For many gang members there comes a time when the novelty of the gang life has worn off or its intensity becomes overwhelming. Reasons for gang desistance are diverse, but commonly include the stresses and danger of violence and incarceration, stable partnerships, meaningful employment or, for some, religious conversion. Yet, given the proximity to violence and death that gang membership entails, what makes young people want to join a street gang in the first place?

**Individual gang joining: risk factors**

The incentives for gang affiliation can be appreciated through a brief review of the risk factors for gang membership. Previously I indicated that gang members hail from low-income circumstances. More specifically, research has shown that street gangs attract individuals who live in socially disorganised communities and face social exclusion, family problems, and a lack of education and job opportunities. While only a minority of youths in these conditions enter a gang, it is these risk factors that enable gang membership. Moreover, as the risk adolescents experience accumulates, the chances of gang joining increase. Thus, a juvenile who resides in a marginal community but has a supportive and caring family may withstand the lure of gang membership, while another youth in the same area but suffering parental neglect or domestic violence may prove less resilient.

To outsiders, street gangs may well appear to be a mob of marauding youths, but they constitute above all a space in which young people seek to fulfil their personal needs, some shared, some conflicting. Crime and violence therefore must be seen as by-products of, rather than as reasons for, gang joining. Economic necessity and access to drugs are among the motivations for joining, but more often include fun, status, identity, a sense of belonging, friendship, and understanding. These stimuli do not fundamentally change, despite a trend towards greater criminal involvement. Given the-

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87 Terence Thornberry et al. *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73.


mostly non-material needs that youths seek to satisfy, it is useful to highlight the link
between social marginalisation and the street gang culture.

In addition to the obvious socio-economic disadvantage, a life of poverty and
joblessness creates a whole set of psychological problems. "Multiple marginality," or the
manifold exclusion from mainstream society, leaves those affected with few resources to
better their lives. The realisation that others enjoy comparatively greater affluence, but
one’s own aspirations are beyond one’s means of attaining, can cause alienation and
resentment, especially among the young. Given the lack of opportunities to achieve a
reputable social position, youths may seek a place where they are not marginalised and
ignored. In this sense, street gangs offer not only excitement, friendship, and emotional
support, but also a way of acquiring the respect and status that are otherwise
unobtainable.91

The use of violence is central in gaining and maintaining this social power. A gang
member who robs a local resident or attacks a rival gang affiliate may pursue material
rewards or physical harm, but these actions are also means to a higher end. Each gang
relies on violence and intimidation to establish a reputation as daring and superior to
other gangs. Individual gang members contribute to this goal, but simultaneously build a
personal reputation for being willing and able to fight. To do so is to achieve status and
respect among their peers.92 For socially excluded youths gang membership thus serves
to obtain a measure of influence and deference when alternative avenues to self-esteem
and social recognition are sensed to be closed. Indeed, the youths consulted for one
study affirmed to have gained respect, friendship, power, protection, confidence, money,
and freedom.93 At the same time, gang membership exposes young people to greater
physical risk and discrimination by the public. However, the desire to be recognised and
valued is such that many feel a reputation for aggressive behaviour and the risk of violent
death are preferable to being “nobody.”94

Gang emergence: the community context

Given the social roots of the gang phenomenon, it is important to emphasise the
community context in which these groups emerge and develop. These areas are marked

90 Vigil, A rainbow of gangs, 7.
91 Ibid., 29.
92 Savenije and van der Borgh, “Youth Gangs,” 167.
93 Cruz and Portillo Peña, Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas, 68-69.
94 Smutt and Miranda, El Fenómeno de las Pandillas en El Salvador, 137.
by economic hardship, overcrowded living conditions, lack of adequate recreational facilities, and deficient basic services, structural aspects that have also eroded the social ties among residents. Overall, these are neglected places where the frustrations of daily existence make some youths feel that the street gang culture is the only option to satisfy their needs. In the words of one scholar, this neglect ‘is not just a matter of abandoned buildings; it also means abandoned lives and abandoned categories of people.’ Street gangs emerge and persist because of the social marginalisation of many groups in society. Even though not all deprived adolescents join gangs, social and economic inequality is crucial to understanding the gang problem and to the search for solutions to it.

Gang control requires an integrated approach based on prevention, law enforcement, and rehabilitation and reinsertion. The second of these elements, ideally comprising rights-respecting or community-oriented policing instead of single-minded gang suppression, is aimed at the arrest and criminal prosecution of offending gang members. Prevention and rehabilitation/reinsertion both seek to address the socio-economic disadvantage associated with the gang problem. This would entail measures such as an overhaul of a defective education system, the creation of decent jobs, and generally the alleviation of social marginalisation in the communities that spawn gangs. Clearly, a comprehensive gang policy calls for resources, but ultimately also for the political will to undertake profound changes in the structure of society, its institutions, values, and power relations whose imbalance has permitted the gang culture to take hold. The struggle over these responses, and the role some NGOs have played in it, is the subject of this thesis.

Aims and structure of the thesis

This thesis examines three Salvadoran NGOs and their advocacy strategies aimed at reshaping the government’s Mano Dura gang policy. It does so by taking an ethnographic approach as this allows us to delve into facets of the NGO world that would otherwise remain hidden. The study departs from the view that ‘[w]hat is on paper an organisation becomes a “living, breathing” social organism, with all the intricacies, emotions, and contradictions we associate with human relations.’ Rather than merely analysing how and under what conditions specific NGOs sought to promote an alternative gang policy,

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96 Klein, The American Street Gang, 231.
I was interested in the ways that staff constitute the organisations on a daily basis. Thus, the research set out to explore the everyday activities and social processes that occur in each setting. What motivates the NGO workers? What stories do they tell, and what interests, values, beliefs, and experiences do they bring to their job? The ethnographic method permits a richer understanding of an institution’s inner workings and helps analyse and account for NGO policy influence.

Explaining NGO attempts to achieve the implementation of different gang control measures requires investigating the social and political environment as well as the characteristics and strategies of each agency. These dimensions help appreciate the exogenous and endogenous factors inhibiting or facilitating NGO advocacy.

The context in which individuals and groups interact entails various constraints and opportunities for political practices. One objective of this dissertation is to show how El Salvador’s domestic circumstances affected the advancement of alternative gang policy options. The country’s transition to electoral democracy has improved the general conditions for the expression of civil society, but produced no fundamental power realignment and preserved certain dynamics that neutralise social change efforts. I argue that three contextual factors were salient in affecting NGO advocacy: the persistence of elite influence, the nature of the ruling party, and concentration of media ownership. The Salvadoran oligarchy has traditionally played a central role in the nation’s economic and political affairs, and although its composition has altered over the years, it has retained its dominant position in society and remains staunchly opposed to measures that would undermine its interests and privileges. ARENA, the party that oversaw the transition and has governed the country ever since, has been guarding conservative interests since its inception and maintains a political agenda that supports the status quo. The ARENA government therefore had incentives to block NGO challenges of existing arrangements. The media are concentrated in the hands of oligarchic families, and the reporting of the principal news providers exhibits a routine bias in favour of the right-wing government and the economic class. The absence of a pluralistic media system makes it more difficult for dissenting groups to express their views and mobilise political pressure. If the context supplies facilitating and inhibiting conditions for NGO advocacy, organisational characteristics and strategies are crucial for impacting policy formulation and implementation.

NGOs’ capacity for activism, and the strategies they choose, depends on internal factors. These pertain to NGO formation and maintenance and are critical for
understanding why some agencies are politically influential while others are not. Organisations often arise because an individual (or a small group) identifies a problem, decides that it should be addressed, and seeks to mobilise people and resources to achieve that purpose. These “organisational entrepreneurs” commit time and energy (and sometimes funds) to establish an NGO, define its mission, and steer it through its initial phase of development. Without these individuals who accept the burden of rallying people around an issue, many NGOs would not take shape. Once created, agencies must acquire the capacity to conduct their operations while ensuring their sustainability. Maintaining an organisation requires not only commitment, but also human and material resources. The difficulty of securing and preserving appropriate levels of revenue is influenced by the limited availability of funding, particularly where international support may have dwindled and local donations are scarce. Since a steady flow of income is essential for an NGO’s functioning, staff need to develop their fundraising ability accordingly. At the same time, organisations must obtain the required skills and knowledge to advance their agenda. This involves, for example, the ability to set clear and attainable objectives and foster collaboration with others. NGOs may undertake media work to put the issue of concern on the political agenda, educate the public, and mobilise public opinion. Importantly, they must possess the know-how to promote their cause. The question is not only how much expertise NGOs have, but also what kind of expert knowledge they can offer. Staff may have “lived” the problem being tackled, but this first-hand experience does not necessarily equip them with the professional skills to carry forward their advocacy and propose realistic solutions. A shortage of funds and technical knowledge affects NGOs’ ability to create policy change, and for many of them organisational survival often becomes a challenge in itself.

Advocacy strategies vary depending on the objectives that are being pursued. The strategic choices NGOs make, though circumscribed by their organisational capacity, hinge on two endogenous factors: their status and their ideology. Groups that have gained a positive public reputation, often won through demonstrated competence, can draw on their credibility to access the political system and the media more easily. Recognised as serious, reliable, and respectable, these agencies are more likely to be consulted and to be able to participate in the policy process. Organisations that lack this standing will need to use different tactics to make their impact felt. However, the

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98 This point is emphasised in Ahmed and Potter, *NGOs in International Politics*, 25.
99 Ahmed and Potter have termed this the “entrepreneur model” of group formation. See Ahmed and Potter, *NGOs in International Politics*, 25.
strategies NGOs adopt are also informed by their ideological position. NGOs differ both in how they view an advocacy issue and in how they seek to effect policy change. The stance they take on each of these questions has consequences for the political outcomes they strive for. The gang problem elicits divergent reactions not only between NGOs and the state, but also among the former themselves. While there is agreement among NGOs that gang prevention and rehabilitation require a greater allocation of public resources, the fault line runs between those who consider the gangs as inherently destructive groups that need to be dissolved and those who argue that only some aspects of the gangs (violence and drugs) are harmful and youths should therefore be encouraged to abandon these negative expressions but not to withdraw from their gang.

NGOs may support policy changes, but what transformations they can induce will depend on the nature of their involvement in the policy process. NGOs differ in their level of intent to participate.\textsuperscript{100} Their ideological position shapes the broader tactical style, which in turn determines substantive priorities and the degree of antagonism with which the authorities are approached. The organisations I studied implemented different advocacy strategies, which gave preference to either direct policy influence or change “on the ground.” Although the immediate targeting of decision-makers may seem the more obvious approach, NGO advocacy can aim to bring about an alternative policy by other means. This may entail empowering weaker social groups to feel greater self-respect and design solutions to their problems or creating innovative programmes that demonstrate to the government a better way of addressing a problem. While these efforts do not constitute direct interventions in the policy process, they alter the policy context and can serve to put pressure on the administration to adopt a different set of guidelines. Especially when combined with other actions such as participation in discussion forums or some form of media work, these endeavours can influence policies. However, the model programme may unwittingly relieve the government of certain responsibilities by assuming some of its functions.

Organisational ideology also underlies the perceived role within the domestic political system. Some NGOs see themselves as being in cooperation with the state, while others maintain a more antagonistic relationship. The establishment of democracy in El Salvador has meant that the country’s general attitudes towards what constitutes legitimate political behaviour have shifted from the past adversarial posture towards a more collaborative stance. This is not to say that the need for documenting and

\textsuperscript{100} Casey, “Third sector participation,” 251.
criticising state performance has become superfluous or that NGOs have renounced previous denunciatory activities; indeed, for many these tasks remain an important part of their work. Yet, as NGOs are trying to reinvent themselves, many of them have come to believe that a democratic environment requires them to propose alternative initiatives on a given issue, rather than (merely) exposing the state’s inability to address the problem. However NGOs try to straddle the line between confrontation and collaboration, they develop a preferred tactical style. When it helps secure funding or resource and skills shortages impede the adoption of a different approach, the strategy that characterises the organisation may be pursued even if it is ineffective for changing government policy. Whatever the reasons for adhering to a particular strategy, this choice has consequences for NGOs’ policy influence.

I want to add a note on the meaning of effectiveness. The NGOs I researched did not attempt, nor can they be expected, to resolve the complex social problem of street gangs. They did, however, seek to persuade the government to replace *Mano Dura* with more comprehensive and rights-respecting gang control, and this thesis examines both how the NGOs promoted policy change and why their efforts met with limited success. To assess the organisations’ influence I compare their policy positions with their achievements at three levels: government discourse, policy change, and state behaviour. The Saca administration pledged to commence preventive and rehabilitative programmes, but these rhetorical commitments may be interpreted as either a victory for the NGOs or an attempt to stifle further criticism. More importantly, one must ascertain whether a shift occurred in both policy and behaviour: the adoption of a new set of guidelines may seem to denote success, but the existence of policy documents and institutions is meaningless in the absence of implementation. Indeed, the final outcome of the advocacy efforts, notably the persistence of the *Mano Dura* approach, points to limitations in NGO strategies.

The NGOs that appear in this study are a legal advocacy organisation, the Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (Foundation of Applied Legal Studies, FESPAD); the peer rehabilitation group Homies Unidos; and a Catholic development NGO, the Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (Industrial Park Don Bosco, Polígono/PIDB). Each was born out of different circumstances and concerns, but while they all advocated the creation of an alternative gang policy, they did so with different

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101 Ibid., 250.
strategies and priorities. FESPAD, established by a group of lawyers to promote human rights and the rule of law in El Salvador, was selected for its high profile in the defence of gang members' human rights. Staff employed their juridical expertise for legal and policy research with which to publicly criticise Mano Dura and propose one local gang programme. Unlike their counterparts in the other two agencies, they also made a concerted effort to express their position in the media. Homies Unidos was chosen for its distinctive nature as El Salvador’s only NGO that was both founded by, and works with, gang members. Mobilised to design solutions to their own problems, staff have been working to empower their peers to imagine a life free of violence and drugs, though not without their gang. Building on their first-hand experience of gang life, they have delivered testimonial stories to deter at-risk youths from gang joining, implemented rehabilitation projects in gang-affected communities, and alerted other institutions to police abuse against gang members. The Polígono was conceived by a Spanish priest and provides education and microenterprise training to low-income youths. Located in a gang-affected community in eastern San Salvador, the organisation is widely respected for its perceived success in modelling a gang prevention and rehabilitation programme. The project incorporates at-risk youth, ex-gang members, and juvenile offenders and with it the Polígono team has sought to demonstrate an innovative way of tackling the gang problem that might be replicated by the authorities.

Researching NGOs in El Salvador

This thesis is based on nine months of fieldwork in El Salvador where I carried out my ethnographic research, began preparing a content analysis of gang-related press coverage, and conducted over 180 interviews with government and law enforcement officials, academics, judges, journalists, NGO workers, and ex-gang members. For the purpose of reconstructing NGO histories and contextualising government and NGO responses to the gangs in El Salvador, a limited number of interviews were also carried out in the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. In this section I offer some reflections on the difficulties and dilemmas I encountered during my fieldwork and the ways in which I managed them. The discussion covers four areas: fieldwork hazards, access, research relationships, and ethical considerations.

Ibid., 26.
Fieldwork hazards

As someone who had no prior “local knowledge” of El Salvador, my perceptions of the possible dangers to be faced there were largely shaped by media reports. However, while I was determined not to be deterred by exaggerated images of the country and its people, the risks inherent in fieldwork could not be disregarded. On the one hand, I needed to consider the general climate of insecurity in El Salvador and its impact on my freedom of movement. On the other hand, certain hazards were connected with two of the NGOs I planned to examine. The Polígono’s location in a gang-affected community required me to mitigate the risks that my visits to the institution entailed. Homies Unidos posed a challenge not only for its work in gang areas, but also for the very nature of the organisation. Since I did not explore the world of street gangs I avoided the perils associated with the study of such “deviant” groups. Nevertheless, the ex-gang members staffing the NGO, however benign they may be, remain vulnerable to aggressions by rival gang members. In their presence I could therefore have become an involuntary target myself.

Once I had concluded that I was prepared to accept the risks involved in this research, I decided on a twofold approach to “danger management.” Before embarking on my fieldwork I sought advice from individuals with firsthand knowledge of El Salvador, and a preliminary visit to the country in mid-2005 allowed me to assess to the local conditions and devise ways of adapting to them. Throughout my subsequent research I took certain precautions, such as having taxi drivers or NGO staff take me to gang-affected communities and abandoning these places before dark, and generally adopting a ‘stance of resolute awareness.’ Although risks could be minimised, they could not be entirely avoided. The near inevitability of confronting danger became clear to me when I approached the Polígono in a taxi one weekday morning and chanced upon a kidnapping. Their mission accomplished, the kidnappers sought to leave, and finding their exit blocked, one of the men motioned us with his assault rifle to clear the way. The departing vehicle constituted a stark reminder that a field researcher’s safety requires both skill and luck.

107 Ellen, cited in Sluka, , 290.
Access

The research presupposed access to information and therefore to people. Officials proved reluctant to grant interviews and agreed only after much persistence. Nonetheless, appointments were often cancelled at short notice, and sometimes the interviewee presented to me upon arrival was not the one I had requested to speak to, thus requiring a fresh appointment. On other occasions respondents tried to forestall my questions with a pre-arranged PowerPoint presentation. When this occurred I interrupted as politely as possible and asked to begin with the interview. Appeals of this kind were met with some dismay, but since I had explicitly solicited an opportunity to ask questions on my terms, I felt it was appropriate to let respondents decide whether they wanted to proceed with the discussion or abort the session. These evasive tactics and repeat or late cancellations were a constant source of frustration.

It was in my ethnographic research, however, where access posed considerable difficulties. Negotiating access to the NGOs was one of the priorities during my initial stay in El Salvador. Having contacted the organisations prior to my journey, I went to see the directors, explained the nature and purpose of my research, and encouraged questions about my project in order to dispel any remaining doubts. I also offered to assist the NGOs in their work in return for the access being granted. FESPAD welcomed the idea and asked me to produce a policy report for them, but while the task made additional demands on my time, it did not subsequently facilitate my research within the institution. Homies Unidos for their part readily agreed to my presence, and I later discovered the decision to be based on the calculation that my status as a foreigner could smooth entry into prisons and heighten organisational legitimacy vis-à-vis other actors.

Within little time I had secured access to all three NGOs and though pleased with my apparent progress, the ease with which I had achieved it defied methodological textbook wisdom and left me surprised. In the following months I made sure to maintain contact with each agency, but it was when I returned to El Salvador to begin my ethnographic research that complications emerged. The prospect of a critical surveillance had apparently created some anxieties, and the day I hoped to commence my work in the Polígono its director withdrew his earlier permission. Father Moratalla vented his discontent with previous gang-related studies, and his brusque suggestion that I develop
other ways of investigating the subject left me with no choice but to depart. However, persistence would pay off, and in a subsequent meeting the Father resolved to grant me entry to the organisation.

Once this hurdle had been overcome, it remained for me to obtain access to the people within the NGOs and therefore information. The degree to which I could accomplish this would essentially determine the fate of my project. That part of the research proved indeed by far the greater challenge and remained a recurrent preoccupation throughout my time in El Salvador. Although the NGOs tolerated my presence, getting individuals to speak to me and provide me with the verbal or written information I had solicited involved a constant process of negotiation in each of the organisations. Although the onus for the progress of my research was on me, I often felt that staff were reluctant to provide the assistance they had promised to give. The need to approach people repeatedly with the same requests began to wear me out, and sometimes I could not help but think that unresponsiveness was maintained in anticipation of this effect.

**Research relationships**

The problem of access was inextricably linked with the necessity to manage the research relationships I had forged. My rapport with NGO staff rested on the basis of trust and acceptance which, if eroded, would have compromised the collection of research material. In order to maintain my acceptability to the participants, and beyond the help I had initially volunteered, I therefore sought to reciprocate the support I received when the opportunity arose. The predicament was how to strike a balance between maintaining the friendly relations that allowed my research to continue and complying with requests that extended my involvement beyond the justifiable. After one Homies Unidos co-director had been arrested on suspicion of homicide, staff asked me to contribute to a “money gift” they intended to smuggle into prison. A refusal might have been interpreted as an indication that I was not “on their side,” and so I acquiesced despite concerns that the money might be used for illicit activities.

In a similar vein, managing my research relations required me to conceal the ambivalence I experienced towards one of the NGOs. From the outset I did not address

108 In the case of FESPAD, I initiated contact with a senior member of the CEPES since the gang policy-related advocacy was conducted in that centre.
109 On the criminal case against the HU director and its repercussions for the NGO, see Chapter 5.
Homies Unidos personnel with their gang monikers and tried to guard my emotions when conversations touched on past exploits to avoid strengthening their gang identity. Not using their nicknames, although this is how staff liked to be remembered, may have made it more difficult for me to sustain close connections with them, but in some ways it was the easier task. Maintaining a non-judgmental appearance proved more testing, such as when one HU member described, unsolicited and with apparent glee, her own involvement in gang violence. As disturbing as these stories were, I suppressed a sensation of revulsion and my bewilderment at her apparent lack of remorse, which I thought she should have shown as a “rehabilitated” gang member. Had I voiced my sentiments, she might have decided to withhold further information from me, yet by not displaying a judgmental reaction I may have created the impression that I condoned her actions.

My existing uncertainty about HU staff and their motives intensified, understandably perhaps, with the co-director’s detention. To some the private actions of one person might not warrant negative conclusions about the organisation he worked for. However, I had the suspicion (which was later confirmed) that staff were fabricating his alibi to secure his acquittal. At the time I felt I should not turn my back on the very people who had made my research possible and withstood the temptation to withdraw prematurely. However, these developments led me to doubt the group’s integrity and made me wonder what I could realistically hope to learn in an NGO that appeared to have a darker side.

**Ethical considerations**

All social research is fraught with ethical dilemmas, yet in ethnographic research some principles are more difficult to wrestle with, notably informed consent and harm avoidance. In formal interviews I routinely introduced myself to participants and explained the nature of my project in terms I deemed meaningful to them. In most cases I believe to have given respondents as much information as was needed to obtain their informed consent. However, when I interviewed youths enrolled in the Polígono their tightly-regulated schedule meant that participants had to be selected for me. Although all of them appeared to be comfortable in their role, I was unsure whether they understood their participation to be voluntary or felt obliged to comply with my gatekeeper’s request. On some occasions it proved impractical to implement the principle. My investigations took me into a wide range of settings, including NGO-external meetings or community-
based activities, where I had limited control over people’s attendance, and full disclosure of my research would have been highly interruptive. Likewise, there were times when the lines between work and leisure became blurred, as in lunch breaks or after-work drinks, and it seemed unfeasible to continually issue a reminder of my project’s aims and request individuals’ consent explicitly. Ethnographic research is a round-the-clock enterprise, and despite the best intentions, an element of non-disclosure seemed unavoidable.

The possibility that my research might cause harm to any of the participants also had to be considered. Some interviews were granted only on condition of strict anonymity, and I have safeguarded the identity of certain individuals to prevent the job losses or physical threats that their collaboration might have entailed. More generally, I sought to probe carefully and, when necessary, offered to abort the session to avoid emotional distress. Ethnographic work, given the student’s prolonged involvement in a wide range of situations, increases the potential for harm. For the researched, mere exposure to observation could have created unease, but the possibility that I might obtain private information may have been an additional source of strain. The complexity derives from the fuzziness of the public/private boundary as well as from participants’ unpredictable response to the interactions.\footnote{Elizabeth Murphy and Robert Dingwall, “The Ethics of Ethnography,” in Paul Atkinson et al., eds., \textit{Handbook of Ethnography} (London: Sage, 2001), 340.}

However, the greatest risk in ethnography arises when the findings are made public, be it through a PhD thesis or another format. My aim was to provide a critical account of NGOs, warts and all, and the analysis that follows may be a springboard for more effective advocacy on street gang policies. My own intentions notwithstanding, the research participants may disagree with the findings, feel hurt or consider their reputations dented. Negative reactions can perhaps be expected since researchers and those they study may hold conflicting perspectives and interests.\footnote{Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, \textit{Ethnography: Principles in Practice}, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), 275.} Nevertheless, if the NGOs regarded the results of my investigation objectionable, they might close their doors to prospective researchers. The possibility that others will seek to replicate my work is slim and makes “spoiling the field” less problematic, but this obligation cannot always be met.\footnote{Ibid., 275.}
Organisation of the thesis

Chapter 1 examines the historical and contemporary context of El Salvador and traces the continuity of traditional patterns of elite rule, authoritarianism, and exclusion. It shows that the process of democratic consolidation has experienced certain setbacks and highlights the circumstances in which Mano Dura emerged. Chapter 2 argues that Mano Dura constituted a populist penal policy designed to enhance ARENA’s electoral appeal rather than to address the gang problem. It considers how the Saca administration adapted its own Súper Mano Dura to criticism of the previous initiative and argues that while the preference for suppression was maintained, the need for prevention and rehabilitation was not seriously addressed. Chapter 3 focuses on the role of the media in fanning a moral panic over the street gangs and depicting suppression as the most appropriate response to these groups. It examines the contemporary media system and presents the findings of a content analysis of gang-related coverage by El Salvador’s leading newspapers, La Prensa Gráfica and El Diario de Hoy. The chapter demonstrates that the reporting of these conservative broadsheets exhibited a consistent pro-government bias and swayed public opinion towards support for Mano Dura. The subsequent three chapters turn to the NGOs and their strategies aimed at advocating an alternative gang policy. It is argued that these efforts were largely ineffective because the organisations, for reasons of internal characteristics and tactical choices, put insufficient pressure on the government. Chapter 4 considers FESPAD’s methods to contest Mano Dura and its political inexperience to deal with institutional unresponsiveness and media inaccessibility. Chapter 5 surveys Homies Unidos’ work with at-risk youth and gang members and discusses the consequences of NGO maintenance difficulties and staff over-identification with gang members. Chapter 6 examines the Polígono’s gang prevention and rehabilitation programme and suggests that a showcase project, unless combined with greater lobbying, is unlikely to impact government policy. The Conclusion compares NGO strategies, reflects on the implications of this study, and offers some policy recommendations for gang control in El Salvador.
Chapter 1

From authoritarianism to unconsolidated democracy: power, politics, and exclusion in El Salvador

The 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords ended a 12-year civil war and paved the way for the democratisation of a country that had hitherto experienced decades of uninterrupted authoritarianism. The achievements of this time include the demilitarisation of society and the construction of a new civilian police force, the political inclusion of the left and the regular holding of multiparty elections as well as improved respect for human rights and greater freedom of expression. However, El Salvador’s process of democratic consolidation has been uneven and has failed to meet popular expectations. Poverty and inequality remain high and together with high levels of crime and violence have eroded support for democracy. Most importantly, traditional power structures have survived the political regime change and have permitted the economic elite to continue to wield its influence over Salvadoran society and politics.

This chapter provides the background to the adoption of Mano Dura and NGO advocacy of an alternative gang policy. The key aim is to show why the government preferred the use of force to alternative responses to the gang problem and to identify the contextual barriers to NGO action. The chapter begins by tracing the emergence of the oligarchy that protected its interests and privileges through direct political control and institutionalised violence. It then considers the five-decade-long military-oligarchy alliance under which the army held the reins of government and acted as the guardian of the elite. The chapter moves on to the period of the civil war and reveals how the Salvadoran right responded to the breakdown of this “protection racket” by creating its own political party and restore the status quo through electoral participation. It ends by highlighting government resistance to democratic consolidation and examining a series of issue and actor challenges that mark the post-war period and were key obstacles to NGO policy activism. It is argued that democracy was a concession agreed to by the elite in exchange for an end to the war and with it the possibility of rebuilding its economic and political influence. The lack of elite commitment to democratic consolidation has prevented the creation of a professional police force and the emergence of democratic forms of public policy-making. Both the authoritarian nature of the PNC and undue elite influence over the state in turn obstructed NGO promotion of a comprehensive and rights-respecting gang policy.
1. Historical patterns (before 1931)

The characteristics of contemporary El Salvador, and the constraints they pose for NGO advocacy of an alternative gang policy, must be understood in light of the country’s historical development and continuities with past patterns. Spanish colonial rule had seen the development of a monocrop economy and a concomitant trend towards the privatisation of Indian communal land. With the expansion of commercial farming ownership of land and wealth became increasingly concentrated in a few hands while the exploitation of the labour supply sharpened. The landowners not only began to enjoy greater political influence, but also established economic structures that would endure for many years to come. The indigenous and campesino population, faced with massive deprivation, responded to these perceived injustices with periodic revolts. These uprisings were regularly crushed, but, like the reprisals they invited, would remain a feature of the post-colonial period.

In the wake of El Salvador’s independence in 1838 a simmering intra-elite conflict between conservatives, defending authoritarian government and centrally-regulated economies, and liberals, espousing limited representative democracy and free trade, was resolved in favour of the latter. Following their rise to political power, these liberal elites embarked on a series of reforms that encouraged a major expansion of the agrarian economy and exacerbated the existing marginalisation of rural workers. The policies entailed a shift from indigo cultivation to coffee export production and precipitated important changes in landholding patterns. Although coffee had been grown since the 1840s, the consolidation of this industry required more land. Since the agricultural areas that were most suited to coffee growing were those that had been settled by the Indian communities, the encroachment on communal lands which had begun during the colonial era intensified. In the 1880s legislation was enacted that turned these holdings into private property and forced the recently dispossessed population to work on the plantations.

The resultant concentration of land ownership led to the emergence of an enormously wealthy and powerful elite. Dubbed “the fourteen families” - after the republican family groups that constituted its nucleus - this oligarchy expanded in size and influence with the arrival of immigrants who provided capital and technical knowledge and married into the existing dynasties. Together these individuals largely controlled coffee production, processing, export, and finance. The rapid growth of the coffee economy permitted both the development of the country’s infrastructure and greater prosperity among the upper echelons of society. While the elite increased its riches, the vast majority of the populace laboured for very little pay and endured appalling poverty and social exclusion. From the very beginning of the Republic inviolability of private property and maintenance of order were the guiding principles. The idea that the state bears some responsibility for the health, education, and general well-being of all citizens was not part of Salvadoran political culture.

Spurred by both a perceived assault on Indian identity and the heightened social injustice, the indigenous peoples engaged in active resistance to the liberal reforms. The need to deal with periodic unrest prompted the landowners to employ private armies. Elements of these corps eventually became the National Police, which emerged out of an earlier Rural Police, and the National Guard, itself founded in 1912. A third security force, the Treasury Police, would be formed in 1936. Whereas the national army defended the national territory, these security forces upheld public order and soon acquired a reputation for brutality. The structural transformations of this period gave rise to an oligarchic state, a form of political domination by the powerful agrarian elite based on institutionalised violence and the permanent exclusion of the remaining population.

By virtue of its vast economic and social power the elite was able to exercise substantial influence over state institutions and public policy-making. Political control was not acquired in the electoral arena, but merely transferred from one section of the ruling class to another. Between 1911 and 1927 two prominent coffee and sugar-producing families dominated the presidency. The coffee boom of the 1920s led the

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6 Dunkerley, The Long War, 9-10; Wood, Insurgent Collective Action, 22.
8 Montgomery, Revolution in El Salvador, 30-32.
9 Edelberto Torres-Rivas, La piel de Centroamérica (Guatemala City: FLACSO, 2006), 214-216.
subsequent government to allow some political openness, and in January 1931 El Salvador’s first free elections were won by a progressive landowner. Arturo Araujo had pledged social reforms and employment, a programme that was popular with the lower strata of society. However, amid an economic crisis and growing social disturbances, the prospects of reform did not find favour with the elite, and the country’s encounter with democracy proved short-lived.\textsuperscript{11}

2. The military-oligarchy alliance (1931-1979)

In December 1931 a military coup toppled Araujo and instituted General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. A personalistic dictator, Martínez stifled dissent by means of press censorship, army-controlled rural patrols, and an urban network of spies. The only political party allowed to operate was his own Pro-Patria (Pro-Fatherland).\textsuperscript{12} After 1931 the oligarchy ceded the reins of government to the military, but retained its dominant economic power and control over economic policy-making. As part of this “protection racket” the army served as the guardian of the oligarchy and suppressed by force any challenge to the status quo.\textsuperscript{13} This alliance would endure until 1979 and constituted the longest period of uninterrupted military rule in modern Latin American history.\textsuperscript{14} Even when this partnership broke, the army retained its political influence until the end of the 12-year civil war.

The next event that was to leave an indelible impact on the nation followed shortly after the coup. The Great Depression of 1929 and the accompanying collapse of coffee prices had led to declining profits for the coffee growers and unemployment, falling wages, and hunger for the labourers. The escalating social crisis facing the overwhelmingly rural and poor population was added to by stolen elections in January 1932. The Communist Party, founded during the previous period of political liberalisation by Augustín Farabundo Martí, won many predominantly indigenous municipalities in western El Salvador, but the Martínez regime annulled the results.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} Dunkerley, The Long War, 10; Mahoney, The Legacies of Liberalism, 36.
\textsuperscript{14} Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador, 2.
\textsuperscript{15} Erik Ching, “Patronage and Politics under General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, 1931-1939,” in Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford, eds., Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El
Later that month these developments culminated in an insurrection by the local Indian communities. The army responded with unprecedented brutality, swiftly crushing the rebellion or aiding the rebels. *La matanza* (the massacre) saw the indiscriminate killing of an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 campesinos and has retained significance in Salvadoran history and politics ever since.16 *La matanza* preserved oligarchic rule and instilled a ‘lasting memory of terror’ among the lower classes.17 The severity of the repression cowed people into submission and neutralised further rebellions for the next four decades.18 It was only from the 1970s onwards that people would defy state-sponsored violence to seek social and political change.

Another legacy of 1932 was the oligarchy’s rigid hostility to even the most moderate reforms. The protagonists of the uprising were indigenous people who had sought to protest the deteriorating economic and social conditions. Underarmed, they took the life of some 100 individuals and posed no threat to the established order.19 However, the Communist Party had attempted to side with the popular movement, and this association provided the oligarchy and the army with a justification for portraying the uprising as communist-inspired and the subsequent repression as a victory over communist subversion.20 1932 became a legend of barbaric hordes attacking thousands of upright citizens and of a heroic army that could barely stave off the assault.21 Anti-communism entered elite political culture, and reform efforts were henceforth understood as attempts to undermine the institutions that had brought progress to the country.22 The defence of elite privileges became the primary political objective, and actual or potential challengers of the status quo were depicted as a threat to society that had to be contained by force. Since the 19th century political and media ‘narratives of fear’ periodically spoke of a new

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16 On the uprising and massacre of 1932, see ch. 1 of Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*.
menace that required social control.\textsuperscript{23} The violent responses to indigenous uprisings were followed in the 1980s by a counterinsurgency war against the guerrillas, and in similar ways the Mano Dura discourse of the 2000s would depict the street gangs as a great danger that justified the use of force against them.

General Martínez himself governed until 1944 when a civic strike forced his resignation.\textsuperscript{24} His relatively progressive successor was overthrown only a few months later, and after four years of instability military authoritarianism was instated whereby power was exercised by the army as an institution.\textsuperscript{25} Over the next decades popular sectors were repressed and political competition was strictly limited: presidential elections were celebrated, but victory was always reserved for the military’s own party, which became the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (National Conciliation Party, PCN) in 1961. Although the military defended both its own rule and the oligarchic economic model, individual regimes differed in their ideological orientation. Some of them sought to introduce democratic institutions and moderate social reforms, but these attempts regularly met with opposition by the elite and military hardliners.\textsuperscript{26} Reforms were tolerated only insofar as they allowed economic modernisation without structural change.

These tensions heightened in the 1950s and more so in the 1960s when the United States sought to forestall further Cuban-style revolutions in Latin America. Through its Alliance for Progress the Kennedy Administration encouraged economic development and channelled monetary and military aid to El Salvador and other countries in the region.\textsuperscript{27} Prior to these policies successive governments had already begun to promote agricultural diversification into cotton and sugar production as well as light manufacturing. The Alliance essentially helped expand the industrial sector through regional integration and new private investment. Economic growth and the implementation of education, health, and housing programmes notwithstanding, existing trends of poverty and inequality were only reinforced. The expansion of export agriculture led to further land concentration and increased the number of landless campesinos who had to rely on low seasonal wages. Population increases, combined with the forced return of some 130,000 emigrants after the “Soccer War” with Honduras, only intensified rural poverty. Given the worsening conditions in the countryside, many


\textsuperscript{24} Parkman, \textit{Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador}, chs 5-6.

\textsuperscript{25} Mahoney, \textit{The Legacies of Liberalism}, 47.

\textsuperscript{26} Wood, \textit{Insurgent Collective Action}, 25.

\textsuperscript{27} Walter Lafeber, \textit{Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America}, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 151, 175.
workers migrated to urban areas in search of jobs. However, industrialisation did not generate significant employment opportunities, and many people had to turn to the informal sector (typically street vending). The coffee oligarchy, on the other hand, controlled commercial agriculture and extended its reach into the banking sector and the nascent industrial sector. Economic power remained in the hands of a few family groups and allowed them to maintain their influence over state policy. Although the development process saw the emergence of a small middle class, oligarchic control over the economy prevented the rise of a new industrial elite that might challenge the social and political dominance of the landed oligarchy.

The few reformist efforts that did occur during that time were resented by the elite but tolerated as long as they did not undermine dominant interests.

In tandem with its economic assistance the Alliance also sponsored a counterinsurgency programme aimed at containing revolutionary movements. With the help of US advisers the Salvadoran military developed a nationwide paramilitary network and a centralised intelligence agency to provide early warning signals of “communist” infiltration. The paramilitary organisation Organización Democrática Nacionalista (Nationalist Democratic Organisation, ORDEN) was established by National Guard commander General José Alberto Medrano in the mid-1960s and was tasked to identify suspected communists among the rural population. ORDEN patrols gathered information and carried out repressive activities when ordered to do so. Most of the victims who were disappeared or killed for being “enemies of the state” were simply poor people who tried to improve conditions for their families and communities. The existence of these structures, and the political violence they conducted, fostered fear and mistrust among neighbours and disarticulated local social networks. Such was the level of past insecurity that contemporary social relations remain affected by it. The intelligence obtained by ORDEN members was processed by the Agencia Nacional de Seguridad Salvadoreña (Salvadoran National Security Agency, ANESAL), co-founded by Medrano and National Guard major Roberto D’Aubuisson, the latter ANESAL’s deputy director. The unit was staffed by officers of the various armed services and in addition to its

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intelligence-gathering function also served for death squad activities.\textsuperscript{32} In the years prior to and during the war both entities played a key role in targeting real or imagined opponents of the status quo.

A political opening in the 1960s saw the emergence of moderate opposition parties, notably the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party, PDC). The PDC had made gains in legislative and mayoral elections and challenged the PCN in the 1972 presidential contest. However, in a context of growing mass mobilisation the military handed the victory to its own candidate, arrested and tortured the PDC’s contender, José Napoleón Duarte, and brutally suppressed subsequent protests.\textsuperscript{33} This blatant electoral fraud convinced many Salvadorans that peaceful change was unattainable and armed struggle appeared the only viable route. Revolutionary organisations began to form and throughout the 1970s carried out sporadic bombings and kidnappings.\textsuperscript{34} The major opposition during that decade came from the popular movement that brought together students, teachers, and industrial workers. These urban coalitions occupied buildings and held marches and demonstrations to demand an end to economic and political exclusion.\textsuperscript{35}

In the capital’s marginal zones, but particularly in many rural areas, the Catholic Church played a key role in organising the poor into Christian Base Communities (CBCs). Inspired by liberation theology, which encouraged the church to abandon its previous message of passivity and submission and become an advocate for the poor, Catholic clergy and lay workers formed bible-study groups in which campesinos discussed teachings on social justice.\textsuperscript{36} Equipped with an increasing sense of dignity and human rights, the rural population began to demand economic reforms. The church, for its part, criticised governments and the elite for their indifference to the suffering of others. The Salvadoran right labelled these activities as subversive and responded to this political mobilisation with violence. Campesinos were murdered or disappeared, and several priests were tortured or killed by death squads during the 1970s.\textsuperscript{37} One of El Salvador’s most

\textsuperscript{37} Brockett, \textit{Land, Power, and Poverty}, 137; LeoGrande, \textit{Our Own Backyard}, 37.
powerful voices for peace and social justice, Monseñor Óscar Romero, would be assassinated in March 1980. The killing of this and other prominent religious figures, notably the Jesuits in 1989, demonstrated starkly how much the oligarchy and the military resented calls for profound social and political change.

By the time of the 1977 elections the military resorted to greater levels of intimidation and fraud to deter the opposition. In the face of persistent popular movement action the new government instituted full press censorship, banned public meetings, and outlawed strikes. Torture, disappearances, and murders of political dissidents, priests, students, and trade unionists continued. State violence further radicalised the left, which intensified its guerrilla activities. In October 1979, concerned by the revolutionary threat and the Nicaraguan Sandinista victory a few months earlier, a progressive faction of the Salvadoran army staged a coup. The officers installed a military-civilian junta and promised to end the repression, to create a democratic political system, and to initiate a series of pro-poor policies, including agrarian reform. These measures would have nationalised the elite-controlled banking system and affected many of the oligarchy’s coffee estates, but the Salvadoran right ultimately deterred these changes. In the short term the junta’s reforms were blocked by conservative army officers, and its civilian members resigned within three months. The civil war would soon begin in earnest, and, significantly, the military-oligarchy alliance had broken.


The revolutionary organisations, now unified under the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), launched their military operations in January 1981. The guerrillas turned to a war of attrition, targeting power lines, bridges, and export crops. The economic sabotage hurt many ordinary Salvadorans and would be increasingly unpopular, but the war also produced economic transformations that were to have important political implications. While the fighting occasioned a rapid decline in national output and massive capital flight, by the end of the decade a sectoral change would have occurred: the profitability of the agro-export sector

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38 LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 39.
decreased sharply, whereas the commercial and service sectors surged, prompting a shift in elite economic interests.\textsuperscript{41}

The military, inefficient and corrupt, had limited capabilities to fight an insurgency.\textsuperscript{42} However, after the 1979 coup the United States had made it a foreign policy objective to prevent the left from seizing power and supplied substantial military aid.\textsuperscript{43} With US assistance the army was able to halt, if not defeat, the revolution, but it did so at an enormous human cost. In an attempt to eliminate sources of support for the guerrillas, it deliberately targeted the civilian population in the countryside where the FMLN was active. The inhabitants of these areas were automatically suspected of belonging to, or collaborating with, the guerrillas and risked being the target of indiscriminate violence. Massacres such as El Mozote stand as a tragic reminder of the execution of defenceless individuals.\textsuperscript{44}

Alongside the military effort the oligarchy developed its own response to the crisis. Since the 1979 coup the elite could no longer rely on the army to safeguard its interests. Its wealth and privileges at stake, the right sought to regain control of the government, first through two unsuccessful coup attempts and subsequently by other means.\textsuperscript{45} One of these was the creation of its own death squads. Roberto D'Aubuisson had left the National Guard, but had taken ANESAL intelligence files with him and built these clandestine structures with the financial support of wealthy businessmen, including the founder of El Salvador's second-largest newspaper, \textit{El Diario de Hoy}.\textsuperscript{46} In regular TV shows D'Aubuisson identified “subversives” who were assassinated shortly afterwards. Other victims were intimidated through threats published in the national press.\textsuperscript{47} The death squads were embedded within the security forces and those that were not were tolerated by the state. The covert nature of their activities shielded the government from accountability for their actions and ensured impunity for the perpetrators.\textsuperscript{48} These

\textsuperscript{42} Dunkerley, \textit{Power in the Isthmus}, 401-402.
\textsuperscript{43} Americas Watch (now Human Rights Watch), \textit{El Salvador’s Decade of Terror} (Yale, IA: Yale University Press, 1991), 119.
\textsuperscript{44} Binford, \textit{The El Mozote Massacre}; Mark Danner, \textit{The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War} (London: Granta Books, 2005 [1993]).
\textsuperscript{45} LeoGrande, \textit{Our Own Backyard}, 58.
\textsuperscript{46} Montgomery, \textit{Revolution in El Salvador}, 132-133. \textit{El Diario de Hoy} is a family publication and is now directed by descendents of the said death-squad financier.
plainclothes individuals shot people in broad daylight or abducted their victims before torturing and killing them, then leaving their mutilated corpses along roadsides or in body dumps.\(^49\) Anyone who expressed undesirable political views risked being eliminated. The brunt of the violence in the 1980s was borne by unionists, clergy, students and teachers, human rights defenders, and journalists. Critical press organs were driven out of existence, and the social movement was decimated if not for the arrests, murders, and disappearances of its leaders, then for the fear of the survivors: state repression not only aimed to physically eliminate political opponents and social activists, but, through the repeated public display of tortured bodies, also to terrorise the living and suppress all popular mobilisation.\(^50\) In the worst years of the war, between 1980 and 1983, more than 30,000 civilians fell victim to the army, the security forces, and the death squads.\(^51\) Thereafter paramilitary activity declined, but did not stop.

The second instrument that the oligarchy resorted to in an effort to forestall reforms and reassert its dominant position in the country was the creation of its own political party. Founded in 1981, the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance, ARENA) espoused an ideology anchored in anticommunism, capitalism, and nationalism: any system perceived to jeopardise the right to private property was likened to an assault on El Salvador's existing order and thus a threat to national security.\(^52\) The formation of this openly partisan political vehicle signalled a major transformation of the way in which the elite would henceforth exercise its power. Under the leadership of Roberto D'Aubuisson the party prepared to compete in elections held as part of a US-sponsored political liberalisation process.

At the same time as the United States helped fight the guerrillas militarily, so it sought to undermine the revolutionary movement by promoting democratisation and a centrist government. The beginning was made with the 1982 elections for a Constituent Assembly, which also selected a provisional president. While the left was unable to participate for fear its candidates would be killed, the ARENA campaign favoured the complete annihilation of the FMLN and proved hugely successful with the right.\(^53\) In coalition with the PCN, ARENA gained control of the Assembly and swiftly proceeded to stop the recently-initiated agrarian reform. However, concerned that D'Aubuisson’s

\(^{49}\) Americas Watch, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror*, 21.

\(^{50}\) Lauria-Santiago, “The Culture and Politics of State Terror,” 100.

\(^{51}\) LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 235.


death squad involvement might prompt a cut in military aid, the Reagan Administration blocked his nomination as provisional president and had an alternative candidate installed.\textsuperscript{54}

When D’Aubuisson ran for president in the 1984 elections, the United States channelled covert funding to the PDC to ensure Duarte’s victory and foster reforms.\textsuperscript{55} However, once voted in the centrist government had little freedom of action. Required to adopt austerity measures, Duarte was unable to achieve economic recovery and improve the general standard of living, and the rightist-controlled Assembly blocked initiatives that the elite disapproved of.\textsuperscript{56} His attempts in 1984 to hold peace talks with the FMLN were opposed by the army and the United States who were committed to a military defeat of the left. Although hugely popular in the country, dialogue between the warring sides soon broke down. The signing of the 1987 Esquipulas II regional peace treaty initially provided a fresh impetus for a negotiated solution to the conflict, but efforts to find a political settlement were again boycotted by the military and then suspended completely.\textsuperscript{57}

The electoral process of the 1980s, however, ushered in two significant developments. The first was the opening of some political space and with it the re-emergence of organised civil society. Labour unions demanded better wages and working conditions, community organisations in the war zones and in urban slums asserted the basic needs of their members, and NGOs monitored the human rights situation, provided development services, and assisted refugees.\textsuperscript{58} In 1988 social and religious organisations, through their participation in the National Debate, called for peace. This commission, together with opinion polls showing public support for dialogue, built a popular consensus in favour of negotiations that could not be ignored.\textsuperscript{59}

The second development, and the one with greater long-term consequences, was the metamorphosis of ARENA into a seemingly more moderate party. ARENA’s early success owed much to its association with violent and anti-democratic solutions to demands for social and political inclusion, but also limited its wider appeal. After two

\textsuperscript{54} Clara Nieto, \textit{Masters of War: Latin America and United States Aggression from the Cuban Revolution Through the Clinton Years} (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 375-376.
\textsuperscript{55} Americas Watch, \textit{El Salvador’s Decade of Terror}, 127.
\textsuperscript{56} LeoGrande, \textit{Our Own Backyard}, 279.
electoral defeats in the mid-1980s the party began to soften its image and leadership in an attempt to expand its constituency and gain power. D’Aubuisson was replaced by Alfredo Cristiani, a US-educated entrepreneur from a wealthy coffee-growing family and untainted by death squad ties. Although ARENA did not shed its militant anti-communism, it integrated a broader range of businesspeople and relative moderates who were more tolerant of democratic norms than the traditional agro-export elite had been. Aided by generous donations and the logistical, technical, and communications skills that other parties lacked, ARENA vastly improved its vote-getting ability. The Duarte government’s corruption and its inability to deal with the economic crisis and end the armed conflict played in ARENA’s favour. The party made significant gains in the 1988 municipal and legislative elections, only to be trumped by its victory in the 1989 presidential contest. Ten years after the coup that had challenged its political and economic dominance the oligarchy had returned to power. The right was now in a position not only to influence the negotiation and implementation of the peace accords, but also to shape the post-war context in which NGO advocacy would unfold.

Once in office Cristiani called for renewed negotiations with the FMLN. Peace talks got underway, but at the time both the government and the army still hoped the left could be defeated militarily. After the bombing of a trade union headquarters the guerrillas suspended the dialogue and in November 1989 launched a massive offensive that brought the war to the capital. The offensive demonstrated the FMLN’s continued combat strength and dispelled illusions of an army victory. The right’s options further diminished when that same month government troops assassinated six Jesuits at the Central American University. The murder of the priests, who had been committed to society’s poorest sectors and advocated a peaceful solution to the conflict, was widely condemned both domestically and internationally and prompted a cut in US military aid. Both the offensive and the Jesuit killings were watershed events that spurred on the peace process, and UN-mediated talks resulted in the Chapultepec Peace Accords signed on 16 January 1992.

The gamut of factors that facilitated a negotiated settlement of the armed conflict include a change in post-Cold War US foreign policy, the erosion of the FMLN’s

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64 Ibid., 79, 188.
external support and a softening of its own ideological stance, a military stalemate, international outrage at the Jesuit killings, the impact of the regional peace process, the social and economic costs of the war, and pro-peace public opinion. However, a prime factor was a shift in elite economic interests and an associated preference for ending the war and managing a transition to electoral democracy. The structural transformations of the previous decades had seen the rise of an agro-industrial faction of the elite which moved its capital into the growing service and commercial sectors. In contrast to the undiversified agrarian faction, this modernising group was no longer reliant on repressive labour relations and adopted a politically more moderate outlook. After 1979 the right closed ranks behind the army and ARENA, but as the war became seemingly interminable and prevented the oligarchy from reviving the economy and restoring its way of life, the moderate group accepted the need for a negotiated solution: the military’s failure to defeat the FMLN made the army decreasingly useful, and ARENA’s electoral success convinced parts of the elite that a more pluralistic political system was a desirable concession in return for a cessation of the conflict. Thus, the Cristiani government’s acceptance of democracy reflected a purely pragmatic decision aimed at restoring the elite’s dominant position in the country, rather than a commitment to a more inclusive regime as such.

This is all the more troubling given that the right’s conceptions of democracy were limited and included little more than elections and free speech. Interviews conducted with elite members at the turn of the decade revealed that although the modernising elements among them had developed support for democratic norms, in other ways they continued to share the ideological worldview of their politically retrograde counterparts. At its core lay a fierce opposition to structural reforms and the belief that the elite has created economic development, employment, and thus a higher standard of living for the Salvadoran population. Respondents viewed the division between the rich and the poor as natural and although some backed the idea of limited social welfare provision, structural reforms were seen as an unreasonable assault on the very people who had brought progress to the country. The need for a redistribution of wealth was rejected as

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69 Paige, *Coffee and Power*, 204.
70 Ibid., 217.
71 Ibid., 194, 205-206
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was the link between inequality and the revolution. Instead the war was attributed to a small group of terrorists who lacked popular backing and would never be a significant electoral force.\(^72\) Thus, in the early 1990s parts of the elite had come to accept the arrival of democracy but not the notion that it might be used to redress the imbalance of social and economic power. Some commentators have argued that the insular lifestyle of the wealthy makes them oblivious to the suffering of others and the need to relinquish some of their privileges.\(^73\) This insularity may explain why elite political culture had changed so little by the time El Salvador began its democratic transition. The right’s apparent ideological inability to imagine a different world would certainly have significant implications both for the country’s post-war context and NGO advocacy of an alternative gang policy.

4. The post-war period (since 1992)

After twelve years of fighting and a death toll reaching 75,000 the peace accords ended one of the most intense internal conflicts in Latin America.\(^74\) The agreement, aimed at building a democratic and just society, had to be implemented by the existing ARENA government. Since that party, and the groups it represents, had more to gain from the preservation of the status quo than from the widely anticipated socio-economic and political change, resistance to the transition process could be expected. This section examines some of the difficulties that occurred in the execution of the peace accords and subsequently considers El Salvador’s uneven democratic consolidation. The aim is not to undertake an exhaustive review of the developments in either of these areas, but to highlight the consequences of certain initial distortions and to provide the background to the adoption of Mano Dura and NGO advocacy of a comprehensive and rights-respecting gang policy.

\(^72\) Ibid., 202-203, 208.
4.1 The implementation of the peace accords

The Chapultepec agreement was intended to end the war, promote democratisation, guarantee the unrestricted respect for human rights, and reunite society. In pursuit of these objectives it mandated demilitarisation, the elimination of the security forces and the establishment of a new National Civilian Police, the dissolution of the guerrilla army and the FMLN’s legalisation as a political party, electoral and judicial reforms, and socio-economic measures. In addition an Ad Hoc Commission reviewed the human rights records of senior army officers with a view to purging the military, and a Truth Commission was created to investigate major human rights violations committed during the conflict. The implementation of the accords was verified by a UN peacebuilding operation (ONUSAL) and benefited from significant amounts of international financial aid. Both the monitoring activities and the resources were critical in applying pressure on the government and achieving compliance with the peace agreement.

Among the accomplishments rank the definite cessation of hostilities, the removal of the military from political life, and the political integration of the left. However, in other respects the outcome was more mixed. The delays and obstructions were numerous and reflected elite opposition to the attainment of institutional strengthening, respect for human rights, and socio-economic transformations that the democratisation of El Salvador would require. While the resistance to the necessary reforms was serious in its own right, its significance for this study lies in the fact that it was characteristic not of a single government, but of the ruling party. The mindset that marked the early obstructionist efforts remained in place at the time of Mano Dura, and therefore the administrations of both Francisco Flores and Antonio Saca were likely to be un receptive to NGO calls for a gang control based on social policies and respect for human rights.

Elite reluctance to the construction of a democratic society, including those elements that would provide the foundations for an alternative gang policy, is illustrated by the following events. The Chapultepec accords outlined a series of measures designed to promote poverty alleviation and a more egalitarian development. However, this remained the most neglected part of the agreement and a key component, the Social and Economic Forum, was initially boycotted by the private sector and disintegrated when it failed to produce agreements on basic economic and labour issues. The accords also

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76 Hall MacLeod, Constructing Peace, 45.
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sought to eliminate repressive military structures and guarantee respect for human rights, notably by creating the Ad Hoc and Truth Commissions and replacing the security forces with the new National Civilian Police. However, to varying degrees of success the right resisted all of these reforms. The army, to which the security forces had been organically linked, was reduced in size and constitutionally limited to national defence. However, the government delayed the removal of officers responsible for the worst abuses, and members of the High Command were retired with full honours.\(^78\) In the context of a post-war crime wave army patrols began assisting the police in its public security tasks.\(^79\)

The Truth Commission attributed 85% of war-time killings to agents of the state, paramilitary groups, and the death squads.\(^80\) It established that ARENA founder Roberto D’Aubuisson had planned and directed numerous death squad activities, including the assassination of Archbishop Romero.\(^81\) Its report urged an investigation into the death squads to prevent their reactivation and recommended that named perpetrators be removed from their current positions and banned from public office for at least ten years.\(^82\) The right-wing press attempted to discredit the document, and both the military and the Cristiani government rejected the Truth Commission’s findings.\(^83\) Many of the recommendations were never implemented. Instead, five days after the publication of the report, and on the initiative of President Cristiani, the ARENA-dominated congress passed a blanket amnesty.\(^84\) The law contains a number of unconstitutional provisions but has so far been upheld by the Supreme Court of Justice.\(^85\) Thus, the state not only failed to send a signal that the violence of the past had been unacceptable, but also foreclosed criminal prosecutions. This omission could have serious consequences, because ‘authoritarianism has its roots in human behaviour; it finds its support in, and maintains itself through, the presence of living social forces, behaviour, repeated values, and norms.’\(^86\) In other words, the neglect to punish those who had sustained and


\(^80\) Truth Commission, “From Madness to Hope,” 311.

\(^81\) Ibid., 357, 359.

\(^82\) Ibid., 380, 382.


\(^84\) Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 91.


tolerated repressive structures meant that these individuals might seek to undermine democratic institutions and respect for human rights. Subsequent developments, notably the resurgence of death squads and attempts to strengthen authoritarian elements within the PNC, proved this to be the case and would eventually impact NGO advocacy of alternative gang control.

In the months prior to El Salvador’s first post-war elections in 1994 several FMLN leaders were attacked or killed in ostensibly politically-motivated circumstances. The authorities’ inability or unwillingness to discover the perpetrators led the United Nations to form the Joint Group for the Investigation of Politically Motivated Illegal Armed Groups. Following its investigations into these murders the Joint Group confirmed that the old death squads had metamorphosed into highly organised criminal organisations that carried out a combination of illicit activities and acts of political violence. These structures apparently aimed to destabilise the transition process by preventing the PNC from becoming an effective institution, creating conditions that favoured the continued militarisation of society, and sparking fear among citizens to inhibit popular political organising. The Joint Group requested the government to make a permanent effort to eradicate illegal armed groups and recommended strengthening the PNC’s investigative capacity to deal with political violence and organised crime. Little progress was subsequently made in either of these areas, suggesting that the Salvadoran state continued to lack commitment to fostering human rights and a democratic police.

**Resistance to the police reforms**

The National Civilian Police (PNC) merits a prominent place in this discussion, because it is a key actor in the execution of any gang policy. Its inability to tackle El Salvador’s gang situation, and violent crime more generally, reflects serious and entrenched institutional weaknesses. Many of the PNC’s current problems, notably its investigative incapacity and abusive character, can be traced back to the government’s initial efforts to prevent the formation of a professional police force. It is therefore vital to appreciate how and why deliberate attempts were made to subvert the agency.

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89 Ibid., 22-23.
The PNC was intended to replace the militarised security forces, which had maintained order through intimidation and lacked specialised investigative skills, relying instead on torture to extract confessions. In addition to their death squad involvement, the police were complicit in a range of criminal activities, including arms and drug trafficking. During the war a US-funded judicial reform effort, enabling the creation of a Special Investigative Unit (SIU) and an anti-narcotics unit (UEA), aimed to improve investigative policing. However, with its emphasis on training and resource-provision the project neglected the need for political commitment and attitudinal changes and ultimately failed to achieve its objectives. Despite their enhanced technical capabilities, SIU members remained ineffective and repeatedly covered-up human rights abuses.

The Peace Accords stipulated that of the three security forces both the Treasury Police and the National Guard would be dissolved immediately, while the National Police would be phased out during a two-year transition period. In its place was to emerge the PNC whose doctrine stressed the civilian, apolitical, and professional nature of the corps. A new police academy (ANSP) was to train future police and instil in them respect for human rights, and an independent Inspector-General would oversee disciplinary units tasked to monitor police services and probe misconduct. Crucially, an entry quota system foresaw that during the transition phase the new force would recruit 60% of its personnel at all levels among civilians with no direct participation in the war and, following a vetting and retraining process, 20% each among former National Police members and ex-FMLN combatants. The entry quota system had been adopted in lieu of the left’s earlier proposal to merge government and guerrilla armies but remained a controversial step. During the peace negotiations some had warned of damaging power struggles within the PNC and the detrimental effects resulting from the admission of elements of the old security forces. The concern was that these individuals would bring with them the institutional culture of crime, violence, and corruption that had been so central to their previous career and poison efforts to construct a professional and law-abiding police. Integrating them successfully into the PNC required transforming deep-rooted attitudes and practices and would not be achieved merely through new training.

90 Ibid., 59.
94 GOES and the FMLN, “Peace Agreement,”ch. II.
mechanisms and a change of uniform. The entry quota system therefore implied a high risk of “authoritarian contamination” of the PNC and made the responsible implementation of the police reforms all the more important.95

From the very beginning, however, the right sabotaged the restructuring of the public security apparatus. The government opposed this project partly because it had agreed to it as a way of achieving the disarmament of the FMLN and lacked the commitment to build a democratic institution.97 More importantly, the government appears to have been concerned about losing its influence over a key instrument of political control and social order maintenance.98 As a result, various attempts were made to perpetuate authoritarian policing structures and to prevent the emergence of a professional and democratic PNC. One problem concerned the authorities’ reluctance to provide both the ANSP and the PNC with the necessary resources, thus delaying the training and deployment of the new force.99

Secondly, the dissolution of the old security forces was resisted by incorporating thousands of former Guardsmen and Treasury Police into the National Police and subsequently delaying the demobilisation of the latter corps.100 The transition to a new security model occurred amid a post-war “crime wave” that the PNC seemed unable to deal with. The population soon began to doubt the PNC’s crime-fighting abilities and to lose trust in the force. The government, however, seemed unprepared to address the prevailing insecurity and accelerate the deployment of a professional police.101 Instead, it exploited public anxieties to foster nostalgia for authoritarian responses and justify the delay in phasing out the National Police and the return of soldiers to assist with public security tasks.102

Finally, and most significantly, the government did everything possible to ensure the dominance of conservative elements within the PNC. Many on the right feared that a PNC that included FMLN members and civilians, viewed as sympathetic to the left, would be an unreliable guarantor of order.103 Various efforts were therefore made to

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95 Costa, La Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador, 195-199.
97 Costa, La Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador, 189.
98 Cruz, “Violencia, inseguridad ciudadana y las maniobras de las élites,” 264.
99 Costa, La Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador, 183-190.
100 Ibid., 141.
101 Ibid., 144.
102 Cruz, “Violencia, inseguridad ciudadana y las maniobras de las élites,” 256.
retain the influence of old security forces personnel, notably by circumventing the regulations concerning their admission and promotion. For example, some ex-National Guard members and Treasury Police, though barred by the Peace Accords from service in the PNC, entered the ANSP as civilians or joined the new force via the National Police quota. 104 Those candidates, however, were never properly evaluated such that the PNC was likely to incorporate at least some individuals with a history of human rights abuses. 105 In contravention of the peace agreement the government also transferred the SIU and UEA, both staffed exclusively by militaries and associated with serious human rights violations, into the PNC without prior vetting and retraining. Neither unit provided an investigative capacity for the new police; indeed many of their members were themselves implicated in illicit activities. 106 The UEA chief, Major Oscar Peña Durán, was inappropriately appointed Deputy Director of Operations in 1993 and immediately imposed an authoritarian style on the PNC. Previously identified by the Ad Hoc Commission as a drug trafficker, Peña Durán was pressured into resigning before too long and went on to found his own private security company. 107 However, as is discussed below, his harmful influence over the PNC continued.

Meanwhile, promotions to the command structure also favoured ex-security forces personnel even though it had to be staffed according to the entry quota system. A strong civilian police leadership would have been especially important to prevent authoritarian attitudes from becoming embedded within the PNC. However, from the beginning the government placed a disproportionate number of former militaries in the senior posts from where they could impose an authoritarian stamp on the entire police force. 108 Their influence has remained undiminished over the years and has probably done most to prevent the PNC from becoming an effective and rights-respecting institution. Since its early days the agency has lacked meaningful investigative capacities and internal control mechanisms and witnessed growing police abuse. 109 The PNC quickly threatened to assume the characteristics of the old security forces, but the government did not take the necessary corrective measures. 110 Instead its attitude conveyed a deliberate desire not only to politicise the PNC, but also to weaken it to such an extent that a return to the old

104 Costa, La Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador, 203.
105 Ibid., 200.
106 Ibid., 235, 278-279.
107 Ibid., 237 (note 13), 242, 262, 272.
108 Costa, La Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador, 204, 211; Stanley, Protectors or Perpetrators?, 19-21.
110 Costa, La Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador, 182.
security model could be justified. Given these early problems it could reasonably be expected that the agency would undergo a further regression in the years to come. The persistence of “authoritarian enclaves,” and with it an entrenched contempt for human rights, would eventually mean that NGO calls for alternative gang control could simply not resonate with government and law enforcement officials.

4.2 El Salvador’s unconsolidated democracy

As is argued throughout this thesis, NGO advocacy was shaped in critical ways by the contemporary political and socio-economic environment whose characteristics must now be addressed. El Salvador’s transition to democracy was a significant achievement, and even critical observers concede that the country is qualitatively very different today. Large-scale political violence has ended, regular free and competitive elections have been held, freedom of expression is considerably greater than before, and poverty rates have declined. Despite these appreciable advances, El Salvador’s democracy remains weak and exhibits important continuities with past practices. Definitional issues aside, scholars widely agree that full democracy requires more than elections and emerges from a process of consolidation, that is, ‘the behavioural and attitudinal embrace of democratic principles and methods by both elites and the [public].’

This developmental perspective recognises that countries may complete their transition to democracy, but subsequently lack much of its substance. If these regimes are to move closer to the democratic ideal, they will need to acquire additional features, such as a democratic political culture, strengthened institutions, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and greater social and economic equality.

Several writers have noted that although El Salvador has experienced a political transformation, its democracy continues to display a number of shortcomings. Indeed, some have argued that these deficits are so numerous as to warrant the label “hybrid

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regime,” a polity that combines democratic and authoritarian traits.\textsuperscript{115} It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a comprehensive assessment of the quality and extent of El Salvador’s democracy or of the factors that have conspired against its consolidation. The aim, rather, is to contextualise the governmental preference for \textit{Mano Dura} and to identify those obstacles to democracy-building that limited the possibilities of NGO advocacy. One set of challenges is issue-related and concerns political-institutional problems, social and economic exclusion as well as crime and violence. The underlying pattern is ARENA’s inability or unwillingness to create a society that serves the needs and interests of all its members. The party’s posture, combining an elite-protective attitude with indifference to the country’s long-standing problems, helps explain the governmental reluctance to adopt and implement an alternative gang policy. Another set of challenges is actor-related and involves the police, the economic elite, and civil society.\textsuperscript{116} These institutions and groups had a decisive impact on NGO advocacy: the first given its law enforcement responsibilities, the second for its influence over the state and thus the adoption of social programmes required for gang control, and the third because its relative weakness shaped the degree to which NGOs could gain greater political weight and therefore persuade the authorities to adopt and implement a different gang policy. Together the issue and actor characteristics that are sketched out below serve to understand the contextual constraints on NGO advocacy and set the tone for subsequent chapters.

\textbf{4.2.1 Issues}

\textbf{Political-institutional challenges}

Following the signing of the Peace Accords El Salvador has made important strides in the area of civil and political rights.\textsuperscript{117} Yet, conspicuous problems persist in virtually every other sphere. ARENA has held the presidency since 1994 and remains the dominant political power in the country. Increasing citizen dissatisfaction with the party’s policy initiatives and a slumping economy enabled the FMLN to improve its electoral showing at the municipal and legislative levels, and I will return to the significance of these developments in Chapter 2. However, political competition has occurred in very unequal


\textsuperscript{116} Given their prominent role in promoting \textit{Mano Dura}, the media are considered separately in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{117} For an assessment, see Córdova Macías, “\textit{La contribución del proceso de paz},” 146-149.

Technical problems and irregularities have been a recurrent feature of the electoral process, but the partisan functioning of the electoral authorities has prevented these oddly chronic deficiencies from being corrected.\footnote{Córdova Macías, “La contribución del proceso de paz,” 159-169.} Most significantly, El Salvador has yet to experience an alternation of power. Thus far the right’s political and economic control of the state has merely made democracy another instrument for the preservation of elite power and privileges.\footnote{Córdova Macías, “La contribución del proceso de paz,” 145.}

The conservative sector’s lukewarm commitment to democracy is reflected in weak institutions and poor regime performance. The justice system, for example, remains corrupt, politicised, and incapable of dealing with crime and violence. Impunity is rife and, together with continued death squad activity, has progressively eroded the rule of law.\footnote{FESPAD, \textit{Estado de la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal en El Salvador, Julio 2002-Diciembre 2003} (San Salvador: FESPAD Ediciones, 2004), 114-120; Laurence Whitehead et al., \textit{Perfil de Gobernabilidad de El Salvador} (Madrid: Trama Editorial: 2005), 81.} The Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Ombudsperson, PDDH), created by the Peace Accords to safeguard human rights, has been hampered by severe budgetary limitations.\footnote{Córdova Macías, “La contribución del proceso de paz,” 145.} Its recommendations are routinely ignored by other parts of the state, and its staff have received numerous death threats.\footnote{PDDH, \textit{Violaciones a los derechos humanos por responsabilidad de la Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador} (San Salvador: PDDH, 2007), 9.}

Evidently I can provide only a brief glimpse into the workings of El Salvador’s democracy. However, the available research suggests that the above trends are indicative of a more general, purposeful neglect to equip the country’s institutions with the capacity and resources they require, ostensibly because those in power are opposed to the construction of a democratic society.

Similarly, the policies of successive ARENA governments have failed to resolve the population’s most pressing concerns, notably socio-economic welfare and public security. Both are considered below for their direct relevance to gang control; the point I want to emphasise here is a different one. For most Salvadorans the signing of the Peace Accords brought not only the long-awaited end to the war, but also constituted an...
opportunity to address the structural factors that had sparked the conflict.\textsuperscript{123} However, in subsequent years public opinion has consistently identified economic issues and crime as the country’s main problems, and a generalised perception that little has been done to tackle them has led to widespread disillusionment.\textsuperscript{124} Not only have citizens become increasingly dissatisfied with individual administrations, but the feeling that a democratic regime does not help meet their needs and expectations has also led them to become disenchanted with democracy itself. This has been reflected in a persistently low voter turnout (with the exception of 2004), and, more importantly, in a gradual rejection of democracy as the preferred political system. Although Salvadorans continue to express support for democracy as a form of government, since the late 1990s a growing number of people would willingly discard their recently-won political freedoms in exchange for greater socio-economic justice and security.\textsuperscript{125} The continued prevalence of crime and violence, in particular, serves to perpetuate an authoritarian political culture and plays into the hands of those who do not favour the construction of a democratic society. Salvadorans’ acute desire for greater physical safety is thus easily exploitable for political ends and contextualises both the popularity of Mano Dura and the uphill task faced by NGOs advocating a more rights-respecting gang policy.

Social and economic exclusion

As the Introduction indicated, gang development is facilitated by the conditions of poverty and social exclusion that mark many urban communities. The indicators below help visualise why some Salvadoran youths have felt the need to join these groups and provide a yardstick of government efforts to address the underlying structural factors. Following its ascent to power ARENA initiated a series of economic reforms centring on privatisation, trade liberalisation, deregulation, and monetary measures that culminated in the adoption of the US Dollar as the national currency. The policies stimulated Central American economic integration and transformed the Salvadoran economy into one based on non-traditional exports (including the \textit{maquila} industry), services, tourism, commerce, and remittances.\textsuperscript{126} Until 1996 the country experienced high economic growth, which benefited particularly the financial sector and permitted the elite to consolidate its

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 240-243.
wealth.\textsuperscript{127} Ordinary Salvadorans, however, were disproportionately hard hit by the reforms and have seen no substantial improvement in their living conditions.

Although human development and poverty standards have improved in recent years, the disparities have historically been so severe that this progress has been insufficient to even out the vast differences in income and access to basic services. As of 2003, 43\% of the population remained in poverty, and the proportion of those in absolute or extreme poverty reached 19\%.\textsuperscript{128} Despite an increase in social spending, significant deficits persist in the provision of basic social services. Figures for the same period show that 33\% of homes lacked decent housing facilities, 24\% had no potable water while for the majority of those who did water supply was only intermittent.\textsuperscript{129} 47\% had no access to rubbish collection, 18\% lacked electricity, and 55.4\% were without telephone.\textsuperscript{130} 24\% of citizens had no access to health services, while social security services excluded almost the entire rural population and covered only 39\% of urban residents.\textsuperscript{131}

One of the country’s challenges is to create better educational and economic opportunities, particularly for its youth. El Salvador is an eminently young nation, with 37\% of its members below the age of 15 and 57.6\% under 25.\textsuperscript{132} Their social mobility is impeded not only by a low-quality education system, but also by the incapacity of the labour market to absorb the growing work force. Young people, especially males, have been disproportionately affected by unemployment, and the absence of sufficient and decent jobs has confined an increasing number of individuals to a situation of underemployment.\textsuperscript{133} The exclusion and marginality this implies for large parts of the population is exacerbated by persistent inequality. Although these conditions had slightly improved by 1992, income inequality has since risen again: between 1992 and 2002 the top quintile increased its share of national wealth from 54.5\% to 58.3\% while that of the lowest quintile declined from 3.2\% to 2.4\%. In 2002 the richest 20\% of society received 24 times the income of the poorest 20\%.\textsuperscript{134} Clearly, if the country is to achieve greater human development and equality, public spending needs to increase and this in turn

\textsuperscript{126} PNUD, \textit{Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2003}, 23.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{133} The term “underemployed” refers to those who work involuntarily less than 40 hours per week or work 40 hours or more per week and receive an income below the established minimum wage. On unemployment/underemployment in El Salvador, see PNUD, \textit{Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2001}, 125; PNUD, \textit{Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2003}, 136.
requires a fairer tax structure and a more determined fight against tax evasion and elusion. The private sector, however, has so far remained opposed to the introduction of redistributive policies.\footnote{PNUD, Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2001, 108-111.}

Given the low levels of social expenditure, what explains El Salvador’s advances in poverty reduction, and what do these factors insinuate about governmental efforts to reduce the social exclusion that constitutes the backdrop to gang development? To begin with a caveat, poverty has indeed diminished in the post-war period, but not to the extent that official statistics indicate. According to a UNDP study, the prevalence of poverty is underestimated because the methodology that is used to measure it is inaccurate. If the calculations were adjusted, poverty rates would exceed their current levels.\footnote{PNUD, Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2003, 13.} Of greater relevance, however, is the impact of out-migration and remittances. Since 1996 the lack of decent job opportunities has prompted an increasing number of Salvadorans to leave the country and seek employment abroad, often as undocumented migrants.\footnote{PNUD, Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2005: Una mirada al nuevo nosotros. El impacto de las migraciones (San Salvador: PNUD, 2005), 34.}

Today an estimated 1.5 million Salvadorans live and work in the United States alone and send home parts of their earnings to maintain their families.\footnote{Sarah Gammage, “Exporting People and Recruiting Remittances: A Development Strategy for El Salvador?” Latin American Perspectives 33 (2006): 75.} By 2000 the flow of remittances had reached US$1,750 million or 13.2% of GDP, and in 2004 22% of Salvadoran homes received remittances totalling US$2,548 million or 16% of GDP.\footnote{PNUD, Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2001, 151; PNUD, Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2005, 15.} These payments represent not only a key support of the domestic economy, but for poor families also the principal source of income and the means to satisfy their basic needs. Both migration and the remittances have played a critical role in alleviating poverty in El Salvador: the former by absorbing excess labour, the latter by ameliorating the conditions of those who have stayed behind. Together these factors have done more than public policies to raise human development and poverty standards.\footnote{PNUD, Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano, El Salvador 2003, 35.} Although the increase in social spending should not be dismissed, governments have evidently not made any serious effort toward the improvement of basic services and the creation of meaningful employment. The lack of political will to undertake substantial social transformations first aggravated the gang problem and later lay behind officials’ resistance to comprehensive gang control.
Crime and violence

Along with social exclusion crime and violence rank as one of El Salvador’s most serious problems. Homicides, while amounting to only 7.2% of all offences committed in 2003, are of particular concern.¹⁴¹ Norwithstanding an elevated pre-war homicide rate, with the end of the conflict the country experienced a sharp increase in the number of murders that reached 138/100,000 inhabitants between 1994 and 1995.¹⁴² The figures subsequently declined until they resumed their ascent in 2003.¹⁴³ By 2005 the Instituto de Medicina Legal (Forensic Institute, IML) registered a homicide rate of 55/100,000 inhabitants, and El Salvador was considered the most violent country in the whole of Latin America.¹⁴⁴ Given that the World Health Organisation classifies a homicide rate exceeding 10/100,000 as an epidemic,¹⁴⁵ alarm has understandably been raised at the enormous economic and social cost violence has been inflicting on society. The UNDP, for example, has calculated that in 2003 alone El Salvador incurred expenses totalling US$1,717 million or 11.5% of GDP for health, administration of justice, private security, and loss of investment and property.¹⁴⁶

Clearly, the entire nation would benefit from a better use of human, physical, and material resources if greater efforts at violence prevention were being made. The fact that this is not the case is perhaps more readily understood when considering the geographical distribution of homicides. Although crime and violence create generalised feelings of insecurity, it is the urban poor who are disproportionately affected by it. They are separated both spatially and socially from the middle-class city of public services and security.¹⁴⁷ In Greater San Salvador, one of the areas with the highest incidence of murders, marginal zones see much greater levels of violence than the more affluent areas.¹⁴⁸ Social exclusion may be one facilitating factor, but so are the culture of violence, ¹⁴¹ PNUD, ¿Cuánto cuesta la violencia a El Salvador? (San Salvador: PNUD, 2005), 26.
¹⁴³ José Miguel Cruz, “El Salvador,” in Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano, La cara de la violencia urbana en América Central (San José: Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano, 2006), 110.
¹⁴⁵ See PNUD, ¿Cuánto cuesta la violencia?, 23.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 58.
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an ineffective justice system (on which more below), and the availability of firearms. An estimated 450,000 weapons are in civilian hands, and their ubiquity makes violence much more lethal: in 2003 they were used in 71% of homicides.

The most visible form of violence in recent years has undoubtedly been committed by the street gangs. Yet, establishing their level of responsibility in the number of homicides has been a rather difficult task. In 2004 figures varied widely depending on the source: while the PNC attributed up to 80% of murders to the gangs, the IML suggested it might be a mere 10%. In reality only sound investigations can shed light on the perpetrators and the motives of the thousands of homicides that annually occur in El Salvador. However, as I will discuss below, the investigative capacity of both police and prosecutors has remained extremely deficient. This fundamental weakness has precluded better crime control over the years and was the reasoning behind the anti-gang legislation enacted in 2003 (see Chapter 2).

Before I turn to these institutional deficiencies I wish to reiterate the earlier point on the link between crime and political culture. Insecurity and police ineffectiveness have led many Salvadorans to harbour authoritarian attitudes and to turn to private (at times illegal) means to ensure their own safety. On the one hand, fear of victimisation has encouraged large parts of the population to favour order and the use of force over respect for legal norms. According to one survey more than 75% of citizens thought human rights favoured criminals and prevented the state from dealing with them. On the other hand, given the state's failure to provide public security people have largely resorted to alternative mechanisms of protection, including private security guards, carrying guns, and -in isolated cases- sicariato (the use of contract killers) and taking justice into their own hands. Aided by incendiary media reporting, conservative politicians have exploited public anxiety about crime to justify tougher laws and militarised policing. Over the years this has been the dominant official response to the country’s social problems. Mano Dura merely followed an established preference for punitive measures that afford political credit and require no commitment to changing the status quo.

149 Cruz, “Violencia, inseguridad ciudadana y las maniobras de las élites,” 248.
150 PNUD, ¿Cuánto cuesta la violencia?, 26, 35.
151 Cruz, “El Salvador,” 130.
153 Ibid., 521.
Actions that could have achieved a real impact on the levels of crime and violence have been neglected. One of these is a comprehensive crime strategy and greater precision in the recording of homicides. So far the three institutions that collect the relevant statistics (PNC, IML, and FGR) publish different figures, and attempts made since 2005 to harmonise data-gathering methods have not produced the expected results. The eradication of these numerical discrepancies is indispensable for the development of effective policies; the fact that this has yet to be accomplished highlights the utter disinterest in dealing with one of the country’s most serious problems. A second measure concerns the circulation of firearms among civilians. The authorities have done little to collect the weaponry left over from the war, tackle the growing illegal market, or sufficiently tighten the rules on gun possession. Despite earlier reforms, the current firearms legislation entails no restriction on the number of weapons a citizen may own and even permits civilian use of assault rifles such as M-16 or AK-47. A reduction in the availability of firearms would at least lessen the lethality of (gang) violence, but in some cases officials’ own business pursuits may actually preclude them from acting in the public interest. Finally, no serious efforts have been made to strengthen the investigative capacity of police and prosecutors. An enquiry into all homicides committed in 2005 found these deficiencies to be so severe that only 3.8% of murders had been investigated and resulted in a conviction. This situation not only creates impunity and stimulates crime, but also prevents a clear understanding of the problem. Therefore, doubt is also cast on the official justification for Mano Dura which held the gangs responsible for the majority of homicides. Overcoming investigative weaknesses requires an allocation of more resources to the relevant institutions, but also presupposes that their leadership fosters greater internal commitment to resolving cases. One recent study indicates that police in fact give little importance to homicides in which the victims are poor and/or suspected gang members and often dismiss them as gang-related killings.

155 Sidney Blanco Reyes and Francisco Díaz Rodríguez, Deficiencias policiales, fiscales o judiciales en la investigación y juzgamiento causantes de impunidad (San Salvador: PNUD, 2007), 61.
157 Rodrigo Ávila, formerly Deputy Minister for Public Security and Director-General of the PNC, is the owner of several gun shops and private security firms. See Hume, Armed violence and poverty in El Salvador, 17.
158 Blanco Reyes and Díaz Rodríguez, Deficiencias policiales, fiscales o judiciales, 18.
4.2.2 Actors

The National Civilian Police (PNC)

It was previously shown how the government initially attempted to sabotage the construction of a professional and democratic police force. These actions had a lasting impact on the PNC, and together with subsequent distortions engender a serious institutional deterioration. The intent here is to highlight the PNC’s main problems today, other than the investigative weaknesses referred to above, and to suggest that these were critical barriers to the implementation of a rights-respecting gang policy.

The politicisation of the police, particularly through the selection of its most senior personnel, has persisted over the years. The Director-General’s post has been staffed either by a civilian who identified more or less explicitly with ARENA (Mauricio Sandoval and Rodrigo Ávila) or a member of the old security forces (Ricardo Menesses). The command structure has been dominated by ex-military officers who, with the approval of their superiors, have converted the police into a vertical and authoritarian force. One of the steps towards that end was taken in late 2000 when revelations about police involvement in illicit activities resulted in a massive purge of the institution. Although the process apparently permitted the dismissal of criminal elements, it also served to expel “inconvenient types,” among them a disproportionate number of officers whose origins had been with the FMLN. The removal of individuals who might have opposed negative influences within the organisation, especially from the higher ranks, made it all the easier for corrupt and abusive practices to flourish.

The PNC’s professional character has been undermined in a variety of ways. The institution’s budget has been progressively reduced over the years, and this has inevitably limited the resources that are required to purchase the necessary equipment and to adequately pay and train police. While this affects efforts to stem crime and violence, it also prevents the hiring of capable personnel and leads to corruption and poor discipline.


161 PDDH, Violaciones a los derechos humanos, 11.

162 Spence, War and Peace in Central America, 61.

Corruption has been a persistent problem within the PNC and has been actively encouraged by some of its directors. During Sandoval’s tenure, for example, use was made of the *partida secreta* (a discretionary presidential spending account) to hand monthly kickbacks to individuals within the FGR and the PNC, including the Inspector-General, the police leadership, and elite units.\(^{164}\) Evidently, corruption was not only deeply embedded in the organisational culture, but also tolerated at the highest levels of government. Commissioner Menesses, a professed evangelical Christian, founded a sizeable religious movement within the PNC that is linked to the Tabernáculo Bíblico Bautista Amigos de Israel, one of the fastest-growing evangelical churches in El Salvador. Promotions and preferential access to off-duty work came to be conditional on an individual’s membership of this church or other bonds of loyalty to the police leadership.\(^{165}\) Favouritism of this kind fosters resentment among officers and necessarily affects their performance.

Perhaps the most serious problem is the recurrent human rights violations, which is compounded by the absence of effective control mechanisms. Although the police academy provides new entrants with the necessary training, the absence of a human rights culture within the PNC has made it difficult to promote respect for such guarantees among the lower ranks.\(^{166}\) Similarly, internal disciplinary systems play a key role in preventing police abuse and are generally considered an important sign of authorities’ commitment to professional conduct and the rule of law.\(^{167}\) The PNC’s disciplinary units were initially overseen by an external Inspector-General, but in 2001 a new organic law placed this post under the authority of the Director-General and seriously undermined the existing system of checks and balances.\(^{168}\) Due to insufficient resources and a lack of independence the Inspector-General cannot exercise appropriate control over police abuse and ultimately favours the impunity of perpetrators.\(^{169}\)

The PDDH has repeatedly condemned practices such as the excessive use of force, beatings of detainees, and torture to extract confessions, sometimes in the presence of police chiefs.\(^{170}\) Recommended corrections have largely been ignored, and the frequency

\(^{164}\) Anonymous interview AI-007.
\(^{165}\) Ibid.
\(^{166}\) Interview with Xochitl Marchelli, Human Rights Instructor, ANSP, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.
\(^{168}\) Córdova Macías, “La contribución del proceso de paz,” 230.
\(^{169}\) PDDH, *Violaciones a los derechos humanos*, 78-79.
\(^{170}\) Ibid., 23, 38.
of the abuses only intensified during the 2000s.\footnote{Ibid., 9, 23.} In addition, the period between 2004 and 2006 saw an increasing number of cases in which police-run social cleansing groups beat or tortured and subsequently killed individuals, including gang members. Investigations into these extralegal executions were not undertaken, allowing the perpetrators of these acts to remain in impunity.\footnote{Ibid., 60-61.} Instead, the government has rejected allegations that extermination groups may be operating from anywhere within the state.\footnote{\textit{La Prensa Gráfica,} “Gobierno niega existencia de grupos de exterminio de pandilleros,” 19 August 2005, available at http://www.laprensagrafica.com/lodeldia/08.asp (accessed 20 August 2005).} However, one of my interviewees confirmed that a death squad structure has indeed developed within the PNC.\footnote{Anonymous interview AI-007.} Grupo Omega is managed by various ex-militaries, maintains its intelligence units within some of the Ministries, and receives information and logistical support from senior PNC officials, including Commissioner Douglas Omar García Funes and Commissioner José Luis Tobar Prieto.\footnote{Grupo Omega is run by retired army officers, including General Gustavo Perdomo (named in the Truth Commission report for human rights abuses), Major Oscar Peña Durán, and Captain Adolfo Torres (now ARENA’s director of the Department of San Salvador and the owner of private security companies). The intelligence units are located, among other, at the Ministerio de Gobernación, the Treasury, and the Vice-Ministry of Transport. Commissioner García Funes is an ex-Guardsman and former PNC Deputy Director of Investigations and currently Deputy Director of Specialised Areas. Commissioner Tobar Prieto is an ex-National Policeman, former PNC Deputy Director of Investigations and Deputy Director-General and since September 2008 the PNC’s Director-General.} At the time I conducted my research three extermination groups were embedded in the police elite units. Clearly, there is an urgent need to conduct further enquiries into the composition, operation, and financing of this structure and to prosecute those involved in it. The failure to eradicate the death squads of earlier periods is precisely what permits the persistence of these destructive practices. The lack of investigations into current death squad activity as well as deficient control of police abuse more generally suggests that the authorities condone such acts. Given government and PNC-internal reluctance to maintain a professional and rights-respecting police corps, it is difficult to see how NGOs could successfully promote a form of gang control that eschews brute force.

\section*{The economic elite}

To understand the limits to NGO activism it is equally crucial to consider the influence of El Salvador’s affluent minority over the state and public policy-making. Previous studies have documented how the oligarchy consolidated its power over the decades through the further strengthening of kinship ties and business alliances among the
dominant family groups.\textsuperscript{176} The economic diversification that began in earlier periods and intensified with the reforms of the 1990s certainly impacted the configuration of the elite. However, factors such as the war and the structural shift from an agro-export model to a new growth pattern based on non-traditional exports, service, and commerce also prompted some businesses to expand their activities within Central America.\textsuperscript{177} Since 1990 both the globalised economic power groups (EPGs) that emerged from this process and the transnational corporations (TNCs) that were drawn to the isthmus by trade liberalisation and privatisations have pushed for even stronger regional economic integration. Over the years the TNCs have penetrated into the sectors formerly controlled by national elites and are economically powerful actors in their own right.\textsuperscript{178} Nonetheless, the EPGs have themselves concentrated greater wealth and economic power in their hands, and while this has reinforced the polarisation within the private sector, it has also had serious consequences for Salvadoran society as a whole.\textsuperscript{179} The intent here is to highlight the political implications of this new economic integration, particularly elite influence over the political system and public policy-making.

The EPGs rely on a variety of mechanisms to advance their interests, including private sector-specific institutions such as think-tanks, business schools, and periodic meetings.\textsuperscript{180} An ideological affinity with the country’s leading media allows them both to promote their own priorities and to marginalise voices that criticise the general direction of social and economic policy.\textsuperscript{181} One of the more direct ways in which the EPGs can shape government policies and programmes is through their control of ARENA. Since this party is the vehicle through which the elite participates in politics, the government’s economic agenda tends to coincide with that of the EPGs.\textsuperscript{182} Indeed, many businessmen have held important posts in past administrations, affording them participation in strategic decisions. In a recent survey of Salvadoran entrepreneurs most respondents felt that this created a conflict of interest and tended to result in policies that favoured only certain groups.\textsuperscript{183}


\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 545.

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 539, 545.

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 555-556.

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 547.

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 550.

\textsuperscript{183} IUDOP, “La transparencia en el Estado salvadoreño: La perspectiva de los empresarios,” \textit{Boletín de prensa} Año XX, No. 1 (San Salvador: IUDOP, 2005), 8.
Perhaps of greatest concern is the elite’s increasing reliance on informal lobbying mechanisms. The most powerful family groups form a type of “big boys’ club” (locally known as “los grandotes” and “los torogozones”) and have “latch rights” that permit them frequent and direct access to the highest authorities, including the President of the Republic, ministers, lawmakers, and judges. The EPGs are not always successful in advocating some measures and vetoing others, but analysts consider their influence generally very effective.

According to the previously cited poll, most interviewees concurred that it was these big businesses that determined economic policy and were the only ones to have benefited from the policies of the last four ARENA governments. The same study concluded that the EPGs’ influence over the decision-making process was so profound as to amount to a “capture of the state.” The elite’s preparedness to use its unparalleled wealth and power to impose its interests has encouraged a highly undemocratic and exclusive policy process that fails to meet the needs of all Salvadorans. The government’s partisan nature in turn has been a key obstacle to the pursuit of comprehensive gang control.

Civil society

The NGO advocacy efforts that are the focus of this thesis must be located in the changing dynamics of civil society activism in El Salvador. The social movement had been at the forefront of calls for peace and democratisation, but when these objectives had been achieved it lost its unity and sense of purpose. Although the overall conditions became more conducive to popular organising, the social movement has remained weak and fragmented and lacks the analytical capacity, creativity, and strategic skills to increase its political influence. Its struggles are now oriented more towards sectoral demands concerning issues such as health, the environment, women’s rights, consumer protection, and human rights, and this very diversity has prevented the articulation of a common agenda. Broad mobilisations such as the mass demonstrations against the privatisation of the public health system between 1999 and 2003 (the famous “marchas blancas”) have been

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184 Segovia, “Integración real y grupos centroamericanos de poder económico,” 546.
185 Ibid., 549.
187 Ibid., 8.
188 Las Dignas, CDC, FESPAD, and IDHUCA, eds., El Salvador por dentro (San Salvador: UCA, 2005), 122-123.
Chapter 1: From authoritarianism to unconsolidated democracy

The country has seen a rise in small-scale protests focused on specific local problems, but the overall atmosphere is marked by widespread apathy towards citizen participation. Analysts have attributed the absence of a strong and coherent social movement to a leadership vacuum that arose when its middle class members switched to the newly-legalised FMLN. However, this trend has undoubtedly been compounded by the growth of the NGO sector.

NGOs had already developed in the course of the armed conflict, but it was in the post-war period when they really began to flourish. The scarcity of domestic funding makes many of them dependent on international assistance, and new funding requirements have encouraged many civil society groups to adopt NGO status and obtain the necessary legal personality. As a result of these changes El Salvador has experienced a veritable NGO boom: whereas by 1979 merely 22 of these organisations had been registered, during the war this figure grew to 74 and now exceeds 5,000. The sector attracted many middle class professionals and sapped much of the social movement’s intellectual strength. However, the main consequence of these developments has been the fragmentation of civil society into small and competing NGOs. The risk is not only a duplication of activities, but also a tendency for much of this work to become reduced to a series of isolated projects and to neglect the creation of conditions for long-term social and political change.

Even organisations that are committed to transforming society may merely criticise specific laws or policies without finding ways of addressing structural factors.

In recent years Salvadoran NGOs have tended to maintain a largely reactive attitude to the country’s problems and have shown little capacity either to propose alternatives to existing measures or to influence public opinion. Thus far the possibilities of NGO action have been limited by both internal weaknesses and exogenous constraints that need to be overcome if greater political impact is to be achieved. On the one hand, the organisations lack adequate human and financial resources, a common agenda, and

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190 Whitehead, Perfil de Gobernabilidad de El Salvador, 57-60.
192 Aguilar and Miranda, “Entre la articulación y la competencia,” 73.
193 Jenny Pearce, “From civil war to ‘civil society’: has the end of the Cold War brought peace to Central America?” International Affairs 74 (1998): 599.
194 Ibid., 614.
196 Córdova Macías, “La contribución del proceso de paz,” 211.
strategic alliances. On the other hand, they operate in a new political environment that frowns on the confrontational behaviour of the past and is normatively biased towards a search for consensual solutions. NGOs have been largely supportive of democratic forms of action such as the lobbying of public officials, but unequal access to decision-makers and the press (on media barriers, see Chapter 3) has prevented them from making a substantial impact on policy processes. The challenge for NGOs is not only to create more space for pluralistic participation and expression, but also to strengthen their capacity to effect change, including by giving greater priority to networking, advocacy, community empowerment, and support for the social movement. Above all they need to acquire a better understanding of existing power structures and how these might be transformed. NGO work that seeks narrow policy changes rather than innovative ways of targeting the actors who have every interest in blocking them is unlikely to have the desired impact.

**Conclusion**

El Salvador’s political and economic affairs have historically revolved around the country’s elite. Throughout republican times this powerful minority used its influence over the state to protect its privileges while the rest of the population was deprived from a share in the wealth. Reform efforts met with strenuous resistance, and real or potential challengers to the status quo were depicted as a threat to society that had to be contained by force. The *Mano Dura* discourse of the 2000s, painting the street gangs as a new menace that required social control, would merely follow an established precedent. While the defence of elite interests remained the primary objective, the way in which political control was exercised varied. For five decades the oligarchy relied on the military to act as its guardian, but when this alliance broke with the October 1979 coup it sought to reassert its dominant position through state-sponsored violence and the creation of its own party.

ARENA offered a political project that the elite could rally around despite its divergent economic interests and was quickly able to achieve a major electoral triumph. With its victory in the 1989 presidential contest the right returned to power and soon took steps towards a negotiated end to the war. Although a number of factors facilitated

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a political settlement of the armed conflict, a key reason was the recent shift in elite economic interests and the associated preference for managing a transition to democracy. Since the prolongation of the fighting would only have delayed the oligarchy in reviving the economy and restoring its way of life, a moderate faction decided that the introduction of a pluralistic political system was a desirable concession in return for a cessation of the hostilities. This acceptance of a more inclusive regime, however, did not entail a shift in elite political culture and therefore no commitment to democratic consolidation.

Given that those who were tasked with the construction of a more egalitarian society had the least interest in it, the transition process was marred by obstructions and advanced largely due to international financing and monitoring activities. In recent years many of the initial gains have been halted if not reversed, and today El Salvador’s democracy remains weak and exhibits an unsettling continuity with past practices. The country continues to lack a democratic political culture and well-resourced, responsive institutions, and governments have made no serious effort to reduce social exclusion and provide all citizens with adequate public security. Rather, economic policy has exacerbated existing inequalities, and public anxiety about crime has been exploited to foster nostalgia for authoritarian responses and to justify tougher laws and militarised policing. This established preference for punitive measures and the preservation of the status quo helps us to understand why the government would also respond to the gangs with Mano Dura. Similarly, the acute social demand for security suggests that the official gang policy was likely to be greeted with applause, regardless of its suppressive nature or level of effectiveness.

By the time Mano Dura would be launched El Salvador had developed two characteristics that would make NGO advocacy of alternative gang control difficult. First, the police had been turned into an authoritarian and abusive force that lacked a culture of human rights as well as the investigative capacity to tackle (gang) crime and violence. Second, elite influence over ARENA and the state had become such that a minority of Salvadorans can shape policy design in its sole benefit and preclude the rest of society from participating in the decision-making process. The ruling party’s preference to protect elite interests and maintain a politically-pliant -though unprofessional- police would motivate government resistance to the implementation of a comprehensive and rights-respecting gang policy. The complexity of these contextual

199 Centre for International Studies, “Engagement with civil society,” 34.
constraints in turn would require NGOs to contest *Mano Dura* in creative ways as well as to overcome internal weaknesses and unequal access to decision-makers and the press. The following two chapters consider the government’s *Mano Dura* policies and the media’s role in promoting this approach to gang control.
Chapter 2

Mano Dura against the street gangs: a populist penal response to a social problem

El Salvador has a long-standing gang problem that merely assumed greater visibility once the war had ended and deported Salvadoran youths brought with them the US street gang culture they had been immersed in. Despite mounting public concern about the impact of gang activity, the authorities had long failed to tackle the problem in a coherent manner. It was only in 2003 when the outgoing Flores government launched its widely publicised *Mano Dura* plan that a gang policy was first introduced. The measure proved immensely popular and was subsequently continued by the Saca administration, though with certain modifications.

This purpose of this chapter is to analyse why gang control suddenly became a priority and what changes the policy experienced once it became the target of judicial and civil society criticism. It begins by outlining the main characteristics of *Mano Dura* and the accompanying anti-gang legislation (*Ley Antimaras*) before focusing on the timing of the strategy. Turning then to the Saca government’s expanded *Súper Mano Dura*, the chapter considers the consultation process that preceded it and examines the programme’s additional components of prevention and rehabilitation/reinsertion. Finally, I show how the measure was quietly buried once it had become a political liability and highlight some of the long-term implications of gang suppression. It is argued that *Mano Dura* constituted a populist penal policy that sought electoral advantage rather than effective gang control. Preventive and rehabilitative initiatives were adopted to deflect further criticism and entailed no serious effort to reduce gang crime and violence. Suppression remained the dominant approach as it was the easier response for a government that is reluctant to allocate more resources to investigative policing and lessen the conditions of social marginality that many Salvadorans live in.

1. The Flores Administration’s gang policy

*Mano Dura* and the *Ley Antimaras*

On 23 July 2003 President Francisco Flores descended on one of the capital’s gang areas to launch *Mano Dura*. Positioned in front of an oversized graffiti, he informed the assembled journalists that gang members would be systematically arrested and order re-
established in the affected communities. Since the PNC had attributed the majority of delinquent acts to these groups, the implication was that the plan would not only dismantle the gangs, but also lower the country’s high levels of crime and violence. In the months to come, and amid considerable media publicity, the authorities embarked on graffiti removal, joint police/military anti-gang squads (Grupos de Tarea Antipandilla, GTA) could be seen patrolling the streets, and police carried out massive area sweeps to detain suspected gang members. Those who were seized in these operations were often publicly exhibited, and the press, which played a critical role in framing Mano Dura as an effective policy, supplied abundant coverage of these spectacular crackdowns (see also Chapter 3).

The criminal prosecution of arrested gang members was meant to be facilitated by a temporary Anti-Gang Act (Ley Antimaras, LAM). Of an anticipated six-month duration, the bill proposed to make gang membership a crime punishable with two to five years in prison and was aimed at all individuals above the age of twelve. These provisions breached a number of constitutional guarantees and international human rights norms, including by lowering the age of legal responsibility and requiring no evidence that an offence had been committed. Instead, the police could simply detain everyone they deemed to be gang members by virtue of physical features, such as tattoos, or form of

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dress.\(^4\) The measure created immediate resistance among human rights defenders, judges, and opposition politicians who objected to the terms of the proposed law, indeed insisted there was no need for special legislation at all, and called for greater emphasis on prevention and rehabilitation.\(^5\) The government, for its part, was faced with an unexpected dilemma since most recently-detained gang members were released for lack of evidence and the LAM initially failed to be enacted.\(^6\)

The relentless pressure of President Flores and other officials paid off, and in early October 2003 ARENA and PCN lawmakers ratified the decree.\(^7\) However, the problems did not stop there. The PDDH submitted a constitutional challenge to the LAM, and many judges opted not to apply a law they considered to be violating human rights.\(^8\) The Supreme Court of Justice eventually determined the legislation to be unconstitutional, but the ruling came only days before the LAM was due to expire and helped the ruling party save face prior to the presidential elections.\(^9\) Furthermore, on the day the verdict was delivered the congress passed another three-month anti-gang act, which closely resembled the previous measure.\(^10\) In June 2004 the position of domestic critics was buttressed again when the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child requested the derogation of the LAM, but by then President Saca had entered office and was about to announce his own gang policy.\(^11\)

Throughout this time government and law enforcement officials defended their approach to gang control, variously arguing that *Mano Dura* served to take dangerous gang members off the streets, lower the homicide rate, and restore tranquility in the communities.\(^12\) The judges, who continued to release gang members if no evidence of an


\(^10\) Ibid., 22-24.


\(^12\) *El Diario de Hoy*, “Bajan crimenes, asegura Menesses,” 16 August 2003, 3.
offence was presented, were accused of siding with criminals and unreasonably boycotting the authorities’ efforts to provide public security.\textsuperscript{13} The suppression activities certainly enabled the police to identify and record many of El Salvador’s gang members, but they squandered scarce resources and were utterly ineffective in securing convictions or controlling crime. Between 23 July 2003 and 30 August 2004, when the launch of \textit{Súper Mano Dura} signalled the beginning of a new phase in gang control, a total of 19,275 gang-related detentions had been made (including repeat arrests). However, more than 95\% of cases were dismissed.\textsuperscript{14} More importantly, the homicide rate rose from 2,172 murders in 2003 (a daily average of 6) to 2,762 in 2004 (a daily average of 7).\textsuperscript{15} As discussed below, press coverage of the gang policy glossed over these problems and helped sustain public support for the measure despite its discriminatory nature and detrimental impact on the situation of crime and violence. The attractiveness of \textit{Mano Dura} is a significant point and, given the government’s previous indifference to gang control, requires us to probe the emergence of the policy.

The populist nature of \textit{Mano Dura}

This thesis has already emphasised that although El Salvador’s street gangs are not a new phenomenon, prior to 2003 the authorities had not developed a consistent approach to these groups. Critics might argue that even \textit{Mano Dura} did not amount to a full-fledged plan or policy, but merely encompassed a series of suppression efforts. It remains nonetheless true that the measure constituted the first explicit attempt to address the gang problem. Since there had been no recent spike in gang violence and homicide figures had declined in previous years, what might explain the sudden need for gang control? I contend that \textit{Mano Dura} was a populist penal policy whose primary purpose was not to curb street gang activity, but to improve ARENA’s electoral advantage in the run-up to the 2004 presidential elections. Penal populism is a political response that portrays offending as the result of wilful anti-social behaviour rather than social exclusion and promotes imprisonment as the principal crime reduction strategy.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Mano Dura} pertained to this category, because it exploited public anxiety about crime by depicting the gangs as the main source of insecurity and offering respite through punitive

measures. Although the plan was fundamentally weak, it focused on a highly visible target and conducted some striking police operations that would, in the short term at least, boost ARENA’s image while circumventing criminal investigations and gang prevention/rehabilitation. What interests us here is less the discourses that painted the gangs as a threat and rendered Mano Dura a meaningful policy, but the factors that prompted its adoption.

To appreciate how the government came to express such unexpected interest in gang suppression, it is vital to consider the timing and context in which the effort was initiated. At the time Mano Dura was launched El Salvador was barely eight months away from the next presidential elections. Although ARENA has successfully defended the presidency since 1989 and dominated congress together with other right-wing parties, it suffered increasing losses at the municipal and legislative levels. Growing disenchantment with the country’s economic direction benefited the FMLN, which steadily augmented its share in congressional seats and municipalities. The first significant swing occurred when the left regained control of the San Salvador mayor’s office in 1997, a trend that deepened with the elections of 2000 and 2003 in which the FMLN overtook its main adversary in the Legislative Assembly.\(^\text{17}\) Although in 2004 victory would again go to the right, in the preceding months it was widely felt that the FMLN’s recent gains had strengthened prospects for an alternation in power.\(^\text{18}\) Since the elite remained concerned at the possible erosion of its privileges, ARENA would rapidly have to bolster its own electoral appearance if it was to retain its influence over the state.

In the past surveys have shown that Salvadorans’ perception of the main national problem impacts their political preferences. In other words, citizens will favour one of the two largest parties over the other depending on whether it is preoccupied with economic issues or crime.\(^\text{19}\) For much of 2003 public opinion had identified the economy as the overriding problem, and this assessment had adversely affected ARENA’s levels of support.\(^\text{20}\) However, in an October poll almost half the population indicated insecurity as most important, and for the first time as many as 21% of respondents signalled the gangs

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as the key topic. The same survey revealed that 88% of interviewees were in favour of Mano Dura, and a majority believed the plan would help lower crime. Furthermore, in the space of a few months ARENA had managed to displace the FMLN in voting intentions. One factor behind this shift was the greater popularity of ARENA’s presidential candidate, but another was clearly the introduction of Mano Dura. Although one might argue that the ruling party’s good showing was merely an unintended effect of the plan rather than its purpose, both the timing and the inconsistent nature of the gang policy permit the conclusion that the strategy aimed not to reduce gang violence, but to win votes. This inference was confirmed by a leaked COENA memo, which acknowledged that Mano Dura and its backing by the majority of voters gave ARENA an immediate opportunity to associate itself with a winning theme and present itself as the party that is toughest on crime.

With Mano Dura and the accompanying media campaign the government ably deflected attention from its poor economic performance and defined the gangs as the most pressing problem to which Mano Dura was proposed as the appropriate solution. The measure instantly appealed to a population that lives in constant fear of victimisation. Since gang control afforded ARENA substantial political benefits, it became a central campaign theme and was ultimately one of the reasons for the right’s presidential victory. However, previous difficulties, including widespread criticism of suppressive crackdowns, the judges’ lack of cooperation, and the expiry of the LAM, required Antonio Saca to adopt a revised gang policy.

2. The Saca Administration’s gang policy

Súper Mano Dura

The government’s strategic plan recognised that crime and violence remained one of the country’s challenges and affirmed that a special effort would be made to address the gang

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23 Ibid., 4-6.
25 The COENA is executive committee of ARENA. On the memo, see *La Prensa Gráfica*, “ARENA a pescar votos con el plan antimaras,” 13 August 2003, 14.
26 José Miguel Cruz, “Las elecciones presidenciales desde el comportamiento de la opinión pública,” *ECA* 665-666 (2004): 266.
problem through prevention, law enforcement, and reinsertion. Prior to the launch of Súper Mano Dura each of its components was to be discussed in a wide-ranging consultation process. Held in mid-2004, the Foro Antipandillas (Anti-Gang Forum) brought together government and police officials, judges, NGOs, and international donor agencies to reach a consensual approach to gang control. Since the proposals that emerged during the two-week event were meant to constitute the basis of President Saca’s gang policy the main results are briefly reviewed below. I argue that the administration organised the roundtable to secure new anti-gang legislation that would permit the continuation of gang suppression. Prevention and rehabilitation initiatives were debated and subsequently adopted to placate critics of Mano Dura, but these programmes were trivial and did not amount to a fundamental policy change.

The forum was structured around three thematic roundtables that focused on criminal and criminal procedural laws; juvenile penal legislation; and prevention/rehabilitation. Participants rejected the creation of special anti-gang legislation and agreed instead on an amendment of Article 345 of the Penal Code which sanctions membership of an “illicit association,” i.e., a group or organisation whose purpose is the perpetration of crimes. Prevention was thought to require better education and job opportunities for young people and improvements of the community context. Similarly, rehabilitation/reinsertion was seen to entail psychosocial assistance, economic opportunities, and intervention in the family and community context. The legal reforms were instantly sent to congress and enacted in early August 2004. At the end of the month President Saca formally initiated Súper Mano Dura and deployed further GTAs in gang-affected areas. The PNC continued its raids and hoped to dismantle the gangs through the targeted arrest of their leaders. Yet, the police largely persisted with its established method of detaining individuals for their suspected gang membership, claiming that the street gangs were criminal organisations and those displaying gang-specific tattoos could therefore be prosecuted. The judges, however, were unconvinced and again released gang members if insufficient evidence for an offence was supplied.

28 See José Miguel Cruz and Marlon Carranza, “Pandillas y políticas públicas: El caso de El Salvador,” in Moro, Juventudes, Violencia y Exclusión, 153.
29 Ministerio de Gobernación, Construyendo juntos una política de prevención, atención y control de la violencia. El camino recorrido por las mesas de trabajo (San Salvador: mimeo, 2004), 14-22.
While the authorities made gang suppression a priority, prevention and rehabilitation programmes were introduced only after a considerable delay. *Mano Amiga* was aimed at preventing at-risk youths from joining gangs while *Mano Extendida* sought to help gang members reintegrate into society. The institutions that have been tasked with the implementation of these initiatives are the Youth Secretariat and the National Council of Public Security (CNSP). To avoid repetition my assessment of the two plans is structured around the contribution of each of these agencies.

**The Secretaría de la Juventud (SJ)**

The Secretaría de la Juventud (Youth Secretariat, SJ) is a dependency of the Presidency of the Republic and was established in 2004 to execute the presidential programme *JóvenES*, aimed at promoting the development of young people. In pursuit of this objective the SJ carried out a nationwide survey into their needs and subsequently developed the *Plan Nacional de Juventud 2005-2015* (National Youth Plan 2005-2015, PNJ). This is not the place to exhaustively examine either the survey results or the PNJ except to note that the former, at least in their published version, reveal little about the difficulties facing young Salvadorans and constitute a weak foundation for a public policy. The PNJ, on the other hand, makes no reference to the ideas proposed during the Anti-Gang Forum and incorporates no coherent strategy to improve the quality of life of gang and non-gang youths. Instead, it proposes a series of activities that are structured around five main pillars. One of these concerns “Vulnerable Groups” and comprises *Mano Amiga* and *Mano Extendida*.

Although *Mano Amiga* had been announced as a gang prevention programme, in the plan it is presented as a much broader form of early intervention assisting youths at risk from crime, gangs, drug addiction, and teenage pregnancies. Similarly, *Mano Extendida* is described as an initiative that seeks the rehabilitation and reinsertion of gang members, juvenile offenders, drug addicts, and street children. More specifically, it is meant to teach values, offer spiritual assistance, education and job training, health services, tattoo removal, cultural and sports activities, and facilitate the search for employment. The programmes target youths between the ages of 15 and 24 years and are based on the idea

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of “focalización” or a focus on the 20 communities most affected by crime and violence. They are operationalised by a multi-agency system that comprises the SJ and other institutions with youth-related functions such as Ministries and local governments, the police, the CNSP, NGOs, churches, and the private sector. The official role of the SJ is to act as national coordinator of existing gang control efforts, manage resources, and monitor and evaluate the various projects.

During a visit to the organisation I intended to find out more about its role in gang control and was handed a number of brochures, but the then Secretary, César Funes, and the Programme Coordinators who received me seemed unable to supplement the written material with more concrete information. Several of my interviewees had had a similar experience and confirmed my perception that the SJ’s activities lacked substance. Below I highlight what appeared to be some of the most critical problems both with the institution and its work.

First, it is debatable whether there existed a real need for the Secretariat. Although it is largely known for its gang prevention and rehabilitation programmes, the SJ has the much broader mandate of fostering the development of all youths. However, prior to the Secretariat’s creation El Salvador already had a body of comparable scope, the Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (ISNA) or child protection agency. The ISNA is best known for administering the country’s juvenile detention centres, but in fact has a wide range of functions aimed at ensuring the wellbeing of all individuals below the age of 18 years. The Institute has for years been under-resourced and struggles to meet its responsibilities, and while I am not proposing that it should have been given added tasks in gang control, the establishment of the SJ clearly produces a duplication of efforts and the absorption of scarce resources. Instead of further inflating the state bureaucracy and its expenses, the government could have restructured existing institutions and designed the SJ purely as a gang-specific mechanism. National gang policy coordination was sorely needed in El Salvador. However, the Secretariat appears merely to masquerade as a gang control body, demonstrating President Saca’s commitment to prevention and rehabilitation, but delivering few tangible results. I am inclined to reach this conclusion for a number of

37 Interview with María Teresa de Mejía, Legislation and Public Policy Officer, UNICEF, former Director of the ISNA and Director of the OAJJ, San Salvador, 20 April 2006.
reasons. One is that little if any interest has been shown in developing a strong and effective institution. Not only has the Secretary’s post been held by three different individuals in as many years, but most technical staff also lack the necessary expertise and are simply ARENA youths who receive generous salaries while being groomed as future party cadre. Another reason is that the SJ has unaccountably spent vast amounts of public money on promotional and other items, but has been much less clear in its approach to gang control.

The community-level gang work suffers from a series of inconsistencies. First, focalización is meant to concentrate efforts in the most crime-ridden zones. While it is necessary to mitigate the community factors that spawn gangs, local programmes must be combined with a comprehensive national gang strategy that also addresses broader issues such as gun control, economic development, development of urban infrastructure, improvement of education, and provision of jobs and vocational training. However, as the previous chapter indicated, these are precisely the areas that no ARENA government has really wanted to tackle. Second, it is unclear how and whether targeting occurs. Gang scholars stress that a gang control policy needs to correctly target individuals, groups, and communities. In the absence of publicly available information it is impossible to assess how the SJ selects programme participants. However, the fact that the communities were selected for their homicide rates rather than their gang problem suggests that there is either no awareness of the need for gang-specific targeting or no clarity of goals. Either case points to a lack of explicit capacities and intentions to undertake gang control.

Furthermore, there is a degree of arbitrariness in the choice of the communities. Some gang-affected towns have been ignored entirely, because their homicide indicators were not considered serious enough to warrant inclusion in the programme. Other areas are disregarded because their gang problem is so severe that they are considered to be beyond all hope and to merit only suppression. Within the SJ technical staff who have no ties to ARENA are also pressured to give preference to municipalities governed

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41 Klein and Maxson, Street Gang Patterns and Policies, 239-241.
42 Interview with Salvador Hernández, Director, MOJE, Ilobasco, 11 July 2006.
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by that party. In addition, where the Secretariat does maintain a presence it has helped create youth committees, but their leaders reportedly act as orejas (government informants) and convey to the institution if local residents plan to hold demonstrations or meetings with the FMLN mayor.

The SJ’s coordinating function is no more coherent than its community-related activities. Although the institution is tasked to synchronise, monitor, and evaluate existing initiatives and to disseminate their results, it has made only feeble attempts to fulfil this part of its mandate. One NGO working with at-risk youths and imprisoned gang members professed never to have been contacted. Another one affirmed that not only had it not been offered assistance, but the government had also accused it of covering-up gang crime and threatened to withdraw its legal personality if its gang prevention continued. For those who have collaborated with the SJ the encounter has been a disappointing one. One NGO that had been offered some funding in return for sharing its experience faced repeated delays and a year later was still waiting to be reimbursed. More often, however, the Secretariat seems merely to associate itself with other actors’ efforts for political capital. I was told of repeated occasions when the SJ had offered financial contributions and then requested that the money be spent on its own promotional items and either the Secretary or the President of the Republic appeared in the inauguration ceremony. The surrounding media publicity then ensured that these officials reaped the benefits for activities which others had in fact been organising. Such incidents have created resentment among those who are truly interested in working for Salvadoran youths and lend the government no credibility. Indeed, they suggest that the authorities’ primary goal is image-management rather than gang control.

This perception is reinforced by the fact that nothing has been done to harmonise suppression with prevention and rehabilitation efforts. Several interviewees expressed concern that their rehabilitation work in the communities had been hindered by police intimidation if not arrests of gang members even when these could be clearly identified

48 Interview with Salvador Hernández, Director, MOJE, Ilobasco, 11 July 2006.
49 Interview with Verónica Hill, Youth Programme Coordinator, Office of the Mayor of San Salvador, San Salvador, 14 June 2006.
as programme participants. In one case the project organiser asked the PNC’s Director-General for an explanation and was informed that gang members merely joined rehabilitation initiatives to obtain a safe-conduct.\textsuperscript{50} The possibility that some gang youths manipulate those who seek to help them start a new life cannot be ruled out and has reportedly occurred.\textsuperscript{51} However, if this is assumed to be a general attitude, then alternative gang control approaches are thwarted from the beginning. If the SJ took its coordinating function seriously, surely it could have used its authority to ensure that the police deter gang crime without interfering with complementary activities.

So far it is unclear what, if any, the Secretariat’s achievements are. At the time I conducted my research no evaluations existed of either its own output or the external programmes it is said to be monitoring. Overall, the SJ appears to be a fundamentally weak and politicised institution that operates with little transparency and displays neither a vision of comprehensive gang control nor a real interest in it. The fact that at least one of the institutions expressly created to promote prevention and rehabilitation fails in its most basic responsibilities certainly casts doubt on the government’s commitment to gang violence reduction.

The Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP)

Unlike the SJ, the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (National Council of Public Security, CNSP) has been actively engaged in gang prevention and rehabilitation. The creation of this body had originally been proposed by ONUSAL with a view to advising the Head of State in public security matters. In 1996 then President Calderón Sol agreed to establish the CNSP, more in response to pressure from the UN than out of conviction, and in its early years it produced a series of important studies.\textsuperscript{52} However, its recommendations were rarely implemented.\textsuperscript{53} The Flores government subsequently changed the Council’s profile, assigning it a role in crime prevention. More recently, its mandate was extended to cover also gang rehabilitation. Below I review the CNSP’s contribution to gang control.

\textsuperscript{50} Interviews with Verónica Hill, Youth Programme Coordinator, Office of the Mayor of San Salvador, San Salvador, 14 June 2006; Carlos Rivas, Pastor General, Tabernáculo Bautista de Avivamiento, San Bartolo, Ilopango, 6 June 2006.

\textsuperscript{51} Interview with Tránsito Ruano, Centro de Formación y Capacitación de la Vicaría Divino Salvador, Archdiocese of San Salvador, San Salvador, 14 February 2006.

\textsuperscript{52} On the creation of the CNSP, see Popkin, \textit{Peace Without Justice}, 192.

Through its Programme for the Social Prevention of Violence and Crime the Council has been conducting community organising, education and vocational training, sports and arts, and improvement of social infrastructure. Geographically the activities have been limited to the municipalities with the highest homicide rate in the Departments of San Salvador, La Libertad, and Sonsonate. The initiative received an important financial boost when in 2003 the European Union (EU) began supporting the CNSP with ProJóvenes, a five-year project for violence prevention that is co-funded by the EU and the Government of El Salvador.\textsuperscript{54} ProJóvenes itself comprises the five components of community and municipal organisation; family strengthening, education; vocational training and employment, and, more recently, rehabilitation and reinsertion.\textsuperscript{55} Similar to the CNSP’s long-term programme, it is aimed at youths aged between 10 and 25 years and operates in 13 municipalities within Greater San Salvador, although different communities have been selected each year.\textsuperscript{56} Both initiatives mainly seek to create a violence prevention model based on local actors such as community leaders and municipal governments.\textsuperscript{57}

In both its preventive and rehabilitative efforts (examined below) the CNSP relies on focalización, the concept that also guides the SJ’s work. I will not elaborate much further on this idea except to note that the Council directs its focus both to areas (the most insecure communities) and beneficiaries (at-risk youths, juvenile offenders, and gang members). The approach is justified with the argument that gang and gang-prone youths live in marginalised zones.\textsuperscript{58} Although this view recognises the role of community factors in gang emergence, as I indicated earlier the problem is that El Salvador has thus far not developed a national gang strategy. Local initiatives can therefore only have a limited impact. Another uncertainty I would highlight is again the targeting of participants. I have previously emphasised the importance of targeting, but the paucity of available information makes it difficult to establish what, if any, criteria the Council adheres to. Absent documentation of programme processes and outcomes it is impossible to assess the CNSP’s gang prevention more fully.

\textsuperscript{54} The financing agreement was signed on 23 May 2002, but the disbursement of the funds did not begin until 2003. The budget totals €12,400,000.00; the EU makes the greater contribution with €9,200,000.00, while the Government of El Salvador provides €3,600,000.00. See CNSP and European Union, \textit{ProJóvenes de El Salvador, 3L/V/B7-3100/99/0133, Plan Operativo Anual} (San Salvador: mimeo, 2005), 13.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Greater San Salvador comprises 14 municipalities in the Departments of San Salvador and La Libertad.
\textsuperscript{57} Interview with Óscar Bonilla, President, CNSP, San Salvador, 31 March 2006.
\textsuperscript{58} Interview with Armando Jiménez, Executive Director, CNSP, San Salvador, 5 July 2005.
The selection of communities for their homicide indicators rather than their gang problem certainly suggests that the programme might not be sufficiently gang-specific and instead assumes that broader efforts to increase citizen organising and opportunities provision will also help reduce gang violence. Of similar concern is the CNSP’s decision not to operate in certain communities, because factors such as weak or non-existent organising, domestic violence, demographic density, low educational levels, extortions, and gang activity are perceived to constitute a barrier to successful interventions. However, among the excluded communities are several that are notorious for their gang activity and therefore should be prioritised for control efforts. The Council’s preference to attend only to areas that are seen as amenable to its programmes allows it to demonstrate its commitment to helping troublesome youths, but it is hardly the way to handle a serious and growing social problem. Gang control is complex and difficult, which is why a sustained and comprehensive engagement is required. Simply abandoning entire communities and leaving their residents in a vulnerable situation is surely not the answer.

Since its inception ProJóvenes has experienced a number of setbacks, including changes in the technical assistance and personal disagreements, and has achieved little. By mid-2006, only 27% of its budget had been disbursed. Furthermore, the little money that had been paid out was not well-spent. During the financial year of 2005, for example, 78% of the budget had gone to overheads and only 4% to project activities. A concern to balance out the earlier underspending prompted the Council to substantially increase its expenditure for sports and social infrastructure. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the construction of football pitches and the like in communities that require more positive recreational space, but its contribution to gang control is bound to be minimal if little else is done.

Since ProJóvenes was scheduled to terminate in mid-2008, at the time I conducted my research the CNSP was seeking to make the project sustainable beyond that date. If the Council alone were to continue with it, it would require considerably more public funds. The institution relies on an annual budget of a meagre US$1 million and has been kept afloat largely through EU funding. Given that the government has in the past shown

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59 Anonymous interview AI-008.
60 A list of communities marked for inclusion/exclusion was supplied by a CNSP staff member.
61 Anonymous interviews AI-005 and AI-008.
62 Anonymous interview AI-008.
63 CNSP and European Union, ProJóvenes de El Salvador, 2.
64 Ibid., 8.
65 Anonymous interview AI-011.
little interest in supporting the Council’s work, it would seem unlikely to do so in the future. Furthermore, the presidential decree that created the CNSP is set to expire in 2009, and the agency’s own destiny is uncertain at this point. Back in 2006 the CNSP hoped to strengthen community participation and local government-led initiatives for violence prevention. However, an important challenge for the Council has been to restore trust and build a working relationship with the mayors. The public security approach of successive ARENA administrations has led to widespread cynicism, and especially the FMLN-governed municipalities initially showed strong resistance to the CNSP’s collaborative attempts. As difficult as the development of a coherent gang policy is, the political nature of this undertaking often seems the greater obstacle.

**Gang rehabilitation**

The Council has conducted gang rehabilitation since 2004 when its current President, Óscar Bonilla, took office and reapportioned scarce resources in an attempt to provide a more comprehensive response to the gang problem. Some of the main activities include territorial work aimed at the collection of local data on gangs, the training of community leaders, reflective workshops, and employment provision; prison-based vocational training and reflective workshops; and a tattoo removal programme. In 2006 the CNSP’s rehabilitation unit was staffed only by three individuals, the Director and two Rehabilitation Officers. The lack of human resources necessarily constrains these efforts, and at the time of my visit to the CNSP the community-based work was still in the data-gathering phase.

At the heart of the programme lies the *granja-escuela*, a rehabilitation centre located in the Department of Sonsonate. Opened in 2005, the *granja* has each year been housing one group of former MS and *Dieciocho* members aged 16 to 25 and alternating between male-only and female-only groups. During a period of six months the youths are offered spiritual and psychological assistance, health services, tattoo removal, sports, education, and vocational training. Initially, a group of 20 males was taught to grow roses and breed chickens, and subsequently 14 girls were given classes in chicken farming, bakery, and

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66 Interview with Óscar Bonilla, President, CNSP, San Salvador, 31 March 2006.  
67 Anonymous interview AIF008.  
68 Anonymous interview AIF013.  
cosmetics. These practical skills are supplemented with a short course in business administration to facilitate self-employment and thus offset the lack of domestic job opportunities.

The CNSP has declared the first experience to have been satisfactory, because participants were able to conclude the programme and did not kill each other. However, by 2006 no formal evaluation had been undertaken, and my brief assessment of the initiative is based on the limited information I was able to ascertain. The Council has avoided major conflicts between the internees, largely because its target population is restricted to individuals who retain no ideological commitment to their gang. Yet, at least in the case of the first group supervision was sufficiently lax as to allow the youths to smuggle in drugs and weapons, and two of them were injured. One of the key challenges for the project concerns the provision of viable jobs. The Salvadoran private sector largely refuses to hire ex-gang members, a stance that severely limits the Council’s room for manoeuvre. The self-employment option is thought to be the best alternative, but training is given in areas in which competition is likely to be strong. Furthermore, the agricultural sector holds no appeal to most Salvadoran youths who prefer work in urban zones to backbreaking, underpaid rural labour. The CNSP’s choice of training options is therefore somewhat questionable, but more problematic is its ambition to prepare youths with little formal education for the labour market within a few months. Indeed, some of the girls of the 2006 contingent were illiterate and can hardly be expected to acquire the level of competence that is required for self-employment. So far the Council’s rehabilitation programme seems to have been a mixed success: in 2005 only 15 participants completed the process, while the 2006 group was reduced to 11 after one desertion and two deaths. Moreover, four of the males were placed in the Polígono Industrial Don Bosco for further education and training, allowing the Council to lend its own project an appearance of success when it had merely delegated its responsibility to another institution.

The most critical test facing the CNSP is the need to transform the granja into a true rehabilitation initiative and to make it sustainable in the long term. Clearly, gang

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70 Interview with Armando Echeverría, Director of Rehabilitation, CNSP, 25 January 2006.
71 Some ex-gang members withdraw completely from gang life (pasivos), while others abandon drugs and violence but remain emotionally attached to their gang (calmados). See also Chapter 5.
72 Anonymous interview BI-001.
73 Interview with Oscar Bonilla, President, CNSP, San Salvador, 31 March 2006.
74 Interview with Lilian Vega, Lecturer in Economics, UCA, San Salvador, 2 May 2006.
75 Conversation with Giselle Moreno de Domínguez, Coordinator of the Granja-Escuela, Izalco, 17 February 2006.
rehabilitation requires more than a six-month commitment, and some staff have privately acknowledged this.\textsuperscript{77} Part of the problem is that the project had originally been conceived as a halfway house to assist ex-convicts temporarily with their social adaptation, but was then adopted as a gang rehabilitation centre.\textsuperscript{78} Council personnel lack expertise in gang control and have struggled to locate a model they could learn from, but they hope to be able to convert the \textit{granja} gradually into a more consistent project.\textsuperscript{79} Pivotal to achieving this goal are the collection of reliable gang data and the hiring of staff who can demonstrate both technical competence and principled behaviour. The fact that the Director for Rehabilitation had to be denied access to the \textit{granja} after it emerged that he had solicited sexual favours from some of the girls shows that the Council has yet to instil greater professional conduct.\textsuperscript{80}

Financial limitations are another factor in the institution’s inability to develop a larger and more sophisticated rehabilitation initiative and may jeopardise the sustainability of even this modest effort. Regardless of how serious El Salvador’s gang problem might be considered, the \textit{granja} is evidently too small to have any significant impact. However, rehabilitation is not cheap, and the CNSP has had to operate on a tight budget. A six-month programme costs some US$70,000, and to kick-start it the first participants even had to help renovate the building they were to be housed in.\textsuperscript{81} Council staff believe that gang rehabilitation is the state’s responsibility, but thus far the government has failed to supply adequate funding.\textsuperscript{82} To increase the viability of the \textit{granja} CNSP members have opted to sell some of the produce generated there and to seek more international donor support. In 2008 the project entered its fourth year, suggesting that their efforts have borne fruit. However, a programme that is so underfunded that its very beneficiaries need to work to ensure its sustainability testifies to the dire state of gang rehabilitation in El Salvador. The government has yet to make comprehensive gang control a greater priority, and the CNSP could work towards that goal if it sought to exercise greater political influence over key actors in this field, notably the government and the private sector.

\textsuperscript{76} Anonymous interview AI-012.
\textsuperscript{77} Anonymous interviews AI-004 and AI-013.
\textsuperscript{78} Anonymous interview AI-013.
\textsuperscript{79} Conversation with Omar Calix, Supervisor of the Granja-Escuela, Izalco, 13 June 2006.
\textsuperscript{80} Anonymous interview AI-013.
\textsuperscript{81} Interview with Armando Echeverría, Director of Rehabilitation, CNSP, 25 January 2006.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
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The political weight of the CNSP

Although the Council was established for the purpose of designing and proposing solutions to public security problems, its impact has remained negligible. The institution has had many ex-FMLN members among its senior officials and has been more supportive of prevention and rehabilitation than other components of the government. However, CNSP staff have been largely unable to translate their personal commitment into practice. Salvador Samayo, the previous Council President and like his successor, Óscar Bonilla, once a member of the FPL guerrilla organisation, introduced the idea of the social prevention of violence, but encountered no backing for it. Changes to the CNSP mandate then transformed the advisory body into an implementing agency and only further reduced its weight. When Mano Dura and the LAM were introduced, Mr Samayo spoke out against the measures and requested that more money be spent on prevention, but to no avail. Mr Bonilla has also called for a restructuring of the gang policy and a reallocation of resources, but the government has been similarly unreceptive to his pleas. Some observers attribute this failure to his lack of vision and inability to influence policy-making. Mr Bonilla acknowledged that the CNSP carries little political weight, but pointed to the difficulty of achieving prevention and rehabilitation in a country where the police has traditionally been the preferred answer to crime and resistance to alternative approaches continues.

Given the twin constraints of limited resources and lack of political will, it may be unsurprising that the Council has failed both to enhance its existing programmes and to help persuade the government to implement a national gang policy. Thus far the concern with gang violence reduction within the CNSP has permitted the execution of at least some work in this area, but clearly much more is required. For the street gang situation to be alleviated the government as a whole must be involved in comprehensive gang control. In addition, the private sector, whose influence over the state remains a key factor in the persistence of social exclusion, needs to help reduce socio-economic inequality and create more and better jobs. For the CNSP this may ultimately to be as

83 Conversation with Armando Echeverría, Director of Rehabilitation, CNSP, 25 February 2006.
84 Anonymous interview AI-011.
87 Anonymous interviews AI-005 and AI-008.
88 Interview with Óscar Bonilla, President, CNSP, San Salvador, 31 March 2006.
difficult to accomplish as it is for the NGOs, but perhaps it could exploit its status as a governmental agency more forcefully and be more vocal in its position. After all, what can the Council hope to achieve with its own work, however valuable it may be for some youths and communities, as long as it is disconnected from a broader gang control policy? It might be argued that some limited initiatives are better than none at all, but on their own they will make no impact on the overall gang problem. Besides, in the absence of evaluations it is impossible to determine whether existing programmes have been properly implemented and led to positive outcomes.

Overall, the CNSP’s output appears superior to that of the Secretaría de la Juventud, which has shown no evidence of concrete activities and serves mostly to portray the government as being dedicated to inclusive gang control. However, the Council has remained a marginalised institution and its work little appreciated by the government. The persistence of this trend demonstrates that the Saca administration, despite its change in rhetoric, has made no concerted effort to combine law enforcement with prevention and rehabilitation. If anything, the traditional approach, permitting the authorities to gain political capital from short-term results while preserving the status quo, has continued to be privileged.

The “re-launch” of Súper Mano Dura

In the months following the launch of Súper Mano Dura government and police officials repeatedly argued that the plan was a success. Much like the Flores government had done, the Saca administration relied on ambiguous indicators, such as the amount of graffiti removed, the number of gang-related detentions, and the restoration of tranquillity in gang-affected communities, and asserted the murder rate had decreased (see Chapter 3). Gang arrest figures were certainly considerable, totalling 14,601 between September 2004 and August 2005 alone (including repeat arrests). However, contrary to official claims homicide figures maintained a sharp upward trend, reaching 3,778 in 2005 and in 2006 would stand at 3,792 (a daily average of 10). In other words, despite, or

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89 Aguilar and Miranda, “Entre la articulación y la competencia,” 62.
because of, the *Mano Dura* policies, the homicide rate rose from 33/100,000 inhabitants in 2003 to 41 in 2004, 55 in 2005, and eventually climbed to 57 in 2006.91

These statistics were the clearest possible evidence that the real perpetrators remained at large and the gang control initiative had been a resounding failure. For a while the authorities sought to downplay the deteriorating crime levels, suggesting, for example, that *Súper Mano Dura* was effective but the gangs deliberately committed more homicides to defy the state or that the situation would be worse without the plan (see Chapter 3). However, given the escalation of violent crime, claims as to the measure’s efficacy began to lose their credibility. Furthermore, although *Súper Mano Dura* remained hugely popular, according to the IUDOP’s end-of-year survey for 2005 as many as 45.4% of Salvadorans now thought it had helped little or not at all in lowering crime.92 Since the country was to hold municipal and legislative elections in 2006, public opinion could not be ignored.

Publicly, President Saca remained adamant that his plan was workable and announced it merely had to be adjusted and re-launched, because the gangs had evolved into organised crime groups.93 This reshuffle saw the return of Rodrigo Ávila as police chief and the creation of a new elite unit aimed at reducing gang extortions.94 Beyond these cosmetic changes gang control seemed to experience no major reorientation until the introduction of a new plan in mid-2006, *Maestro de Seguridad*. This latest suppression effort maintained patrols, but shifted the law enforcement focus from area sweeps and mass detentions to the investigation of individual gang “leaders” and gangs as organised criminal structures.95 The *Mano Dura* policies, which had been instituted to enhance ARENA’s electoral image, had served their purpose and were quietly withdrawn when they threatened to become a political liability. The successive plan, however, did not signal an attempt to work towards the articulation of a comprehensive gang policy. Rather, the authorities have continued to pursue prevention, suppression, and rehabilitation activities in a disconnected fashion and to prioritise suppression over other strategies. Central to this preference are a discursive emphasis on the gangs’ mutation

95 Interview with Commissioner Óscar Chávez Valiente, Secretary-General, PNC, San Salvador, 3 July 2006.
and a recent interest in transnational cooperation on gangs. I consider both below before offering some brief comments on the legacy of *Mano Dura*.

**The “mutation” of the street gangs**

Since the launch of *Mano Dura* government and police officials have associated the street gangs with terrorism and organised crime and portrayed them as transnational in nature. These discourses intensified under the Saca administration and have played a critical role in defining the gang problem and legitimising some control efforts over others. These discursive aspects are examined in greater detail in Chapter 3, and I want to consider here only briefly the merit of these labels and their implications for gang control.

The connection between street gangs and terrorism was construed in two ways. One was to liken gang violence to “acts of terrorism” or to argue that the gangs were “sowing terror” in local communities. The second involved a rumoured link with Al-Qaeda. Both of these claims are unpersuasive and can be dispelled as politically-driven myths. Gang members’ ready use of violence creates a threatening atmosphere in certain areas, and some of them have committed brutal crimes that must not go unpunished. However, terrorism refers to the systematic use of violence, or the threat thereof, in pursuit of political aims. Street gangs and their members pursue no such objectives nor are most of their targets innocent civilians. Applying the terrorist label to these groups obfuscates the nature of the problem and only distorts the search for appropriate policy options. As for supposed gang ties to Al-Qaeda, the US authorities have repeatedly denied their existence, although they have not ruled out the possibility that gang members might one day smuggle terrorists into the country. Nonetheless, Salvadoran politicians and police have periodically revived this link. Fiction aside, the US government’s current focus on counterterrorism implies that attempts to depict the gangs as a terrorist threat augur more funding for suppression activities.

The purported association between street gangs and organised crime has had even greater resonance and constitutes a cornerstone of current control efforts. The Salvadoran authorities have insisted that street gangs form to commit crimes, maintain a

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structure indicative of criminal enterprises, and are involved in organised crime and drug trafficking. However, these claims misrepresent the nature of gangs and exaggerate their criminal component. Youths join these groups to fulfill a variety of individual social needs, not to engage in criminal and violent acts. Anti-social behaviour is a by-product of gang affiliation rather than its goal. Furthermore, crime and violence are the most sensationalised dimensions of gangs, but occupy only little of their members’ time. Street gangs are generally incapable of behaving either like organised crime groups or drug gangs. The former require mature, professional members with organisational skills, well-defined leadership, and specialised group roles, while the latter demand a clear, hierarchical leadership, strong group cohesiveness, a code of loyalty, a narrow focus on drug sales, and avoidance of non-sales-related criminal involvement. These features are not typical of street gangs, which tend to have a shifting leadership, intermediate levels of cohesiveness, frequently-broken codes of honour, and versatile and independent criminal involvements. Recent research suggests that individual gang members may act as “foot-soldiers” for criminal groups, but states there is no evidence that the street gangs as such control drug sales or engage in other organised criminal activities. The Salvadoran authorities’ mischaracterisation of street gangs only invites forms of control that are mistaken from a law enforcement perspective and neglect the social roots of the gang phenomenon.

Finally, officials have described the street gangs, notably Mara Salvatrucha and Discioca, as transnational entities. This dimension is deduced from their presence in the United States, Mexico, and northern Central America; cross-border contacts through the use of communications technology such as mobile phones and the Internet; and gang movements within the region. The existence of some transnational connections is unsurprising, especially since some Salvadoran gang members are deportees. However, the fact that youths in different countries claim affiliation with the same gang does not necessarily point to the proliferation of a regional network that answers to a single chain of command. Indeed, a recent study confirmed sporadic links between Salvadoran gang

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102 Klein, The American Street Gang, 42; Klein and Maxson, Street Gang Patterns and Policies, 186.
members and their counterparts elsewhere in North and Central America, but found that at present no structured cross-border relations exist between the gangs, let alone a regional gang network. Nevertheless, the idea of transnational street gangs has become conventional wisdom among US and Salvadorean government and police officials and underpins current cooperation in this area.

The characteristics that have been ascribed to the gangs have significant implications for gang control. Depicting the gangs as criminally-motivated and transnational in nature legitimises suppression rather than prevention/rehabilitation and shifts responsibility for the solution away from the domestic sphere. The Saca administration, paradoxically the one that had promised to undertake gang prevention and rehabilitation, intensified this rhetoric and therefore undermined the very rationale for these strategies. The focus on suppression became perhaps more evident with the trend towards gang-related law enforcement cooperation, a trend that began halfway through the implementation of *Súper Mano Dura* and deepened once the policy had been officially withdrawn.

**Transnational cooperation on gangs**

El Salvador has shown a keen interest in a regional approach to the gang problem and has repeatedly encouraged other countries in the area to join policing and intelligence activities. For reasons discussed below the United States has become a key partner in transnational gang control efforts. I highlight four major initiatives, but without providing a full assessment of them. A comprehensive review was not possible partly because the programmes emerged only very recently, partly because they have been shrouded in secrecy. All of these measures require further research to determine how gang control is now being exercised and what impact these international components have on the domestic gang situation. The purpose of considering them here is to demonstrate that suppression has remained the preferred strategy and to suggest that the lack of transparency makes monitoring and evaluation more difficult for NGOs and other actors concerned with gang violence reduction.

One initiative is an annual gang conference that has been organised by the PNC since 2005. The meetings bring together law enforcement officials from the United States, Mexico, and Central America and are aimed at sharing information and best practices

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and establishing strategies to counter the regional expansion of the street gangs.\textsuperscript{109} The idea behind such forms of cooperation is that since the gangs have evolved into transnational networks that communicate across borders, the police forces of the region must operate in similar ways.\textsuperscript{110} The conference agenda has included alternative approaches to the gang problem, but these appear to be mere add-ons to events that are dominated by law enforcement concerns. Both the CNSP and the Polígono have presented their prevention and rehabilitation programmes, but the final agreements have regularly focused on the importance of information sharing and other policing activities.\textsuperscript{111} For example, at the 2007 forum it was decided to establish a Transnational Anti-Gang Centre and a fingerprint initiative to better identify and apprehend gang members (see below).\textsuperscript{112} Apart from the notable absence of attempts to develop a comprehensive gang strategy, the heavy emphasis on networking and information sharing may itself prove less helpful than expected. Although these practices enhance professional skills and knowledge and aid investigations, they may also serve to disseminate the gang police officers’ image of street gangs which is unconcerned with the social factors for gang emergence and embraces a narrow view of gang control.\textsuperscript{113}

A second initiative revolves around FBI-directed gang enforcement both in the United States and in El Salvador. In response to the perceived expansion of \textit{Mara Salvatrucha} and the recent occurrence of some gruesome MS-related incidents in the Washington, D.C. area, in December 2004 the FBI created the MS-13 National Gang Task Force (NGTF) to coordinate investigations and help tackle the largest and arguably most dangerous street gang.\textsuperscript{114} The FBI believes that gangs form specifically to commit offences and views them as organised criminal syndicates. Its method, which was previously applied to dismantle the Mafia and has since been transferred to the street gangs, involves the targeting of gang “leaders” to induce the dissolution of the entire group.\textsuperscript{115} In 2006 the use of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations (RICO) Act has already permitted the US federal authorities to secure the conviction of two MS

\textsuperscript{109} Interview with Brian Duggan, INL Director, US embassy, San Salvador, 28 April 2006.
\textsuperscript{113} Klein, \textit{The American Street Gang}, 189.
\textsuperscript{114} Interview with David LeValley, Supervisory Special Agent, and Melanie Pearson, Intelligence Analyst, MS-13 National Gang Task Force, FBI, Washington, DC, 21 October 2005.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
members. The PNC has long attributed the individual leadership stereotype to the gangs and, after the demise of Mano Dura, modelled its own gang control strategy on the FBI’s approach. In 2007 El Salvador has also adopted RICO-style anti-racketeering laws with a view to applying them to gang members. Gang-related cooperation had already intensified when in April 2005 the FBI opened a liaison office in San Salvador for the purpose of expediting data sharing and coordinating regional gang control with local police forces. The rationale for establishing the office in this location was Mara Salvatrucha’s overwhelmingly Salvadoran membership. However, the primary reason for its creation was a North American interest in curbing gang migration. As indicated previously, the United States routinely deports offending non-US citizens in an attempt to lessen its own gang problem. Whatever the merits of this decision, it has had a revolving-door effect, because many repatriates seek to return to the country they know best. The FBI’s presence in El Salvador is meant to help deter the arrival of deported gang members (and those who relocate to escape police investigations) and with it an expected rise in gang activity.

This is not the place to analyse North American responses to the gang phenomenon. However, it is important to stress that El Salvador’s resolve to reproduce the US approach is unlikely to permit a substantial reduction in gang violence. First, although some gang members break the law, the police view that gang activity constitutes a type of conspiracy to commit crimes is misconceived. Law enforcement officers come into contact with suspected offenders and deduce from these experiences that crime and violence constitute the core of gangs. However, while they are associated with gang life, they are an overstated part of it. The assumption that organised crime and street gangs are similar when they are not only leads to inappropriate forms of gang control. Second, the idea that cracking down on gang “leaders” will result in group dissolution is similarly mistaken, because street gang leadership is typically more flexible and democratic than police officials like to portray it. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the stereotypical

120 Ibid.
121 Klein, The American Street Gang, 64; Klein and Maxson, Street Gang Patterns and Policies, 241.
gang leader, that is, an individual with a reputation for extensive criminal involvement or a willingness to engage in violence tends to enjoy little actual influence over other gang members. Rather, leadership is generally diffused over a number of people and shifts over time with changes such as age or the availability of gang members owing to marriage, work commitments or incarceration. The key-personality image serves a particular law enforcement perspective since it attributes gang members’ crime to the influence of a single leader and implies that the removal of that person will suffice to curtail illicit activities. However, since gang leadership does not reside in one individual the arrest of supposed “leaders” will have no effect on the group itself. The PNC’s adoption of gang control methods advocated by the FBI may afford Salvadoran efforts greater legitimacy, but it is unlikely to impact the domestic gang problem.

A third initiative that deserves mention is the US-sponsored International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) that opened in San Salvador in mid-2005. Overseen by a US-directed Policy Board and funded by the Department of State’s (DOS) Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), the ILEA aims to support criminal justice institution-building and to strengthen regional law enforcement cooperation. It is designed to train Latin American police, judges, and public prosecutors in addressing transnational crimes with emphasis on drug trafficking, human smuggling, terrorism, and money laundering. The curriculum also includes human rights classes and an anti-gang training programme, which is relevant to this discussion. Gang modules cover subjects such as gang hand signs, forensics, and witness and judicial security. The instructors are reportedly gang experts affiliated with the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other US federal agencies and treat the street gangs from an organised crime perspective.

Due to the paucity of available information it is too early to judge either the teaching content at the ILEA-San Salvador or its impact on gang control. Thus far the academy has been operating without any transparency, and despite repeated requests by both

124 Ibid.
domestic and international activists the course materials have not been disclosed. The aura of secrecy surrounding the school suggests that the United States seeks to shield itself from external scrutiny but is of minor importance here. At issue are two different points. First, although the ILEA officially seeks to improve law enforcement abroad, its objective does not appear to be the strengthening of local policing capabilities in their own right, but the advancement of US interests by reducing crime in the region. Drug trafficking and the street gangs are considered the principal sources of instability in Central America and hence US security threats. In this sense the ILEA appears to be a mechanism that permits the United States to export its own criminal justice priorities and enable Latin American police forces to help address US problems rather than their own domestic security concerns. Second, as with the above measures, the school’s contribution to gang control is of a doubtful nature. As indicated earlier, the US federal authorities wrongly equate street gangs with organised crime, and their presence at the ILEA ensures that scores of Salvadoran and other police officials will adopt the same approach to gang crime reduction. The ILEA’s installation in El Salvador may serve to confer greater legitimacy on this country’s control efforts, but can hardly make inroads on the gang problem. Furthermore, it is unclear how the academy can help make gang control more rights-respecting merely by adding human rights courses to the curriculum. ANSP students already receive such training, yet the PNC is regularly implicated in abuses. In the absence of institutionalised commitment to human rights, ILEA activities are again unlikely to leave a positive imprint on gang control in El Salvador.

The fourth and final project concerns the Centro Antipandillas Transnacional (CAT, or Transnational Anti-Gang Centre, TAG) and the associated Central American Fingerprint Exploitation Initiative (CAFÉ). Like parts of the ILEA anti-gang programme the two measures are funded under the three-year Merida Initiative, a US government effort aimed at curbing drug trafficking and gang violence in Mexico and Central America. Established in October in 2007 in San Salvador, the CAT is composed of FBI agents and Salvadoran police and is designed to counter transnational gang activity in the United States, Mexico, and Central America through information sharing, investigations of gangs as criminal enterprises, and anti-gang operations. The CAFÉ

128 Meacham, The Merida Initiative, 70.
129 Ibid., 52.
130 Interview with Xochitl Marchelli, Human Rights Instructor, ANSP, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.
131 See Meacham, The Merida Initiative.
132 Meacham, The Merida Initiative, 68.
programme, on the other hand, was initiated by the FBI’s MS-13 NGTF and entails the creation of a regional fingerprint database to facilitate the identification, tracking, and apprehension of gang members.\textsuperscript{133} Also included is an FBI-developed Officer Exchange Programme, which foresees the temporary assignment of CAT-embedded PNC officers to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Office (LASO) to participate in gang-related training and observation activities.\textsuperscript{134}

The CAT has begun to investigate cases of homicides and extortions committed by Salvadoran gang members either in the United States or in El Salvador but ordered by their US counterparts.\textsuperscript{135} Nonetheless, it is debatable whether more resources had to be invested in yet another law enforcement scheme, let alone one that pretends to tackle the overstated transnational dimension of the street gangs and ignores their domestic nature. Moreover, the utility of the database will strongly depend on the definition of a gang member and is complicated by the fact that membership is ephemeral and turnover high. The risk therefore is that ex-gang members may be misidentified as still active and experience continued police harassment.\textsuperscript{136} As for the training efforts, serious questions must be asked about their value for gang control in El Salvador. Not only do FBI and LA-based gang experts disseminate a view of street gangs that is misconceived and disconnected from prevention/rehabilitation strategies, but the LAPD is also known for its “war mentality” and preference for suppression.\textsuperscript{137} Besides, surely there is little the United States can teach other countries if it has been unable to contain its own gang situation, which with an estimated 30,000 gangs and 800,000 gang members is today out of control.\textsuperscript{138}

Instead of supporting the creation of a comprehensive and (in policing terms) more appropriate gang strategy, US assistance merely legitimises and reinforces the Salvadoran authorities’ emphasis on suppression. The recent accumulation of gang enforcement programmes serves to convey the idea that El Salvador is serious about gang violence reduction when in reality it continues to display little interest in undertaking the necessary prevention/rehabilitation activities. For example, despite the failure of \textit{Mano Dura}, a

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{136} Klein, \textit{The American Street Gang}, 191-192.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 164-165, 189.
senior PNC official affirmed that El Salvador had been chosen as the CAT base due to the high level of professionalism the country had shown in dealing with its gang problem.\(^{139}\) The Merida Initiative does foresee some limited grants for both public and private prevention/rehabilitation projects.\(^{140}\) The GOES, however, remains reliant on foreign donors to fund action in these areas and has yet to develop a comprehensive and long-term strategy. This persistent neglect confirms that NGO advocacy was unable to make an impact on gang control even after the withdrawal of Mano Dura. I will conclude with a brief reflection on the lasting consequences of these policies.

The legacy of Mano Dura

Some commentators have claimed that the street gangs undermine Central American democracies.\(^{141}\) I would argue, however, that the Salvadoran state’s response to this social problem is ultimately the greater threat, and the reasons for this lie in the effects of single-minded gang suppression. For the purposes of this discussion I will consider three such outcomes: social profiling and discrimination, greater insecurity, and nostalgia for authoritarian measures.

The earlier focus on tattoos and other descriptive traits for the identification of suspected gang members has outlived Mano Dura, with detrimental results for certain sectors of Salvadoran society. Individuals with tattoos, even if artistic in nature, have been denied admission to schools and are routinely rejected by prospective employers.\(^{142}\) More importantly, police continue the pattern of social profiling and arbitrary arrests based on people’s age, social background or appearance.\(^{143}\) Young, poor males, regardless of any current, past or no gang affiliation, are subject to frequent stop-and-search practices and may be wrongfully accused of being gang members. Arbitrary stops and arrests are often accompanied by police abuse, including beatings on the street or in police cells.\(^{144}\) Thus, the upshot of Mano Dura is that people are being stigmatised and


\(^{142}\) International Human Rights Clinic, *No Place to Hide*, 46.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., 49-52.
mistreated simply for living in a particular zones. In the sense that the plans have encouraged police brutality and disrespect for basic rights they contribute to the erosion of El Salvador’s already fledgling democracy. Furthermore, the persistence of these serious violations suggests that the government remains indifferent to the need for an alternative gang policy and more effective policing, notwithstanding the adverse effects of suppression.

*Mano Dura* also spread insecurity by increasing the gangs’ cohesiveness and criminal sophistication. Street gangs constitute oppositional cultures, and central for understanding their reaction to control efforts is the concept of cohesiveness.\(^{145}\) Although gangs are not tightly structured, they can become more close-knit if led to become so. Police suppression is one of the most obvious ways of strengthening gang members’ ties to one another and their gang. Increased cohesiveness in turn makes these groups more delinquent and more resistant to further interventions.\(^{146}\) *Mano Dura*, with its area sweeps and mass detentions, could be expected to reinforce gang identity and accelerate gang crime, and this is precisely what happened. The principal changes have been twofold and relate to a more clandestine conduct and the consolidation of gang power, particularly within the prisons. First, gang affiliates have adopted a number of strategies aimed at hiding their membership and evading capture, including an end to compulsory tattooing, the use of graffiti, and the public display of hand signs; as well as a more conventional dress code and hairstyle.\(^{147}\) CNSP President Bonilla, for his part, has maintained that gang members seek to obtain credentials from rehabilitation centres and has accused NGOs that carry out gang rehabilitation and human rights defence of facilitating gang survival.\(^{148}\) Second, gang members have made the prisons a base from where they direct their criminal activities. The concentration of the gangs in separate penal complexes, a decision taken in 2003 to prevent violent clashes between the inmates, has contributed to these developments as much as the absence of serious reinsertion programmes.\(^{149}\) Shared prison time has allowed gang members to forge closer bonds and, through intermediaries and mobile phones, give orders to kill and manage

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\(^{145}\) On gang cohesiveness, see Klein, *The American Street Gang*, 43–45.
\(^{146}\) Klein, *The American Street Gang*, 45.
\(^{147}\) Aguilar, “Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y Estados Unidos,” 3.
\(^{149}\) Interview with Guillermo García, President, AEIPES, San Salvador, 5 May 2006. See also Aguilar, “Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y Estados Unidos,” 6.
Chapter 2: Mano Dura against the street gangs

extortions. Ultimately, therefore, Mano Dura has complicated the gang problem and made life for many Salvadorans more perilous as a result. As with crime and insecurity more generally, the perception that the state fails to protect its citizens from gang-induced delinquency and violence can undermine support for democracy. However, the government’s lacklustre efforts to address the gang problem more effectively reveal a nonchalant attitude towards such concerns.

Finally, and related to the previous point, Mano Dura has helped foster authoritarian attitudes and nostalgia for undemocratic measures. The plans rested on a “politics of fear” whereby the discursive construction of the gang threat was such that it allowed and, indeed, legitimised the continuation of authoritarian crime-fighting strategies. The media-amplified discursive dimension of Mano Dura is examined in Chapter 3. I refer to it here merely to emphasise that both the demonisation of gang members and the recurrent and publicised display of suppressive actions against them served to stimulate popular fears and preferences for such responses over their more promising alternatives. Furthermore, the perceived lawlessness that resulted from the inflated gang threat encouraged the social cleansing of gang members. President Saca has denied that anti-gang extermination squads might be operating from within the state. However, in addition to the evidence presented in the previous chapter there exists information suggesting that people are prepared to take justice into their own hands and, indeed, have done so. For example, in November 2005 the Mano Blanca group made a radio broadcast, announcing its intention to cleanse the eastern town of San Miguel of all gang members, because Mano Dura had proved ineffective. In August 2006 another death squad, the Comando Central XGN Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, killed a gang member in San Miguel, and flyers by the self-styled Sombra Negra group were distributed warning of the impending death of gang members and other suspects unless the authorities created order. Similarly, in 2005 individuals who had lost some of their relatives to gang violence lynched three gang members and justified their act by claiming that Sáper Mano Dura “did not work.” Some observers subsequently expressed their belief

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150 Interview with Salvador Hernández, Director, MOJE, Ilobasco, 11 July 2006. See also Aguilar, “Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y Estados Unidos,” 6.
that more such cases existed but simply remained undisclosed. Such incidents, no matter how rare they may be, are not only a serious challenge to El Salvador’s democracy, but also signal state tolerance of them. Furthermore, they too highlight the authorities’ evident disinterest in developing more effective forms of gang control, despite the dangers to human life and the rule of law that this neglect implies.

Overall, *Mano Dura* has exacerbated the gang problem and left Salvadoran society with a disturbing mix of police abuse, greater insecurity, and a prolongation of authoritarian tendencies. Notwithstanding these consequences and persistent calls for an alternative gang policy, the government remains wedded to suppression. The continued resistance to adopting more sophisticated policing and combining it with prevention/rehabilitation programmes suggests that the authorities lack the necessary political will. Although the country does require greater expertise and resources to tackle its gang problem, both of these can be acquired if real commitment exists to address the multiple factors that facilitate gang development.

**Conclusion**

Although El Salvador has a long-standing gang problem, the authorities had failed to develop an explicit control strategy. It was only in 2003, barely eight months before the presidential elections, that the Flores Administration unexpectedly launched its *Mano Dura* plan. Both the timing and the content of this suppressive gang policy, essentially based on widely publicised police/military patrols, area sweeps, and mass arrests, suggested that it constituted a populist penal measure aimed not at curbing gang violence, but at winning votes. Elite concerns about a possible alternation in power and erosion of its privileges had prompted the Flores government to portray the gangs as the most pressing national problem and to propose a drastic solution to it. Given that the gangs were blamed for the majority of homicides in the country, the implication was that a measure designed to dismantle the gangs would also lower the elevated murder rate.

Since the plan skilfully exploited Salvadorans’ acute desire for public security, it proved hugely popular and helped afford ARENA another term in office. However, it was beset by a number of difficulties chief among which were criticism of its partial and unconstitutional nature and the release of most recently-detained gang members. NGOs and other actors pointed to the absence of vital prevention/rehabilitation programmes...
and condemned the LAM for targeting individuals’ physical appearance and lifestyle rather than sanctioning criminal activity. The introduction of legislation that circumvented the need for investigations and simply sought to reduce criminality through the indiscriminate removal of highly identifiable youths was a sensible option for a government that shuns the professionalisation of the police. However, judicial resolve to defend human rights and the rule of law meant that the majority of gang members were freed for lack of evidence.

These developments threatened to undermine the Executive’s legitimacy and required the Saca administration to announce a revised gang policy. Súper Mano Dura was presented as a plan that incorporated alternative strategies and penal reforms aimed at the lawful arrest and prosecution of gang members. Rhetorical changes notwithstanding, suppression remained the preferred approach while prevention/rehabilitation programmes are politicised, underfunded, and insignificant initiatives that have little impact on the gang problem. The Secretaría de la Juventud, officially tasked to coordinate the execution of Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida, is a technically weak institution that serves to demonstrate President Saca’s commitment to prevention and rehabilitation, but has produced few tangible results. The CNSP, on the other hand, has been most active in this area, but is largely dependent on international donor assistance and lacks gang-specific expertise. Its main gang-related project, the granja-escuela rehabilitation centre, remains underdeveloped and vastly insufficient to alleviate the gang problem. Although its components are designed to help ex-gang members adopt a more conventional lifestyle and join the labour market, the lack of decent job opportunities constitutes a very basic limitation and makes gang reinsertion difficult. The fact that some of the participants were passed on to the Polígono reveals the state’s restricted capacity for gang control.

Ultimately, Mano Dura exacerbated both the homicide rate and the gang situation and was quietly withdrawn once it had become a political liability. However, instead of adopting more effective forms of gang control as part of a comprehensive crime policy, the government merely changed its law enforcement strategy to one that tackles the street gangs as organised crime groups. Central to this approach is an official discourse that wrongly portrays the gangs as transnationally-structured and motivated by criminal objectives. This rhetorical emphasis is significant in that it shifts attention from social exclusion and prevention/rehabilitation programmes to a fundamentally suppressive response and favours regional initiatives over domestic efforts. Transnational
cooperation, in which the United States has taken the lead, is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the initiatives that have recently emerged are overwhelmingly law enforcement-based and not combined with prevention and rehabilitation. Second, the FBI, which views the street gangs as criminal enterprises, is the lead agency in many of these efforts and provides Central American police forces with a mistaken gang control perspective. Third, joint initiatives permit the Salvadoran government to feign commitment to gang violence reduction while allowing it to disown responsibility for the design of domestic solutions to a domestic problem.

Given its suppressive nature, Mano Dura has not only made the gangs more cohesive and delinquent, but also left a disconcerting legacy of police abuse and authoritarian tendencies. Nevertheless, the government continues to insist on suppression, and this preference, combined with the absence of effective alternative programmes, suggests that no political will exists for the implementation of a comprehensive and rights-respecting gang policy. Given elite influence over both the ruling party and the state, it is unsurprising that ARENA administrations have been unprepared to institute more effective policing and execute well-funded and long-term prevention/rehabilitation initiatives that go beyond the current piecemeal efforts. However, the lack of comprehensive gang control also shows that while NGO advocacy helped push for some limited policy change, this pressure was insufficient to achieve a transformation of state behaviour, particularly as regards police suppression and complementary strategies. Subsequent parts of this thesis will examine why some NGOs were unable to exercise greater influence in this area. First, however, we turn to the Salvadoran media and their role constructing the gang threat and promoting Mano Dura.
Chapter 3

Creating folk devils: street gangs and *Mano Dura* in the Salvadoran media

The news media play a central role in public-agenda-setting and policy debates. As a space for the articulation of different interests and perspectives, the media constituted an important strategic resource in the ideological struggle over *Mano Dura*. Government relied on them to sell the plan to the population, while the NGOs could resort to them to put forward an alternative view of the gang problem and the responses it required. The extent to which these actors were able to pursue their objectives depended much on their resources and ability to use news production processes to their advantage. Clearly, though, by selecting information and suggesting to the public how to think about street gangs and gang control, the media had the power to promote or marginalise some voices and the policies they advocated.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. An examination of El Salvador’s contemporary media system aims to reveal the extent to which the country’s political openings translated into a democratised press and to identify the principal obstacles facing Salvadoran journalism today. This profile serves to highlight media barriers to the NGO action I examine in subsequent chapters and to ground my content analysis of gang-related print news coverage. This content analysis in turn seeks to show how government desire for publicity blended with the papers’ own priorities and yielded news reporting that promoted ARENA’s penal populism over other policies. The enquiry helps reveal how the media system and news production processes marginalise alternative voices and contribute to influencing citizen views of the gangs and gang control options.

I begin my study of the Salvadoran media and their treatment of street gangs and *Mano Dura* by offering a few words on the relation between media content and public perceptions of crime and crime policies. I then turn to El Salvador’s media system where I consider the post-war transformation of the journalistic environment and the main features of the contemporary media landscape, including the concentration of media ownership; advertising power, and self-censorship. In part three, I present the findings of the content analysis, which enquired into media representations of gang members, the factors facilitating gang membership and gang onset, and gang control strategies. I end the chapter with a discussion of the results, the impact of media sector characteristics
and reportorial practices, and media effects on public opinion of the gangs and *Mano Dura*. It is argued that although the overall climate is more conducive to journalistic pluralism and freedom of expression than in the past, oligopolistic ownership structures and the political use of advertising soften media content and encourage a journalism that is passive and self-censored. Media owners’ interests and established reportorial practices help explain why news coverage framed the gang problem and its solutions in ways that promoted penal populism. While there are no simple media effects, the research suggests that the press influenced public opinion in perceiving the gang problem as more serious than it was and in supporting *Mano Dura* policies despite their demonstrated ineffectiveness.

### 1. The news media and public perceptions of crime

The media, to varying degrees, perform a number of important political functions: they monitor the conduct of public officials and facilitate accountability; constitute a forum for public debate; and provide information from multiple perspectives. Given their communicative role, the media have the power to shape citizen views of political and social issues. By deciding which items to include in the news agenda and how to frame them, the media structure discussions on a variety of concerns. Not only do they influence what problems audiences think about, but they also identify causes and suggest remedies.¹

Media effects on public opinion have been extensively studied.² While researchers concur that there exists a link between media content and people’s perceptions of social reality, there has been disagreement about the nature of this connection. Some scholars have argued that this influence is direct, the implication being that audience reactions can be inferred from the messages.³ More recent analyses emphasise individuals’ ability to interpret the information they receive. In this view, people’s demographic factors, cultural knowledge, and day-to-day experiences influence how they construe news. Consequently, audience studies need to ascertain the ways in which the media impact public opinion.⁴ However, communication research recognises that although media

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messages do not determine our understanding of the world, they shape it and make some interpretations more likely than others. This finding is perhaps of particular relevance for depictions of crime and crime policies.

Both political and media discourses can represent crime in different ways. For example, they may portray it as a consequence of individual pathological tendencies or of socio-economic inequality. Each of these perspectives has distinct policy implications. If crime is attributed to the personality traits of the perpetrator, punitive policies are likely to be seen as the appropriate answer. If, however, it is explained in terms of the social exclusion prevailing in certain residential neighbourhoods, crime control strategies privileging prevention and rehabilitation will appear as the most sensible response. Studies have shown that representations of crime news affect both the public’s perception of the seriousness of a crime problem and beliefs about the required solution. Since there are no simple media effects, the news media may not promote individual fear of crime even if they constitute a key factual source of information. Nevertheless, media depictions influence citizen views of crime and narrow the choice of policy options people are inclined to support. By shaping public opinion on a problem, its causes, and its solutions, the media thus impact policy-making on the issue.

Since this thesis aims to explore how the right-wing press portrayed the gangs, and to what extent these representations favoured Mano Dura, it is necessary to examine the relevant media coverage. The content analysis I conducted for this purpose will be discussed below. Here I wish to clarify my approach to the scrutiny of the selected media products. Given readers’ ability to construct their own meaning of texts, the value of such an enquiry may not be apparent. The existence of socio-cultural variables notwithstanding, it is reasonable to consider that the news coverage coloured Salvadorans’ perceptions of the gangs to some degree. Yet, as media scholars have pointed out, a textual analysis reveals whose version of reality circulated in the public domain, but it may be more powerful if combined with research about the production or audience reception of media products.

This chapter does not seek to provide an exhaustive examination of the process of gang news production, content, and reception, which would be impossible within the

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5 Croteau and Hoynes, Media Society, 298.
7 Schlesinger and Tumber, Reporting Crime, 189.
8 Roberts, Penal Populism and Public Opinion, 83.
9 Eoin Devereux, Understanding the Media (London: Sage, 2003), 18.
limits of this thesis. Instead, its purpose is to provide an analysis of gang news coverage, itself located within the production context. Media effects on public opinion of the gangs will be referred to by using already existing surveys on the subject. Before turning to the analysis, I will conclude with a few words on the production context.

Journalists, and the establishments employing them, operate within a broader environment that constrains news production. Media texts are therefore inevitably shaped by factors both inside and outside individual media organisations. This research, then, aims to discern the extent of reportorial autonomy in particular newsrooms as well as the ways in which El Salvador’s media system affects journalistic work. By media system I understand the structure of the national media industry and the relations – shaped by a range of social, economic, political, and legal factors – between media organisations, government, and the business elite. Overall, the analysis is guided by the belief that the media are themselves political institutions ‘whose functioning cannot be understood separated from larger political dynamics.’

The following section casts light on practices that mould civil society action and serves as a backdrop to gang-related news coverage.

2. Post-war El Salvador’s media system

2.1 Political openings and the “transformation” of the media

The armed conflict and the subsequent transition to electoral democracy impelled apparently significant changes among the Salvadoran media. The political openings of the early 1990s, ending decades of state censorship and repression, gave birth to novel experiments and permitted an unprecedented aperture in the traditionally dominant press. The overall climate became conducive to journalistic pluralism and greater freedom of expression. Nevertheless, a series of economic, political, and legal factors that historically permeated the Salvadoran media system conditioned its development in the post-war period. The resultant picture is one of mixed results. Advances with respect to the earlier era of intolerance are noticeable, but so are persistent limitations. The intent here is to explore the main features of El Salvador’s media landscape and the ways in which these shape the production of media content. I will initially present an overview of the general trends, including the improved environment for journalistic work; the

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emergence of new media; professionalisation; and changes in the leading press. The chapter then examines the media system and its key players, before highlighting the principal obstacles to Salvadoran journalism today: the concentration of media ownership, advertising power, and self-censorship. Overall, this profile of the media system serves to ground the subsequent content analysis as well as to uncover the media barriers facing critics of the status quo.

**An improved environment for journalistic work**

The political transition ushered in a generally more hospitable environment for journalism.\(^\text{12}\) State-sanctioned violence against reporters and open censorship has ended, although aggressions against media personnel have not ceased entirely.\(^\text{13}\) These reprisals, although serious, have nonetheless been sporadic. By and large, the media enjoy greater independence from the state than in the past, but constraints on journalistic work persist in more subtle forms. Economic control mechanisms, notably the use of advertising to reward compliance and punish dissent, are discussed below. Here the focus rests on legal instruments restricting journalists’ room for manoeuvre, obstacles that are best illustrated with reference to freedom of expression and access to information.

The journalists and media NGO staff I interviewed conceded that El Salvador had made important strides in its respect for freedom of expression.\(^\text{14}\) However, all respondents demonstrated concern about continued limitations in this area. The overall picture was eloquently summarised by news anchor Mauricio Funes:

*Hay quienes sostienen, sobre todo desde el gobierno, de que aquí se vive una irrestricta libertad de expresión, pero la cantidad de medios no es sinónimo de libertad de expresión, hay que ver cuáles son los márgenes de maniobra con que pueden operar estos medios de comunicación, pero más que eso cuál es el nivel de participación que tiene la ciudadanía. En El Salvador hay más libertad de prensa y de opinión que en el pasado. Si lo comparamos con respecto a lo que existió durante la guerra, hay un nivel de tolerancia mucho mayor hacia el pensamiento y las opiniones disidentes, pero sigue habiendo serias restricciones al ejercicio periodístico como también a la libertad de expresión cuando las opiniones que se buscan expresar o cuando las informaciones que


Mauricio Funes’ comments constitute a reminder that the transition to electoral democracy has improved the environment for journalistic work, and political debate more generally, but it is an insufficient condition for greater freedom of expression. Greater possibilities for critical reporting exist, but its exercise remains hampered in a number of ways. One such mechanism lies in laws that effectively encourage reportorial self-censorship, a problem I discuss below in greater detail. Under El Salvador’s penal code, individuals found guilty of offending the honour of a public official risk a prison sentence, and journalists may be stripped of their press credentials. Convictions may be rare, but the existence and potential enforcement of such provisions is likely to prod individuals into silence, thus stifling the articulation of critical ideas.

These legal barriers to news production are but one form in which the government continues to wield power over the media. Another source of tension, affecting investigative journalism and the performance of public oversight, is the highly restricted access to information. Even though this right is enshrined in the Salvadoran Constitution, the country lacks a law that would require officials to grant access to public records and data. El Salvador remains one of the very few Latin American nations that have no such regulations, and the authorities have firmly rejected the need for them. As a result, information is provided on a purely discretionary basis, and observers have noted that refusals are often based on officials’ desire to evade criticism and maintain a positive image. Existing studies indicate that the limited access to information remains

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\[15\] Some sectors, particularly the government, maintain that freedom of expression is unlimited here, but the number of media is not synonymous with freedom of expression. We need to consider the room for manoeuvre in which the media operate, but above all the population’s level of participation. In El Salvador there exists more freedom of the press and freedom of expression than in the past. Compared to the situation during the war, there is much more tolerance towards dissenting thoughts and opinions, but there continue to be serious restrictions of both journalistic work and freedom of expression when the opinions that one seeks to express, or when the information that one seeks to disseminate through the existing media, challenge the status quo and challenge the power groups in this country.” Interview with Mauricio Funes, TV Journalist, San Salvador, 20 June 2006.


\[20\] Peraza Torres, “Derecho a la información,” 821.
one of the most significant obstacles to Salvadoran journalism. This finding was confirmed by the reporters I interviewed on this subject. However, one of the respondents acknowledged that many domestic journalists had developed an indolent attitude towards news-gathering, preferring the transcription of official speeches and press releases to investigations. The problematic access to information likely encourages such an approach to reporting, but it is also fostered by the political and economic interests of individual media outlets. Just how these concerns affect journalistic work will be clarified below. Suffice it to note here that the commercial logic of the news media favours routine practices of reporting. A central element of these news routines is journalists’ reliance on a small number of institutional news sources and pre-scheduled official events. It is worth emphasising the implications of these standard procedures since they are significant for both the gang news coverage and NGO attempts to contest Mano Dura.

Official sources, by virtue of their status, enjoy privileged access to the media. Government representatives and law enforcement agents are among those who exercise considerable influence on the news-making process: they define what issues are newsworthy and how they are presented. As a result, news coverage tends to reflect established interests and to reaffirm the basic social order. At the same time, these practices put alternative voices at a disadvantage. Resource-poor groups have difficulties to compete with the spending power and news-management skills of official actors and therefore to achieve coverage. Routine journalistic practices thus allow the state to influence the news agenda, including items concerning the nature and magnitude of crime. The content analysis will substantiate this point and show how the Salvadoran government’s priorities affected gang-related news.

The emergence of new media

The repression and political intolerance of the 1980s had essentially suffocated critical journalism. When the war drew to a close, a number of promising papers were launched in an attempt to diversify the available spectrum of the press. However, they soon

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21 Chamorro, El Poder de la Prensa, 46; Ladutke, Freedom of Expression in El Salvador, 56.
24 On news routines, see Charlotte Ryan, Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1991), 141-149.
25 Devereux, Understanding the Media, 7.
collapsed under economic pressure. Their short lifespan has been considered elsewhere and is here reviewed, albeit briefly, since their fate is indicative of the problems that beset alternative media to this day.27

The monthly news magazine *Tendencias*, published since 1990, maintained a pluralistic editorial line and addressed primarily opinion leaders. However, it proved unable to become self-supporting once crucial international funding ceased and had to fold after seven years.28 The weekly newspaper *Primera Plana* was created by foreign journalists who had descended on El Salvador to cover the armed conflict. *Primera Plana* began circulating in 1994, again with much-needed international assistance, and offered critical coverage of current events. Insufficient advertising revenue forced its closure after only nine months, but the paper is credited with introducing investigative journalism in the country.29

**The trend towards greater professionalism**

The presence of foreign war correspondents in El Salvador is widely believed to have contributed to raising professional standards among younger journalists.30 US and European correspondents’ inquisitive approach to reporting left an indelible impression on a new generation of Salvadoran media personnel. Over time, the latter would replace the *empíricos*, established reporters who had learned the trade on the streets and accepted bribes.31 Several local universities started offering journalism degree programmes, and it is estimated that 95% of the country’s reporters have now undergone academic training.32 In the newsrooms these individuals demanded autonomy and showed commitment to the development of investigative journalism.33 The subsequent section will argue that this generational shift was the driving force behind the adoption of critical reporting by the mainstream press. Here, however, I want to suggest that journalistic professionalism and ethics in El Salvador remain limited, with obvious implications for news production.

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28 Ibid., 241.
32 Interview with Antonio Herrera, President, APES, San Salvador, 1 July 2005.
The characteristics of professional journalism comprise formal training; remuneration; autonomy; and ethical principles.\textsuperscript{34} If professionalism is equated with academic credentials, as it now is in El Salvador, there are indeed signs of positive change. However, the quality of reporting is unlikely to improve if other criteria remain unfulfilled. Reporters may have acquired greater journalistic skills, but the impact these might have is outweighed by continued constraints on newsroom autonomy, modest monetary compensation, and weak ethical norms. The impact of editorial interests on autonomy will be explored below, but I wish to stress here the economic barriers to the consolidation of professionalism. El Salvador’s press ethics code, adherence to which is voluntary, did not meet with the approval of some editors and media owners; journalists who sought to implement it were threatened with dismissal.\textsuperscript{35} However, most reporters’ salaries are still extremely low, and more often it is economic necessity or the perks of the job that prompt them to abandon ethical principles and yield to corruption.\textsuperscript{36} In short, professionalism has improved, but it remains insufficiently consolidated and therefore poses no counterweight to the forces that erode critical reporting. This tension between growing professionalisation and structural constraints underlies the problems facing Salvadoran journalism today and is perhaps most striking in the transformation pursued by the leading press.

Changes in the traditionally dominant media

Prior to the political openings of the 1990s, the media market had been dominated by a small number of pro-regime outlets. The emergence of a more pluralistic environment prompted these institutions to undergo an extensive makeover, although this process has been uneven. The most striking innovations occurred in \textit{El Diario de Hoy} and \textit{La Prensa Gráfica}, at the time some of the most backward Latin American newspapers both in their technical presentation and their viewpoints.\textsuperscript{37} Modernisation could be discerned in two key areas: printing and graphic design systems, and content. The latter was revised to soften its ideological slant, the pages were opened to previously excluded actors and ideas, and investigative supplements (\textit{Vértice} and \textit{Enfoques}, respectively) began being

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{34} Waisbord, \textit{Watchdog Journalism in South America}, 153.
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distributed. In each case, however, improvements advanced at a different pace and for different reasons.

The modernisation efforts were initiated by *El Diario de Hoy*. Like its main competitor, its circulation had considerably decreased, because Salvadorans preferred receiving televised war images and largely considered the press as biased and lacking credibility. The family business was (and continues to be) torn by an internal dispute between Fabricio Altamirano, the current executive director and third generation to lead the publication, and his father, Enrique Altamirano, a staunch anti-communist. The son recognised that the political climate required the broadsheet to shed its rigid conservatism if it was to recover commercially. He persuaded the elder Altamirano to hire Costa Rican journalist Lafitte Fernández as Editor-in-Chief and to give him ample powers to undertake editorial changes. The newsroom was filled with new and younger staff, stories became more balanced, and, initial reluctance notwithstanding, *Vértice* was launched. Prominent ARENA figures condemned the remake and demanded Fernández’ removal, but the family resisted this pressure.

The most conspicuous of these innovations was perhaps the introduction of investigative journalism. Historically, the country’s mainstream press had been tied to the political and economic elite and therefore shunned critical reporting. *Primera Plana* constituted the first school for many who would later work for *Vértice* and *Enfoques*. However, this exchange of ideas does not itself explain why El Salvador’s conservative newspapers chose to adopt a previously marginal style of writing. The journalists I interviewed about these developments insisted that the broader emergence of exposés was the fruit of cultural change in the newsrooms. After all, the media had become increasingly staffed with leftist reporters who ardently promoted a pioneering form of journalism.

In the case of *El Diario de Hoy*, these efforts were strongly supported by the newly-hired Fernández. The pursuit of in-depth reporting invited repeated clashes between the reporters and the paper’s owners who even threatened them with dismissal. However,

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the personnel were not discouraged and successfully defended their project for several years. Meanwhile, the company paid for its permissiveness with the loss of prized advertising revenue when some of its patrons felt offended by the muckraking. Although the organisation’s own commercial interests suffered the occasional blow, it persisted with its business strategy. From a marketing standpoint, investigative journalism lent the broadsheet an image of openness and heightened its credibility. To the extent that Vértice helped capture readers in an increasingly competitive media environment, it was tolerated. Yet, the editorial commitment would not outlast this moment.

Over the years the journal experienced a qualitative decline until it quietly folded in 2006. The closure may have been unsurprising given that the elder Altamirano wished to curb the modernising process and preferred the family’s publications to support a conservative agenda. Some observers feel, however, that El Salvador’s investigative journalism has always lacked teeth. Reportorial resolve notwithstanding, wrongdoing has been disclosed only selectively. Issues such as the privatisation of the bank, post-war death squad activities, and organised crime have never been probed. Since exposés risk touching a raw nerve in government and business circles, media owners choose not to invest in the development of a journalism that might well jeopardise their commercial interests. After the disappearance of Vértice, critical reporting remained largely confined to Enfoques, but here the boundaries of permissible behaviour have been similarly drawn.

La Prensa Gráfica, nowadays more moderate than its chief competitor, had initially resisted the need for change. In 1998, however, production came to a standstill when the entire newsroom commenced a walkout to demand greater editorial freedom. The Dutriz family responded by appointing former Education Minister Cecilia Gallardo as the paper’s Editor-in-Chief. ARENA had denied her the presidential candidacy, and so it was under her stewardship that La Prensa Gráfica finally achieved greater journalistic innovation and even turned to criticising the ruling party.

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45 Interview with Mauricio Funes, TV Journalist, San Salvador, 20 June 2006. For one such incident, concerning the disclosure of illegal phone tapping, see Ladutke, Freedom of Expression in El Salvador, 61, 76.
47 Rockwell and Janus, Media Power in Central America, 31.
50 Interview with José Luis Sanz, Deputy Director of Information, La Prensa Gráfica, San Salvador, 27 May 2006.
Salvadoran reporters have observed that even these limited changes in the mainstream press suffered a reversal in recent years. To be sure, news content and opinion pages became diversified, but this evolution speaks to the owners’ business instincts rather than real commitment to democracy and pluralism. The opening of opinion columns to previously vetoed viewpoints, for example, seems designed to balance the odd critical letter with otherwise biased reporting. Overall, the papers’ old political alignments persist and are perhaps most apparent during electoral cycles when the media regularly turn into platforms for intense power struggles rather than reasoned public debate. Domestic journalists fear, however, that the recently-won space for dissent has narrowed. In the case of El Diario de Hoy, for instance, the return to more intolerant attitudes is explicit in the often blunt, if not offensive, editorials. According to a former employee, the elder Altamirano won the upper hand in the family’s internal dispute, with serious consequences for the newspaper’s opening:

El propietario decidió que no iba a permitir que su hijo siguiera abriendo el periódico. Hubo una batalla interna que desgastó totalmente a la redacción. Vino un periodo de un cierre progresivo total del espacio para la discusión interna y para el pluralismo y la apertura en el debate en las páginas. Los impulsores de la apertura perdieron, y nos fuimos.

By and large, there is concern that the advances of the first post-war decade have come to a halt, resulting in the renewed silencing of critical voices and a qualitative deterioration of news content. Patterns of the past, when the press helped preserve elite control, appear to be re-emerging. The following section will examine how the current configuration of the media system contributes to this reality.

2.2 Anatomy of the contemporary media landscape

El Salvador appears to be blessed with an extensive range of print and electronic media. The country has five national newspapers, some 180 radio stations, and 10 TV channels (excluding cable). This picture of diversity, however, is deceptive. Each market niche is dominated by a handful of advertising-rich, audience-strong outlets that fail to offer a

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53 ‘The owner decided that he was no longer going to permit his son to continue to open the newspaper. There was an internal fight that completely wore out the newsroom. There came a time of progressive closure of all space for internal discussion, for pluralism, and for open debate in the news pages. Those of us who had promoted the opening lost, and we left.’ Interview with José Luis Sanz, Deputy Director of Information, La Prensa Gráfica, San Salvador, 27 May 2006.

critique of the dominant political and socio-economic order. Alternative media, or vehicles for the transmission of adversarial views and resistance to the status quo, exist but are poorly funded and reach a very small number of viewers and listeners.\(^{55}\) As a result, they are unable to mount a challenge to mainstream journalism and improve the variety and quality of news.

Among the print media, *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* are the leading publications with an average daily circulation of 110,000 and 95,000 copies, respectively.\(^{56}\) The remaining newspapers match neither the reach nor the political influence of their main competitors. *Más* (40,000), owned by the Altamiranos, is sensationalist in nature and contains little political information. *Diario El Mundo* (20,000), founded by the affluent Borja family as a centrist afternoon paper, has switched to a morning format and has become increasingly conservative. The *Diario Co-Latino* (20,000) is El Salvador’s oldest daily and, when faced with mounting debt, was purchased by a staff cooperative that has been running the paper ever since.\(^{57}\) Originally aimed at building a social movement in support of the FMLN, it continues to represent left-wing ideology and often carries stories not covered elsewhere. The electronic newspaper *El Faro*, and to a lesser extent the on-line magazine *Raíces*, play an additional corrective role. However, their impact is equally diminished since only an estimated 5% of the Salvadoran population have Internet access.\(^{58}\)

Greater competition exists on the airwaves, but here too space for critical news coverage has been shrinking. The vast number of commercial stations is supplemented by very few contenders with an alternative vision. Since the former rebel stations have become more traditional enterprises, social justice issues are largely confined to YSUCA and the 20 community radio stations affiliated with ARPAS.\(^{59}\)

The television market provides a similarly discouraging picture. The state-owned channel 10, a war-time propaganda instrument for the government and the Armed Forces, airs mainly cultural programming and does not counterbalance the news coverage

\(^{55}\) On alternative media, see Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America*, 27.

\(^{56}\) For circulation figures of El Salvador’s newspapers, see Chamorro, *El Poder de la Prensa*, 28. The figures cited here are the latest publicly available data. According to some of my interviewees, the numbers have since changed slightly. However, the overall market position has remained stable, with *La Prensa Gráfica* being considered the leading paper.


\(^{58}\) Interview with Juan José Dalton, Freelance Journalist, San Salvador, 6 February 2006.

\(^{59}\) Interview with Héctor Vides, Executive Director, ARPAS, San Salvador, 14 July 2005. YSUCA operates at the Jesuit University. On the former rebel stations, see Rockwell and Janus, *Media Power in Central America*, 41.
offered by the Telecorporación Salvadoreña (TCS).\textsuperscript{60} Owned by media mogul Boris Esersky, himself a long-standing supporter of El Salvador’s conservative causes, the TCS is the country’s dominant and most established broadcaster. Its stations 2, 4, and 6 cater to the agenda of ARENA and control 90% the nation’s viewing audience.\textsuperscript{61} Channel 33/Tecnovisión and stations 15, 19, and 21 (all part of Megavisión) offer contrasting information, but remain marginal players. The only station that sought to breach the TCS monopoly was Channel 12, since its launch in 1984 known for high-quality news coverage and a pioneering early-morning news interview format.\textsuperscript{62} However, in 1997 the channel’s founder, Jorge Zedán, was forced to sell the controlling interest and became a minority shareholder of the station. The buyer, Mexico’s TV Azteca, was ready to trade critical reporting for higher advertising revenue. After years of internal disputes, the company gained full control of the channel and in 2005 dismissed Salvadoran journalist Mauricio Funes.\textsuperscript{63} His highly respected interview programme was dropped in favour of mass entertainment from Mexico, and today the station’s journalism is \textit{oficialista} – passive in political news-gathering and self-censored.\textsuperscript{64} Funes was able to continue his morning interview at channel 15, but withdrew two years later following his nomination as the FMLN’s 2009 presidential candidate. With the closure of this important space, the communications system has become yet more homogeneous. The next three sections will consider three key barriers to the development of a more open and pluralistic media sector: ownership concentration, advertising power, and self-censorship.

\section*{Concentration of media ownership}

The virtual lack of competition in the Salvadoran media system is rooted in oligarchic ownership structures. The market concentration is palpable among newspapers and television channels, but also exists, though to a lesser degree, in the radio sector where some companies own up to a dozen or more stations.\textsuperscript{65} Overall, media power remains essentially in the hands of three family businesses with ties to the elite and a commitment to the political and economic interests of the ruling party and the private sector. This situation is exacerbated by the advertising power wielded by TCS owner Boris Esersky.

\textsuperscript{60} Interview with Mauricio Funes, TV Journalist, San Salvador, 20 June 2006.
\textsuperscript{61} Rockwell and Janus, \textit{Media Power in Central America}, 44, 49.
\textsuperscript{62} Chamorro, \textit{El Poder de la Prensa}, 23.
\textsuperscript{63} Interview with Mauricio Funes, TV Journalist, San Salvador, 20 June 2006.
\textsuperscript{64} On \textit{oficialista} or pro-government journalism, see Daniel C. Hallin, “Media, political power, and democratisation in Mexico,” in James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, eds. \textit{De-Westernizing Media Studies} (London: Routledge, 2000), 99.
His media empire comprises not only the said three-channel group, cable TV franchises, and radio stations, but also the country’s leading advertising agencies and public relations firms.\textsuperscript{66} The consequences of these arrangements are discussed below. Here it must be emphasised that state failure to regulate the airwaves has permitted the consolidation of an oligopolistic media system. Esersky even employed his collusive relations with political elites to block the sale of an unused public television frequency to Mexican broadcasters.\textsuperscript{67} Clearly, the government may no longer openly restrict media content, but it still sets the parameters within which media organisations operate. This excessive ownership concentration has important implications for media access and content.

The nature of El Salvador’s media industry hinders the entry of additional actors. In the absence of sufficient advertising revenue, the costs involved in the launch of a new paper or TV channel are simply prohibitive.\textsuperscript{68} Under the current circumstances, elite control of the press narrows the range of voices that can be heard. In a democracy the media can serve as a forum of information and debate. However, where they are dominated by for-profit enterprises whose owners intersect with the economic and political elites, as is the case in El Salvador, they impede certain speakers’ access to this public platform. For example, the two leading broadsheets and a radio station affiliated with President Saca’s company Samix have periodically refused to publicise the views of opposition parties and civil society groups.\textsuperscript{69} This blockade may be partly self-inflicted due to strategic weaknesses and a lack of news-management skills. Nonetheless, it excludes some actors from the news agenda and renders their ideas less visible.

Media owners also influence content by their decisions to hire or dismiss certain personnel and by disseminating or suppressing specific ideas through editorial decisions. These processes are more subtle than state censorship, but are nonetheless politically significant since they may result in uncritical and biased coverage. Media outlets necessarily embrace one or another political perspective, as do their proprietors. Problems arise when particularistic interests distort news production. In El Salvador’s dominant media the boundaries between ownership and editorial control remain blurred and continue to limit journalistic autonomy to varying degrees. In \textit{La Prensa Gráfica} the newsroom enjoys relative independence and encounters limits only when the owners feel

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{65} Interview with Héctor Vides, Executive Director, ARPAS, San Salvador, 14 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{66} Rockwell and Janus, \textit{Media Power in Central America}, 45.
\textsuperscript{67} Rick Rockwell and Noreene Janus, “The Triumph of the Media Elite in Postwar Central America,” in Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbord, eds., \textit{Latin Politics, Global Media} (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 57.
\textsuperscript{68} Chamorro and Arencé, \textit{El turno de los medios}, 14.
\textsuperscript{69} Mejía and Gutiérrez, \textit{Medios y democracia}, 13.
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their social and economic status may be threatened. At *El Diario de Hoy*, by contrast, internal censorship is exercised, and the elder Altamirano himself pens the editorial. An indication of the narrow space for dissent was the removal of Juan José Dalton from both papers when his columns incurred the wrath of his employers. A similar case is that of the TCS where stories are filtered and source blacklists are maintained. Esersky’s stations provide free airtime to ARENA members and function as that party’s propaganda arm. A comparable role is played by the radio stations affiliated with ASDER, an association of which Antonio Saca is currently Vice-President.

The above sketch of media ownership patterns, and their influence on news production, suggests that media independence has remained an unfulfilled promise in El Salvador. Although all news organisations are shaped by various interests, its proximity to the country’s economic and political elites makes the leading press unlikely to act as watchdogs and publicise information that might erode the status quo. In what Hughes has termed an authoritarian news model, reporting reflects the overlapping interests of media owners, government, and the private sector. The mass media’s political alignments are unmistakable during electoral cycles, but do generally yield coverage that is supportive of the government’s agenda. Oligopolistic ownership structures thus contribute to the homogenisation of media content and, insofar as these messages favour a small segment of society, ultimately undermine the consolidation of the country’s democracy.

**Advertising power**

The concentration of media power, and its impact on news production, is further accentuated by the political use of advertising. The latter constitutes a critical source of income of media organisations and is therefore an indirect but significant influence on content. In order to maximise their advertiser base, profit-driven media outlets target the main consumers of commercial products and services, that is, affluent and middle-class audiences. News that appeal to these groups rarely include stories about the poor, except

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72 Interview with Juan José Dalton, Freelance Journalist, San Salvador, 6 February 2006.
76 Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict*, 50.
when their conduct affects the upper echelons of society as is the case when they commit crimes or violate basic social norms. 78 Similarly, the threat to a media organisation’s profitability, if not survival, that is implied by the loss of advertising may result in uncontroversial reporting to avoid offending large advertisers. 79 To be sure, outlets that pursue critical journalism as a matter of conviction will seek to withstand such economic pressures. However, advertisers’ political interests, and therefore their decisions on where to spend their budgets, may indeed serve either to moderate media content or to strangle alternative news organisations. In either case the public is ultimately denied the opportunity to be informed in as full and diverse a manner as possible.

The Salvadoran advertising market is inevitably very small. The primary patrons are to be found among the economic elite, but the state maintains the largest media budget. 80 Ever since ARENA first came to power, official advertising has been allocated to the media according to their editorial line. Traditionally, the government has thus rewarded news organisations that offer favourable coverage with a greater share of its budget and punished those that fail to do so with the withdrawal of advertising investment. 81 Successive administrations have also coaxed private sponsors to pull out when publicised information was deemed inconvenient. 82 The resultant picture is one in which some media carry more advertising than news, while others have suffered from politically-motivated advertising boycotts. 83 For example, among the print media La Prensa Gráfica and El Diario de Hoy control an estimated 90% of the market. 84 The TCS, meanwhile, benefits from the ties to Esersky’s advertising agencies and dominates at least 70% of the television advertising market. 85 Some even put the figure at 85%. 86 Oppositional media, by contrast, have struggled to survive. Channel 12, for instance, long resisted external attempts at controlling editorial content, though not very profitably, only because its owner could secure alternative sources of funding. 87 Today, it is mainly the community

78 Croteau and Hoynes, Media Society, 72.
79 Ibid., 71.
83 For a brief analysis of the advertising/news imbalance in the leading newspapers, see CIDAI, “Los medios, la publicidad y la responsabilidad ética,” Proceso 1249 (11 July 2007), 8-9.
84 Interview with Paolo Luers, Journalist, El Faro, San Salvador, 27 May 2006.
86 Lefèvre, “Promoting Independent Media in El Salvador,” 250.
87 See Rockwell and Janus, Media Power in Central America, 133.
radios and the *Diario Co-Latino* that remain the targets of these practices.\(^88\) In short, alternative media are no longer exposed to attacks or open censorship, but instead are being strangled by advertising boycotts, skilfully used by government and business in order to stifle dissenting voices.

**Self-censorship**

A final barrier to the development of a more diverse media sector, and thus more pluralistic news coverage, is reportorial self-censorship. The term refers to a series of editorial actions journalists perform, such as softening their work and omitting information or entire stories, to avoid sanctioning or to advance their careers.\(^89\) Though unrelated to media owners’ direct interference in editorial decisions, these practices similarly tilt reporting in favour of the status quo. Generally, there exists no clearly defined editorial line that explicitly vetoes the scrutiny of certain issues or actors. Rather, journalists adhere to a tacit agreement on what must stay out-of-bounds.\(^90\)

The factors that may prompt self-censorship can be summarised as follows. First, the aforementioned defamation laws that protect the honour of public officials may encourage some journalists not to disclose wrongdoing or question certain behaviour. Second, the political and economic interests of advertisers or their employers can propel media personnel to censor themselves. Third, the current generation of Salvadoran journalists has largely come to discard critical reporting in favour of job security. Fear of dismissal, combined with the limited number of available assignments, leads many to adapt their writing to editorial interests.\(^91\) The choice not to make life difficult for themselves prevents journalists from fully exploiting the political space ushered in by the Peace Accords. Instead, they permit the media to remain at the service of the country’s power groups. Overall, self-censorship has two effects. On the one hand, it eliminates the need for reprisals, a situation that contrasts starkly with the level of physical threat facing journalists in Mexico and Colombia. On the other hand, it works to distort news

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\(^89\) Croteau and Hoynes, *Media Society*, 71.


content and ultimately stifles free expression before it can begin. I will revisit some of these points in the Discussion. First, however, I want to present the findings of the content analysis.

3. Media representations of street gangs and Mano Dura

3.1 Methodology

As argued earlier, the Salvadoran government relied on the media to promote Mano Dura as the most appropriate response to the gangs. The thesis will now examine how the press depicted the gang phenomenon and how these representations in turn served to shape public views of Mano Dura as a meaningful policy. For the purpose of this research I conducted a qualitative content analysis of all gang-related news items published in La Prensa Gráfica and El Diario de Hoy over a period of three years from the launch of Mano Dura. Among the print and broadcast media available in El Salvador, radio and television enjoy greater popularity than newspapers. However, radio constitutes largely a source of entertainment, whereas television and newspapers are consulted for political information and shape the population’s perception of the country’s main problems. Furthermore, journalists interviewed for this study confirmed that the print media, although their circulation is limited to urban centres, possess an unparalleled agenda-setting function. Broadsheets do not reach mass audiences, but they exercise a significant indirect influence on public opinion since the issues they consider newsworthy tend to be taken up by television.

Resource limitations required a narrowing of the number of dailies that could be scrutinised and resulted in the selection of El Salvador’s two leading papers. The period of analysis was restricted to the three years that followed the unveiling of Mano Dura and concluded with the end of my fieldwork and thus my archival access. The research therefore provides a brief, but nevertheless revealing snapshot of the media’s role in creating a particular public image of the gangs and in reproducing arguments for Mano Dura while delegitimising alternative gang control policies.

The daily editions of each newspaper were scanned for items which, singly or in unison, referred to the gangs and gang control programmes. The material included

92 Rockwell and Janus, Media Power in Central America, 7.
articles, editorials, opinion columns, features, photo essays, surveys, and paid advertisements. Whenever pictorial data accompanied the text, both were considered a single unit of analysis. Articles that referred to the gang problem elsewhere, notably in other Central American countries, Mexico, and the United States, were also added to the corpus, because they aided in buttressing pro-Mano Dura coverage in El Salvador. A total of 2,874 items were chosen and then subjected to a close reading.

The analysis explored three elements that came to comprise the publicity campaign in favour of Mano Dura. For this policy to appear sound, gang members first needed to be depicted as inhuman and a danger to society. The second step required a definition of the gang problem as one of individual character deficiencies rather than one of social conditions. Eliminating structural factors from causal explanations of the gang phenomenon would limit state intervention to deterrence, punishment, and control. The third part of the strategy entailed the actual endorsement of Mano Dura: highlighting its success, disparaging criticism of it, and justifying its failure. Overall, I was interested in the ways in which linguistic devices, visual imagery, and reportorial practices combined in order to portray gang members as destructive and detached from their social context, a portrayal that would elicit public aversion to them and legitimise a fundamentally punitive response by the state. Two additional observations are warranted. The first concerns the notion of bias in journalistic constructions of reality, the second relates to the treatment of violence by La Prensa Gráfica.

Newspapers acknowledge certain bias openly and explicitly, for example in editorials and opinion columns. Yet bias also lurks in what appears to be objective news, often as a result of news routines and the propaganda efforts of news sources. Reporters must not only decide which of the day’s happenings are newsworthy, but also gather sufficient information about them and do so efficiently enough to meet their deadlines. Faced with these constraints, journalists need to routinise the news-gathering process, which entails a reliance on official sources and a focus on pre-scheduled events.\(^95\) The existence of these standard practices may be unsurprising, but the implication is that news coverage is oriented towards elite institutions, sufficiently organised and funded to provide a steady stream of information, and relatively devoid of alternative voices. Objectivity in news reporting is unattainable in reality, precisely because reporters select among a pool of sources and are provided “facts” and interpretations these sources wish to have accepted. Through their privileged access to the news-gathering process, politicians, government

\(^95\) Croteau and Hoynes, *Media Society*, 126-129.
and law enforcement officials act as primary definers of reality. The authority associated with these individuals and institutions, together with the time constraints facing journalists, leads to the tendency to publish news reports based on official but otherwise unverified statements. This is perhaps an inevitable form of unintended bias, but it may result in consistent ideological bias masquerading as objective journalism. In practice, reporters tend to engage in neutral reporting, balancing competing truth claims without questioning or challenging the veracity of these accounts. Newspapers can thus churn out information without upsetting powerful actors, but at the same time their news products present a partial and distorted version of reality that supports the status quo.

The analysis below will show how these routines led the two Salvadoran broadsheets to be biased in favour of Mano Dura.

A final comment concerns the reporting of La Prensa Gráfica. In May 2005 the paper launched a campaign aimed at promoting reflection and debate about violence in El Salvador, improving the quality of reporting on the issue, and critically monitoring public and private initiatives designed to build a more peaceful society. Months earlier, the homicide of one LPG worker had impacted the newsroom and triggered the idea for a project that would highlight the problem of violence. The campaign, known as Todos contra la violencia, embarked on a number of objectives, such as a special issue published entirely in black-and-white and the drafting of a Manual for the News Treatment of Violence. It is this handbook, compiled after an external evaluation of LPG journalistic practices and made public in 2006, which is of relevance to the gang-related coverage I analyse below. The manual entails a number of recommendations that reporters are encouraged to apply in their daily work, and I want to review briefly those that are pertinent to the subsequent discussion.

For convenience, I have grouped these points into four clusters: framing, sources, linguistic techniques, and citizen rights. First, articles should avoid simplistic accounts of the multi-causal phenomenon of violence and contextualise events to render them meaningful to readers. Second, journalists should consult a plurality of sources, verify and contrast different versions of events, and provide an independent and truthful news story. Source interests need to be taken into consideration, as the authorities may seek to

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98 La Prensa Gráfica, Proyecto institucional “Todos contra la violencia” (San Salvador: mimeo, 2006).
99 Interview with José Luis Sanz, Deputy Director of Information, La Prensa Gráfica, San Salvador, 27 May 2006.
100 See La Prensa Gráfica, Manual para el Tratamiento Informativo de la Violencia (San Salvador: mimeo, 2005).
publicise the effectiveness of their public security policies while concealing their incapacity to reduce crime rates. Third, the stereotyping and stigmatisation of suspects and specific social sectors should be avoided, particularly in headlines and through the excessive use of metaphors. Perpetrators or criminal acts should not be eulogised. In the case of gang members, individual monikers and group names are to be omitted as are images of tattoos and signs to avoid stigma and the reaffirmation of gang identity. Fourth, criminal justice coverage must respect the principle of innocence to avoid tarnishing the image and name of innocent citizens. The following section, reporting the findings of the content analysis in comparative perspective, remains sensitive to the extent to which these recommendations for a more responsible journalism were implemented.

3.2 Analysis of gang-related media coverage

For *Mano Dura* to appear preferable to other gang control programmes, a depiction of the street gangs needed to be offered that would favour a punitive response. The media can legitimise certain policies not only by backing or opposing them, but also by describing offenders and explaining their actions. Thus, the promotion, and public approval, of *Mano Dura* cannot be understood without considering the role of the Salvadoran media’s treatment of the gang phenomenon. Crucially, journalists do not merely transmit knowledge about social reality, but are engaged in the production of meaning through words and images.¹⁰¹ Language and pictures therefore establish forms of “truth” about the gang problem and its solution. I want to suggest that the Salvadoran press did not merely represent gang members in some ways and not others, but acted as amplifiers of a government and law enforcement-driven moral panic. In Stanley Cohen’s classic definition of the term,

societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long

enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic is passed over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.¹⁰²

Both *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* painted a distorted image of the gangs and exaggerated the threat they posed. Media representations encouraged the public to perceive the gangs as one of the main problems facing the country and to support a populist penal response, a measure that by its very nature could not alleviate but only exacerbate the gang phenomenon. This section identifies the main patterns that emerged from the gang-related media coverage and is divided into three parts. It begins by explaining how gang members were portrayed and then discusses the endorsement or rejection of causal explanations of the problem and their policy equivalents, respectively. The third section, on gang control options, is structured into three phases in order to highlight the arguments and justifications that were offered to preserve the legitimacy of *Mano Dura* and, by implication, the credibility of the government. Thus, phase one covers the period between President Flores’ launch of *Mano Dura* and President Saca’s introduction of *Súper Mano Dura*. Phase two comprises the first year of *Súper Mano Dura* while the third recounts the time when this second initiative was increasingly questioned and eventually “re-launched” before being quietly discarded. The analysis is followed by a discussion of the findings.

### 3.2.1 Representations of gangs, gang members, and gang activity

The first part of the investigation explores the images that were constructed of gang members. These representations, together with conceptions of the factors leading to the onset and maintenance of gang structures, shape policy interventions. I therefore sought to ascertain how gang members were described, and what activities were attributed to them. What are the effects of these depictions and attributions? By describing what gang members are like and what they do, writers establish definitions. Since much of the information for news stories about the gangs is controlled by official sources, these could act as the primary definers of the gang problem.¹⁰³ The interpretations thus provided, particularly by the PNC, Gobernación, and the Presidency of the Republic, set the

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parameters for all subsequent coverage of the issue. The analysis revealed the use of the following techniques that I consider below: categorisation, criminalisation, dichotomy, metaphors, and language eulogising violence against gang members. Overall, the descriptive elements of the reporting reflected a bias towards the official version of the gangs. Gang involvement in crime and violence was distorted and exaggerated such that a suppressive response appeared inevitable. Gang members were dehumanised and portrayed as a public enemy whose elimination was permissible in return for security.

**Categorisation**

One way of describing gang members occurs through categorisation. In this process, individuals are ascribed to a category, which in turn is presented as homogeneous. A collective identity has thus been created, and the characteristics associated with the group can be attributed to all its members. If the category becomes linked with negative traits and activities, these unfavourable inferences will then be seen to apply to everyone in the group. The Salvadoran media have used the following terms in order to refer to the gang member category. The gangs are identified by means of the generic terms *pandilla* or *pandilla juvenil* (youth gang) or the word *mara*. *Clicá* designates the neighbourhood-based subgroups, and the names of particular gangs, notably *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS or MS-13) and *Dieciocho*, constitute categories in their own right. Individual gang members are labelled *pandillero*, *marero*, *miembro de mara/pandilla* (gang member), or *miembro de la Mara Salvatrucha/Dieciocho* (Mara Salvatrucha/Dieciocho member).

The use of categorisation can be observed in the following excerpts:

- *Mara 18 ataca a vigilante en Soyapango* (ST) (EDH, 2 August 2003)

Categorisation has serious repercussions insofar as it entails stereotyping, that is, a simplified and reductive image is applied to an entire group. Media stereotypes provide partial and therefore misleading impressions and invite readers to form erroneous opinions of the members of a group. To the extent that the behaviour or characteristics of the group are negative, society can marginalise and reject the individuals associated

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105 Quotes are taken from the body of the text unless indicated otherwise. Pre-headlines are specified as (PH), headlines as (H), and subtitles as (ST).
with this category. In the case of the street gangs, the inferences that could be drawn from the above excerpts were that a) gang members constitute an undifferentiated group that is regularly linked to crime or violence and b) everyone defined as a gang member is criminal and violent. The Salvadoran press reproduced stereotypes about gang members on both the textual and pictorial levels. Coverage tended to emphasise descriptive traits, such as dramatic nicknames or tattoos, and involvement in drugs, crime, and violence. This occurred particularly in the attention-grabbing but sometimes misleading headlines, which are often all that readers take in. For example, headlines beginning with “maras asesinan” (maras assassinate) reported with certainty that gang members had killed someone, yet the corresponding articles insinuated that this “fact” was merely an unverified statement of a police officer. Reporting of this kind encourages negative stereotypes about gang members. The second part of the process was the recurrent publication of photos showing tattooed individuals, often in police custody. Again these are elements of the news item that impact the readers, and by showing gang members repeatedly in the hands of law enforcement agents, they falsely implied that gang members are constantly involved in criminal activities.

A photo story that appeared in El Diario de Hoy (“Testigo de su tiempo,” EDH, 23 May 2004) provides another indication of how such stereotypes were propagated. The pictures had been taken by a photographer who spent several weeks with a Dieciocho clica, and the result was meant to document life in the gang. The text was accompanied by 25 snapshots most of which displayed individuals who are tattooed or are getting a tattoo, are scarred (an indication of past violence), consume drugs, are engaged in violence (e.g., the jumping-in of an initiation rite), attend a funeral (creating an association between gang members and death), are being pursued by soldiers or in police custody (both indicating conflict with the law). In addition, two captions implied that these activities occur with certain regularity: the funeral scene carried the caption “Las bajas se cuentan a menudo” while a picture showing youths as they ran across uneven terrain was entitled “En esta guerra la huida es frecuente.”

The point is not that the scenes depicted in the photos are untrue, but that they render a simplistic account of gang life and in so doing may lead readers to believe that the said activities are what all gang members do all the time.

106 “Mara 18 attacks guard in Soyapango,” “Gang members assassinate more women.”
107 “The casualties are often counted,” “In this war escape is a frequent occurrence.” The metaphorical language that is used here will be discussed below.
Chapter 3: Creating folk devils

The criminalisation of gang members

Categorisation invoked a crude image of gang members as criminal and violent individuals. Media coverage reinforced this association by explicitly criminalising gang members in a variety of ways. These included an emphasis on emblematic gang members; the attribution of specific criminal activities to gang members, even though many of the accusations failed to be substantiated; the ideational construction of “gang bosses”; and the quantifying of the “gang threat.” Collectively, these descriptive elements painted a picture of gang members as irrational, perverse, and motivated by a desire to terrorise the population with serious criminal activities and brutal violence. The qualitative nature of this ostensible menace was magnified by the manipulative use of statistics. These representational practices served to advance the need for a punitive response, while questioning the feasibility of “softer” approaches to gang control.

Emblematic gang members

The characterisation of gang members as aggressive and in permanent conflict with the law was accentuated by media creations of individual profiles. Whereas categorisation made gang members appear identical, extensive references to only some of them implied that their conduct was representative of the whole group. The figure of the emblematic gang member thus served to symbolise the world of criminal, violent, and ultimately dangerous gang members. The persons who featured in these accounts attracted media attention for their striking nicknames, tattoos, and dress as much as for their arrest and criminal records and attempts to evade justice. For example, a youth known as “el Crazy” acquired notoriety for his jailbreaks and alleged involvement in the decapitation of a female. Reporting about “el Dark” indicated a fascination with the large “18” tattooed across his face, his repeated detentions, and his outburst of anger at being apprehended for a triple homicide (of which he was later convicted). Stories about “el Diablito” (“Little Devil”), one of the first to be captured under Mano Dura, exploited his penchant for skull and horn tattoos, his defying look, and some 23 arrests.

The figure that has most often been in the media spotlight is that of Carlos Ernesto Mojica Lechuga alias “el Viejo Lin.” News items generally charted his recurring arrests, court hearings, and suspensions of criminal proceedings. Police claim he is the national leader of the Dieciocho and have linked him to the dismemberment of an under-age female. Despite the tenuous nature of both assertions, the media have eagerly seized on
these as well as on his political declarations. The excerpts below illustrate the ways in which his danger and leadership role have been constructed.

The first two notes were published after homicide charges against Mojica had been dropped and police re-detained him 30 minutes later for a different offence. The items reproduced here comment on his release and quote the then Director-General of the police, Ricardo Meneses:

**PNC laments freedom of marero leader (H)**
Advisory that Mojica Lechuga, upon returning to the streets, will be a threat to the Salvadoran population. Meneses said, there will be a rise in delitos provocados by the pandilleros. “The consequences will appear to us. The least to which one exposes themselves is to homicide,” said the police chief. “People like him should be in prison.” (LPG, 25 May 2004).

**PNC fears that Viejo Lin will increase delitos (H)**
The release of Carlos Ernesto Mojica (aka) El Viejo Lin, could give rise to an increase in the misdeeds of the Mara 18, warned PNC chief Ricardo Meneses. ‘Everyone will see that delitos will increase due to the orders given by this man,” he stated. Meneses announced that the PNC had redoubled its patrols in the Colonia La Campanera, in Soyapango, where Mojica lives. He is highly dangerous, he is the national leader of the Mara 18, and he will continue to harm the population,” he added. (EDH, 27 May 2004).

Finally, an LPG interview with Mojica was introduced thus:

**Police say he is the national leader of the Dieciocho gang (H)**
Mojica was convicted in 2004, surrounded by seven leaders of his gang and loaded with intimidating gazes, Carlos Ernesto Mojica Lechuga, “el Viejo Lin,” assures that he is ‘[only a] speaker, just as there are others’. (LPG/Enfoques, 21 November 2004).

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108 ‘PNC regrets release of gang leader’ (H) ‘He warned that upon his return to the streets Mojica Lechuga will be a threat to the Salvadoran population. According to Meneses, gang crime will increase. “We are going to see the consequences… Homicide is the least that people are put at risk of,” said the police chief. …“People like him should be in prison.”’

109 ‘PNC fears that Viejo Lin will increase crime’ (H) ‘The release of Carlos Ernesto Mojica (aka) El Viejo Lin could give rise to an increase in the misdeeds of the Mara 18, warned PNC chief Ricardo Meneses. “Everyone will see that crime is going to increase due to the orders given by this man,” he stated. Meneses announced that the PNC had redoubled its patrols in the Colonia La Campanera, in Soyapango, were Mojica lives. “He is highly dangerous, he is the national leader of the Mara 18, and he will continue to harm the population,” he added.’

110 ‘Police say he is the national leader of the Dieciocho gang. He… denies it with a relaxed gesture, with the calmness that comes with authority, power, and experience. Seated in a plastic chair in Chalatenango
The above excerpts depict Mojica as a dangerous individual who can be expected to commit more crimes. The population, particularly the residents in his former community, need to fear the worst, and as long as his conviction remained elusive, more policing provided the only antidote. Given the threat Mojica poses to society, he (and others like him) should best remain in prison. His rank within his gang makes the need for his incarceration all the more urgent. Since the first two articles are based on the assessment of a police chief, his authority lends these claims credibility. Importantly, by merely keynoting the official source, the journalists could disown any responsibility for what was being said about Mojica, but Mr Menesses’ assertions were thus conveyed as factually correct. In the third passage the description of Mojica and his fellow gang members is such that the idea of a clear, hierarchical leadership appears to be endorsed by the reporters. In short, the image of a sociopathic gang leader, who commands a group of similarly criminal and violent individuals, was established. By disseminating sensational but mostly uncorroborated information about Mojica (his involvement in the case of the decapitated juvenile, for example, remains to be proven), the media not only denigrated his image, but also misled the public about gang structures and the crime associated with gangs. The criminal involvement of gang members will be examined next.

Crime and violence attributed to gang members

The media advanced a number of chilling but misleading claims about gang crime patterns. The link between street gangs and crime is real, yet it was mischaracterised and overstated. Below I examine how gang members were labelled as criminal and violent; their actions were portrayed as a consequence of individual pathology; serious and violent crime was overemphasised; the gangs were unhelpfully typified as a transnational phenomenon; and, finally, related to organised crime and terrorism. The ensuing image of highly structured, organised, and violent criminal groups had two significant implications. First, by misinforming the population about the reality of the gang phenomenon, it served to trigger greater public support for punitive measures. Second, by painting gang members as increasingly vicious and destructive, seemingly motivated by individual deficiencies rather than by social and economic disadvantage, it allowed the authorities both to justify a punitive response and to give preference to it.
A variety of techniques were used to depict the gangs as purposefully criminal entities. For one, the media repeatedly quoted government and police officials to that effect, and although these claims were thus attributed to particular sources, they constituted nonetheless a way of constructing knowledge about the gangs. For example, President Flores referred to the gangs as ‘pandillas criminales…con unos ritos verdaderamente salvajes’ (LPG, 15 January 2004) or ‘grupos organizados de asesinos’ (EDH, 9 February 2004). Similarly pejorative remarks came from the next government, with President Saca branding the gangs as ‘bandas de malacates y delincuentes’ (LPG, 23 February 2005) and then Minister of Gobernación, René Figueroa, speaking of the ‘bajo mundo de las pandillas’ (LPG, 11 February 2006). Noteworthy in these speech acts is also the choice of particularly strong words. As such, the criminal nature of the gangs was evoked through an allusion to cruelty and brutality (“savage”) and the world of crime (“underworld”). Emotional language was also used by police officers, as in this comment by Police Commissioner Pedro González: ‘Yo nunca he visto a una pandilla de la MS haciendo obras sociales… Se reúnen para delinquir’ (EDH, 27 July 2003).

Neither newspaper limited itself to simply reporting official declarations, but indeed endorsed various definitions of the “criminal street gang” in its coverage. For instance, La Prensa Gráfica proffered ‘asociaciones delictivas’ (LPG, 11 February 2006), while El Diario de Hoy exhibited a greater tendency towards identifying criminal behaviour as a primary function of the gangs. Thus, the paper wrote about ‘pandillas criminales’ (EDH, 24 July 2003), ‘maras delincuenciales’ (EDH, 28 August 2003), ‘maras juveniles violentas’ (EDH, 4 March 2005) or the ‘ejército del bajo mundo’ ((H) EDH, 22 August 2003). One item on the profile of “the” gang member explicitly warned readers: ‘No existe la excepción de no delinquir’ (EDH, 23 September 2003).

Attempts to highlight the criminality and danger of the gangs were reinforced by active and passive forms of sentence construction. This technique was particularly apparent in headlines and served to accentuate gang members’ responsibility for negative actions while mitigating that of other actors. The following two headlines illustrate how the agency of gang members was emphasised:

*Marecos asesinan anciano* (LPG, 11 November 2003)

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111 ‘criminal gangs…with truly savage rites;’ ‘organised groups of murderers.’
112 ‘gangs of thugs and criminals;’ ‘underworld of the gangs.’
113 ‘I have never seen an MS gang carrying out social works… They gather to commit crimes.’
114 ‘criminal associations,’ ‘criminal gangs,’ ‘criminal maras,’ ‘violent youth gangs,’ ‘army of the underworld.’
115 ‘The exception of not committing crimes does not exist.’
Chapter 3: Creating folk devils

Pandilleros atacan a tres policías rurales (EDH, 16 April 2006).\textsuperscript{116}

While the word position pushes gang members into the foreground, the use of the present tense, a journalistic practice that is meant to enliven the description of a bygone event, conveys the impression that the described act reflects the standard behaviour of all gang members.\textsuperscript{117} Compare this with the following headline in which the victimisation of gang members is recorded:

Muere cuatro mareros en tiroteo con policías (LPG, 13 February 2004).\textsuperscript{118}

Thus, the coverage implies not only that the injuries and deaths experienced by gang members matter less than those of other citizens, but also that gang crime is especially serious. Again, the use of loaded terms (“assassinate,” “attack”) conjures up the apparently belligerent and destructive nature of gang members.

Another, perhaps more compelling, way of labelling these individuals consisted in the use of (current or former) gang members’ own words as incriminating evidence of their criminality. With a subtle difference, this pattern was perceptible in both newspapers. This is how La Prensa Gráfica entitled a first-person account by a female ex-MS member of her life in, and subsequent withdrawal from, the gang:

“Adentro de la mara uno es sanguinario” (LPG, 8 August 2003).\textsuperscript{119}

The reporting of direct speech indicates a journalistic distancing from the remarks, yet it allows the reproduction of “insider” and hence “authentic” knowledge about the gangs. El Diario de Hoy, by contrast, crossed this line and chose to attribute criminality to gang members based on their group affiliation and certain descriptive traits. The following article tells of the arrest of three gang members for a multiple homicide, before describing the reporter’s encounter with the detainees:

Durante las entrevistas, los tres se mostraron tranquilos. Sus respuestas cortas con tono suave, hacían creer que son personas de buen comportamiento e incapaces de cometer algún delito. Sin embargo, al aceptar que eran miembros activos de la pandilla y mostrar sus tatuajes en la espalda y piernas, demostraban lo contrario (EDH, 22 June 2006).\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{116} ‘Mareros kill elderly man; ‘gang members attack three rural police.’


\textsuperscript{118} ‘Four mareros die in shoot-out with police.’

\textsuperscript{119} “In the mara you are cruel!”

\textsuperscript{120} ‘During the interviews the three seemed calm. Their short and softly-spoken answers made you think that they were well-behaved and incapable of committing crimes. However, when they admitted to be
This excerpt is not only seriously flawed in that it derives the suspects’ (as yet undemonstrated) culpability from personal characteristics (tattoos) and a lifestyle (gang membership), but is also yet another example of how the media propagated stereotypes about gang members. The textual coverage mischaracterised these groups insofar as street gangs cannot be defined as either violent or criminal. First, it is not dominant behaviour, such as violence or other particular criminal patterns, that marks out a street gang, but rather crime versatility. Second, it is inaccurate to see gang crime as more than a by-product of the group context. Furthermore, individual gang members may commit crimes, but the assumption that all gang members necessarily do so and to the same extent, is erroneous. Street gangs exist not for criminal reasons, but because they serve to fulfil the social needs of their members. Media accounts such as the above are not only factually incorrect, but also invite misguided gang control policies.

The possibility for the public generally to associate gang members with crime, and thus to support punitive measures, is heightened when news items incorporate stereotypical photos. During the period of analysis, the pages of both La Prensa Gráfica and El Diario de Hoy abounded with such pictures. Gang members were usually shown in one of several positions that suggested they were in permanent conflict with the law: after a police operation, either lying restrained on the ground and having militaristically-clad police officers point their high-calibre weapons at them or being exhibited, handcuffed, in public or outside a police station; or else locked into a police or prison cell. Males were mostly depicted with their shirts removed to reveal their tattooed torso, and often the presence of the media served to elicit defying looks and the flashing of hand signs that demonstrated identification with the gang. The photo below is illustrative of this practice.

\footnote{active Dieciocho members and showed their tattooed backs and feet, they \textit{demonstrated the opposite to be the case.}}
\footnote{Klein and Maxson, \textit{Street Gang Patterns and Policies}, 169.}
\footnote{Ibid., 165.}
The characteristic shared by all these images is the direction in which the camera was pointed. Since media personnel were on the side of the police (the guardians of the law) to photograph gang members, the snapshots reinforced the idea that the latter were breaking the law. Furthermore, the signs and the positions in which gang members were shown had the effect of making them appear menacing: a threat that needed to be controlled. Both papers sometimes published these photos even if they were unrelated to the content of the article. As news photographs are among the most eye-catching elements of a story, these pictures were thus another means to perpetuate gang stereotypes. The anti-violence campaign prompted La Prensa Gráfica to address this problem. References to gang names and individual monikers were eliminated, and tattooed individuals were still depicted, but their tattoos were blurred. For the paper, these were laudable advances, yet the new practices continued to perpetuate gang stereotypes in two ways. First, the pictorial material clearly suggested that what was hidden was a tattoo. Thus, the effect remained the same, with the only difference that the association between tattooed individuals and crime was left to the readers’ imagination. Second, whenever gang involvement in an offence was alluded to, La Prensa Gráfica referred to the suspects as persons ‘con apariencia de pandillero.’ Although no mention was made of particular gangs, an anonymous figure was created and readers could fill this blank by resorting to already existing stereotypes. In short, the paper sanitised its portrayal of gang members, but continued to foster stereotypes about, and social prejudice against, them.

123 ‘who looked like gang members.’
A second way of inflating the criminal nature of the gangs was to portray their alleged acts of violence as senseless, the result of individual irrationality and the desire to cause mayhem for sheer pleasure. Again, these assessments were obtained from official sources and unquestioningly reported. For example, La Prensa Gráfica cited police chief Meneses as describing gang activity as a ‘lucha irracional’ (LPG, 11 June 2004). In an interview, reported in direct speech and without reportorial comments, Mr Meneses replied to one question: ‘Los pandilleros tienen una enfermedad mental llamada asesinato’ (LPG, 24 October 2004). El Diario de Hoy made similar attributions, but a perception of pathological behaviour among gang members permeated also EDH news reporting and editorial pages, as indicated in the following excerpts:

González aseguró que con los homicidios los pandilleros buscan también intimidar a la población, a la pandilla contraria o para cobrar las extorsiones. Este impacto se logra, a juicio de las autoridades policiales, con los cuerpos decapitados y con masacres (EDH, 5 April 2006).  

…varios pandilleros asesinaron, sin razón aparente, a un joven… (EDH, 24 July 2003).

Finally, this opinion piece described gang activity as rooted in evil:

Basta con investigar algunos de los casos más sonados de las maras, quienes según la PNC participan en rituales satánicos, por eso el aparecimiento de partes de cuerpos en varios lugares del país (EDH, 28 June 2006).

Media accounts highlighted the supposed character deficiencies of gang members, such as irrationality and a lack of concern for human life. Stereotyping individuals in this way dissociates their behaviour from wider social structures and, together with certain causal explanations of the gang phenomenon, paves the way for suppression.

A third way in which media coverage promoted the image of criminal street gangs was through an overemphasis on serious and violent offending, including sicariato (contract killings) and extrajudicial executions ostensibly carried out to spark collective fear. The latter category encompasses multiple homicides and cases of extreme brutality, such as the mutilation, torture, and decapitation of the victims. Many of these homicides

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124 ‘irrational fight.’  
125 ‘Gang members have a mental illness called murder.’  
126 ‘González affirmed that gang members also committed homicides to intimidate the population and the rival gang or to commit extortions. In the opinion of the police this impact is achieved with decapitated bodies and massacres.’  
127 ‘… various gang members killed a youth for no apparent reason.’  
128 ‘It suffices to investigate some of the most notorious cases of the maras who, according to the PNC, participate in satanic rites. This is why body parts appear in various parts of the country.’
are committed for no apparent reason, and both the characteristics and the frequency with which they occur, point to a systematic practice that aims to engender insecurity and social terror. As might be expected, claims of gang involvement in these crimes were made by official sources and were perpetuated by the press.

In the following article, for example, La Prensa Gráfica drew on an unnamed PNC study to disclose gang behaviour:

...se dedican a cometer una serie de delitos como venta de droga, robos, violaciones, secuestros, homicidios y extorsiones (LPG, 25 July 2003).

El Diario de Hoy adopted similar reporting practices, but was prepared to endorse official statements, as in the second of the excerpts below:

Los pandilleros, según la Policía, cometen la mayoría de homicidios, violaciones, hurtos, robos y lesiones (EDH, 24 July 2003).

Las pandillas ya no operan por identidad, sino para extorsionar, traficar droga y matar por encargo (PH) Maras optan por lucrarse con actividades delictivas (H) (EDH, 14 July 2005).

Media accounts that concentrate on serious offending implicitly portray gang members as not engaging in a whole range of other licit and illicit pursuits. Indeed, criminal acts constitute only a minority of gang members’ activities, and the conduct of many of these individuals is not criminal. An added uncertainty is whether law enforcement should count any crime committed by a gang member as a gang crime (gang-member designation practice) or only those crimes directly related to gang membership (motive-designation practice). If the former policy is followed, as the PNC appears to be doing, the result will be a caricature of the gang phenomenon. Moreover, a motive can only be established through investigative policing, yet in El Salvador this remains an area fraught with weaknesses, no less so in the case of violent crime. I will return to this point in a moment, but first want to show how the press overstated gang involvement in violent offending.

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129 Tutela Legal, La violencia homicida y otros patrones de grave afectación a los derechos humanos en El Salvador: Año 2006 (San Salvador: Tutela Legal, 2007), 36.
130 ‘...they commit a variety of crimes such as drug sales, thefts, rapes, kidnappings, homicides, and extortions.’
131 ‘According to the police, gang members commit the majority of homicides, rapes, robberies, thefts and injuries.’
132 ‘The gangs no longer operate for reasons of identity, but to extort, sell drugs, and carry out murder-for-hire’ (PH) ‘Maras choose to enrich themselves through criminal activities’ (H).
133 Klein, The American Street Gang, 29.
134 See Klein and Maxson, Street Gang Patterns and Policies, 71.
Gang members have not only been linked to the majority of homicides, but for a number of years also to the decapitations of females, even though this connection remained unproven in most cases.\textsuperscript{135} During the period of analysis, it was these particularly brutal killings that officials highlighted. Importantly, these claims were voiced increasingly often under the Saca government, which, after all, had promised to adopt preventive and rehabilitative measures. Unsurprisingly perhaps, a discourse that depicted gang members as ever more violent and barbaric would appear to undermine the rationale for social programmes. Both newspapers painted Dantesque scenes of violent gang crime and not only failed to question the official interpretation of events, but also endorsed it. \textit{El Diario de Hoy} dedicated a greater volume of its coverage to the topic, and its reporting can only be described as scaremongering. The examples below are illustrative of the treatment the issue was given:

\textit{Las maras están provistas de armas y explosivos de fabricación casera y su nivel de brutalidad llega al punto de descuartizar vivas a sus víctimas} (EDH, 25 July 2003).\textsuperscript{136}

\textit{Pandilleros asesinaron más mujeres} (H)
\textit{Las mujeres se convirtieron en el blanco principal de las pandillas durante este año. Un informe policial atribuye a los pandilleros el incremento en los asesinatos de mujeres, entre 18 y 30 años de edad, con respecto a año pasado.}

The article then quotes some statistics, before reiterating the initial assertion and supporting it with reference to one of the more notorious killings. The link was misleading, because at the time of writing no convictions had been made in this case:

\textit{Este año ocurrieron asesinatos de mujeres cometidos con barbarie y crueldad por los pandilleros. La ola de asesinatos comenzó con la mutilación de una mujer identificada por las autoridades policiales sólo por Rosa N., cuya cabeza apareció en la Plaza Libertad} (LPG, 31 December 2003).\textsuperscript{137}

Several observations must be made. The first concerns violent gang offending \textit{per se}. Although violence serves an important symbolic function in street gangs, their members do not specialise in violent crimes. In the words of one leading gang researcher, their

\textsuperscript{135} Martel Trigueros, “Las maras salvadoreñas, 963.
\textsuperscript{136} “The \textit{maras} are equipped with weapons and homemade explosives, and their level of brutality reaches the point where they dismember their victims.”
\textsuperscript{137} ‘Gang members \textit{killed more women}’ (H) ‘This year women have become the main target of the gangs. A police report attributes to gang members the \textit{increase in murders of women}, aged between 18 and 30 years, compared to last year. …This year gang members \textit{murdered women with barbarity and cruelty}. The \textit{wave of murders} began with the \textit{mutilation of a female} identified by the police authorities only as Rosa N., whose head appeared in the Plaza Libertad.’
offending is “cafeteria-style,” spanning a wide range of transgressions. The second point relates to the nature of gang homicides. Compared to non-gang homicides, they are more likely to occur on the street and in broad daylight and to involve firearms, male participants, and clearly gang victims. In other words, the clandestine mutilation and dismemberment of victims, particularly females, do not bear the traditional hallmarks of gang violence.

In El Salvador cases of homicide for purposes of collective terror tend to remain in impunity. Given the paucity of information about the profile of the perpetrators, gang involvement, though unlikely, cannot be rejected out of hand. However, in 2006, Tutela Legal, a local human rights organisation, investigated 233 cases of homicidal violence. Of these, 57 were classified as gang violence and 139 as extrajudicial executions, the latter category including 28 homicides for purposes of collective terror. Some of the gang homicides were brutal (one female victim was burned alive), and gang members were found to have acted as sicarios in one politically-motivated murder. Nonetheless, Tutela Legal concluded that the remainder of extrajudicial executions did not display the characteristics of gang violence, but rather those of death squad-style killings, the historic pattern of human rights abuses in the country.

Violent crime no doubt makes for dramatic news stories that are likely to capture readers’ attention. However, such accounts may come at the expense of accuracy. The media’s reluctance to probe official statements meant that a narrow view of street gang behaviour was disseminated. Press overemphasis on violent gang offending encourages public misperception of these groups and was yet another indication of how news reporting can work to promote the parochial interests of the authorities.

Finally, the street gangs were portrayed as a collective criminal threat by evoking the image of transnational gangs and associating them with organised crime if not international terrorism. I will consider these two points separately and begin with the purported transnational links. News reporting on this issue included numerous stories on events in the United States where Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13 as it is known there) has been linked to several high-profile incidents in the Washington, DC region and has become a priority of federal law enforcement in recent years. In the Salvadoran media, MS-13 symbolised the transnational street gang: organised, criminal, and violent.

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140 Tutela Legal, *La violencia homicida*, 36.
141 Ibid., 11.
142 Ibid., 32.
press located “authoritative” sources who agreed that this characterisation reflected reality. For example, *La Prensa Gráfica* cited the Central American police chiefs or, as in the following excerpt, the US ambassador to El Salvador:

*El embajador de Estados Unidos en el país, Douglas Barclay, sostuvo del mismo modo que las pandillas no son ‘simples grupos delictivos.’ ‘Lo que hacen las maras es violar, matar, y eso es una gran amenaza a toda la región... Son parte del crimen organizado con enlaces internacionales,’ advirtió Barclay (LPG, 5 April 2006).*

*El Diario de Hoy* editorialised about the internationalisation of the “criminal street gangs,” arguing that transnational forces were promoting their proliferation (EDH, 27 September 2004) and quoted US officials or, as in the piece below, a US gang “expert”:

*Para Mark Krikorian, del Centro de Estudios de Inmigración, la MS es una ‘pandilla transnacional que es extremadamente peligrosa y brutal’ (EDH, 18 January 2005).*

Existing research suggests that while some gang members maintain links abroad, there is insufficient evidence to support the idea of institutionalised cross-border contacts at the group level. *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Diecincho* have a presence in the United States, parts of Mexico and Central America, but they do not form a transnational criminal network. Rather, they must be seen as localised groups that merely identify with the name of an “umbrella organization.” Rhetoric that perpetuates the former perception, and remained unchallenged by the Salvadorean press, has two implications. First, it insinuates that if the gangs pose a threat to a country as powerful and well-resourced as the United States, then surely the challenge is even greater to a country as small and resource-starved as El Salvador. Second, and more importantly, the image of transnational criminal gangs deflects attention from the conditions of social and economic disadvantage that fester in local communities and must be addressed by the government of each of the countries concerned.

Among the criminal activities that were attributed to gang members, the link between street gangs, organised crime (including the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans), and international terrorism received significant attention by the press. Compared to its main competitor, *El Diario de Hoy* covered this theme more extensively, including with a

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143 ‘The US ambassador to this country, Douglas Barclay,... also maintained that the gangs are not “simple criminal groups.” “The maras rape, kill, and that is a great threat to the whole region... They are part of organised crime with international ties,” warned Barclay.’

144 ‘For Mark Krikorian from the Centre for Immigration Studies, the MS is a “transnational gang that is extremely dangerous and brutal.”

greater number of editorials and opinion columns. The fact that the issue featured recurrently in the editorial pages underscores the importance that the papers assigned to it. In line with the earlier findings of the research, allegations of the said nexus were made by official sources, notably President Saca, Gobernación, and PNC officials, Honduran and US authorities (such as the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department), and Central American police chiefs and military officials. The media not only uncritically reproduced official statements, but also endorsed the claims both in their news reporting and in their editorial pages. The three excerpts below are illustrative of this practice. This article tells of a police officer’s presentation during the 2004 anti-gang forum and is accompanied by a photo of armed guerrilla fighters:

**FARC está detrás de maras** (H) *Carteles mexicanos, Las pandillas están relacionadas con la narcoactividad, el crimen organizado y el terrorismo, según la investigación de un grupo especializado del Istmo* (ST)

La guerrilla colombiana de las FARC y tres carteles de droga están ligados a las maras salvadoreñas, reveló ayer la Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador (PNC). Durante la disución de la nueva ley antimaras, el experto en pandillas, subinspector Juan Bautista Rodríguez, las FARC ‘están contratando pandilleros de la MS y 18 para promover la narcoactividad’ en El Salvador… [sic] (EDH, 16 June 2004).146

The first of two LPG articles, in a quote set apart from the main body of the text, cited police chief Meneses after an anti-gang operation:

‘Para nosotros son terroristas. Son los nuevos terroristas de El Salvador.’ (LPG, 4 March 2004).147

“El más grande problema de CA son las maras” (H) *Funcionaria estadounidense afirmó también que las pandillas forman parte del crimen organizado transnacional* (ST) (LPG, 8 April 2005).148

Both *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* coverage displayed an imbalance in the kind of sources that were consulted, although the former made a greater effort to “balance” the statements of official actors with alternative voices. However, sometimes individuals within this second category were cited as seemingly arguing against the social

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146 ‘FARC are behind the maras’ (H) ‘Mexican cartels. The gangs are related to drug trafficking, organised crime, and terrorism, according to the investigation conducted by an expert group in the isthmus’ (ST) ‘The Colombian FARC guerrilla and three drug cartels are linked to the Salvadoran maras, the Salvadoran National Civilian Police (PNC) revealed yesterday. During the discussion of the new anti-gang legislation, gang expert Sub-Inspector Juan Bautista Rodríguez, the FARC “are recruiting gang members of the MS and 18 to promote drug trafficking” en El Salvador…’ [sic].

147 ‘For us they are terrorists. They are the new terrorists of El Salvador.’

148 “Central America’s biggest problem are the maras” (H) ‘US official also affirmed that the gangs are part of transnational organised crime’ (ST).
nature of the gang phenomenon. The point is not that their remarks were untrue; *Mano Dura* critics acknowledge both gang involvement in crime and the need for a law enforcement response. Rather, those who insist on prevention and rehabilitation appeared to be selectively quoted. With regards to the organised crime and terrorism themes, one such case was the publication of an LPG interview with CNSP President Bonilla. Asked about the link between gangs and organised crime, he stated that the gang phenomenon, once related to marginalisation and poverty, needed to be re-characterised, because the gangs were no longer competing for territory, but for drug and weapons markets (LPG, 3 November 2005). Thus, the representative of the state agency that has done most to promote gang prevention/rehabilitation in El Salvador was portrayed as taking an opposing stance. *El Diario de Hoy*, on the other hand, interpreted the direct speech of a gang member as evidence of the link between street gangs and terrorism:

Marero: “Mi vida no vale nada, ni la de nadie más” (H) Un miembro de la *Salvatrucha* relata sobre sus actos de terrorismo (ST) (EDH, 27 June 2005).  

The article, of course, did not tell of any terrorist activity, but of one youth’s encounter with gang violence, imprisonment, and drug use.

The association between street gangs, organised crime, and terrorism was made throughout the period of analysis, but more often so under the Saca administration. Interestingly, some of the media coverage coincided with particular junctures: the launch of *Mano Dura*; the debate on the first anti-gang law; the introduction of *Súper Mano Dura*; the 2004 Anti-Gang Forum; and the annual gang conferences that have been held in El Salvador since 2005. These moments offered the opportunity to appraise both the gang phenomenon and the response it required. Thus, the image of street gangs as organised crime or terrorist groups, offered by officials and perpetuated by the press, emerged when the government had an interest in having its own interpretation of the gang problem accepted.

The media certainly appeared determined to keep these rumoured links alive. In the case of terrorism, in particular, the connection was invoked one day and officially denied days or weeks later only to be revived again. These conflicting messages about a possible current or future link between the gangs and terrorists were confusing at best, and fanned a moral panic at worst. In the editorials *La Prensa Gráfica* accepted the purported alliance between street gangs and organised crime, while *El Diario de Hoy* placed these

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149 ‘*Marero*: “My life is worthless and so is that of everyone else”’ (H) ‘*A Salvatrucha* member speaks of his acts of terrorism’ (ST).
two within the same category as terrorist groups. Both newspapers featured only one critical opinion piece each, both rejecting the notion that street gangs and terrorist groups behave alike. These items were essentially rendered invisible by the editorials and remaining op-eds that took the opposite view. Overall, coverage of these themes was biased in favour of the official version, more explicitly so in the case of *El Dario de Hoy*.

This has important consequences for gang control, and it is therefore necessary to dispel two of the myths that the media were guilty of spreading. The first concerns organised crime, including drug trafficking; the second relates to terrorism. Researchers have reported the existence of a few large street gangs that occasionally behave like organised crime groups. However, most street gangs are incapable of doing so. They simply lack mature, professional members with organisational skills, well-defined leadership and specialised group roles, codes of conduct with clearly understood sanctions, and locations for profits to be used for group purposes. Typically, organised crime groups develop relationships with legitimate businesses as well as political and legal institutions. Illegal activity forms part of street gang identity, but this orientation to crime is insufficient to classify them as organised criminal groups.

An additional note of caution applies to alleged gang involvement in drug trafficking. Salvadoran gang members consume drugs at a higher rate than the general population, but the country’s narcotics market is too small for this activity to be a source of income for the majority of gang members. Rather, much of the drug dealing appears to occur among gang members themselves. Furthermore, the bulk of cocaine trafficking through Central America occurs in large shipments generally controlled by Colombian and Mexican cartels. Most of this cocaine flow goes by sea, not by ground transport, yet the areas that are associated with gang activity are based inland. Some gang members could provide minor logistical or security support, but street gangs, whose members tend to be very young, are unlikely to possess the skills required for this business. In short, the policy interventions that the street gangs require are not those are appropriate to organised crime.

As for the spurious claim that street gangs may be typified as terrorist groups, suffice it to make two points. First, violent crime, whether or not it is gang-related, can raise fear among the population. However, the conclusion that street gangs engage in acts of

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150 Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*, 186.
151 Ibid., 186.
153 Ibid., 63.
terrorism is unwarranted. They do not pursue political objectives, and most of their
targets are gang members, not innocent civilians. Second, officials were frequently cited
as not discarding a future link between the street gangs and terrorist groups. However,
the disclaimer applicable to organised crime is equally valid here: it seems unlikely that
Al-Qaeda or other terrorist networks would require the services of street gangs. In a
post-9/11 environment, invoking a potential terrorist threat raises the possibility to
secure the financial aid to confront it, but it is of little use in the control of street gangs.
Regrettably, the Salvadoran media lent themselves to such demagogy.

*The “gang boss”*

Gang members were also criminalised by what I call the construction of the “gang boss.”
Press coverage included repeated references to *líderes, cabecillas* or *jefes de las pandillas* (gang
boss) or *jefe de clíca* (clique boss), the most prominent case being that of Carlos Mojica.
Media use of these terms was certainly in part inspired by the authorities’ stereotyping of
gang leadership to suit their law enforcement strategies. Two comments must be made
here. First, the word *cabecilla* (ringleader), with its connotation of the professional
criminal world, reinforces the idea that illegal activities constitute the primary motivation
of street gangs. Second, researchers have found gang leadership to be functional, shifting,
and shared among many gang members, often depending less on physical strength or
criminal involvement than on verbal skills, social capacities, and age-levels.\(^{154}\) The former
gang members I interviewed similarly affirmed that the gangs had no leaders as such. At
most, some individuals enjoy influence within a subgroup, because they have gained
respect. Thus, gang leadership is quite unlike the hierarchical and command-oriented
concept that was implied by the Salvadoran media. In effect, press reports not only failed
to question the utility of this notion, and ultimately the appropriateness of gang control
through the targeted arrest of “leaders,” but also misinformed the public.

*The “gang threat” in figures*

Finally, media coverage criminalised gang members by quantifying the “gang threat” in
two ways: estimates on membership figures and the number of gang homicides. In both
cases it should be remembered that criminal statistics, like all data, do not merely reflect
reality, but construct patterns of offending.

\(^{154}\) Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*, 195.
The number of gang members in a country is notoriously difficult to establish. The aim here is not to trace with exactitude the prevalence of gang members in El Salvador, but to show how the newspapers used statistics to produce a particular image of the gang problem. During the period of analysis, both El Diario de Hoy and La Prensa Gráfica began their treatment of this point by quoting President Flores at the launch of Mano Dura. However, these and subsequent reports differed significantly on gang membership figures and suggested an intentionality on the part of El Diario de Hoy to mislead its readers. Compare the following excerpts of the earliest accounts. Both reported a claim the President expressed, yet the EDH article not only cited him slightly differently, but also made manipulative use of statistics ostensibly to buttress Francisco Flores’ assertion:

Según él [President Flores], estos grupos han superado la capacidad cuantitativa de la fuerza pública. Ellos mantienen aterrorizada a la población. ‘Existen más mareros que policías y efectivos militares juntos, son ya entonces una amenaza para todos los salvadoreños,’ dijo.

Next to this LPG article appeared a box listing gang-related PNC statistics, including this information on gang membership figures:

300 grupos de pandillas en el país integrados por 30 miembros cada uno (LPG, 24 July 2003).

Según Saldec [an organisation], se calcula que hay 17,000 miembros de maras en todo el país,… pero otras fuentes creen que pudieran ser más de 30,000. ‘Existen más mareros armados que policías y efectivos militares juntos’, afirmó el mandatario. Según fuentes oficiales, la Policía tiene 18,000 efectivos, y el Ejército unos 12,000 hombres (EDH, 24 July 2003).

The number of gang members cited by El Diario de Hoy diverged considerably from that of La Prensa Gráfica which reflected available PNC statistics. In recent years official figures have oscillated between 9,000 and 10,500 identified and recorded gang members. Police estimates are limited to those gang members with whom the police have had contact, but there is no reason to assume that the actual figures might reach 30,000 or more. This number was only necessary for El Diario de Hoy to be able to imply that gang members might indeed outnumber (and “outgun,” as the paper hinted) the security and

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155 ‘According to him, these groups exceed the quantitative capacity of the security forces. They terrorise the population. “There are more mareros than police and militaries combined; so they are already a threat to all Salvadorans,” he said.’

156 ‘According to Saldec, there are an estimated 17,000 gang members in the country,… but other sources believe that there could be more than 30,000. “There are more armed gang members than police and militaries combined,” affirmed the President. According to official sources, the police has 18,000 officers and the army some 12,000 men.’
military forces. Subsequently, *La Prensa Gráfica* continued to publish the lower PNC figures, while its main competitor did so once, but otherwise tended to refer to “government estimates” of either 17,000 or 33,000 gang members. *El Diario de Hoy* thus amplified the “gang threat” through the use of statistics, more so since its reporting suggested that all gang members were armed criminals. The paper not only failed to ask why government and police had not stepped in earlier to prevent gang growth, if this was indeed the case, but also implied that the state lacked the capacity to confront the problem. This is a disconcerting claim to make and, in the worst case, may prompt citizens to take justice into their own hands. I will return to this point, but for now want to turn to gang members’ contribution to the country’s homicide rate.

The Salvadoran authorities have been promoting the idea that the gangs are the main culprits of crimes, particularly homicides. The focus of this chapter is not on these assertions, but on the media coverage of them. For the purposes of this analysis it is sufficient to note that, apart from the difficulty of defining what constitutes a gang homicide, observers have voiced scepticism about the veracity of the authorities’ claims. Over the years the IML has attributed between 8% and 10% of homicides to gang members. A UN study suggested that a 60% share in the country’s murder rate, which is the figure most commonly attributed to gang members, would mean these individuals were killing at a rate that is untypical for street gangs. Furthermore, since most fatal victims of gang violence are other gang members, this might even mean that most gang members in El Salvador should be dead by now.

Both *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* uncritically reported whatever percentage the police were providing - which could be anywhere between 40% and 80%. By doing so, the papers were complicit in giving the public conflicting messages, since the figures at times referred to gang involvement in crimes (not all of which are homicides) or to gang homicides as involving gang members as *either* perpetrators *or* victims. The excerpts below illustrate these practices:

> Mayoría de muertes por maras (H)
> El 60 por ciento de los homicidios que ocurren en el país es perpetrado por mareros.
> Así lo confirma el director de la Policía Nacional Civil, Ricardo Meneses. ‘Casi todos los delitos en general son cometidos por los pandilleros. El 60 por ciento o más.’

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De cuatro homicidios diarios, tres son por los pandilleros,’ asegura el jefe policial (EDH, 7 May 2004).\footnote{Majority of deaths due to maras’ (H) ‘60 per cent of homicides that occur in the country are committed by mareros. This was confirmed by the chief of the National Civilian Police, Ricardo Meneses. ‘Almost all crimes in general are committed by gang members. 60 per cent or more. Out of four homicides a day, three are committed by gang members,’ maintained the police chief.’}

‘Siempre el problema es pandillas y drogas… El 80 por ciento de los homicidios tiene que ver con pandillas, víctimas y victimarios,’ recaló [Pedro González] (LPG, 17 September 2004).\footnote{‘The problem is always gangs and drugs … 80 per cent of the homicides are connected with the gangs, victims and perpetrators,’ emphasised [Pedro González].}

The newspapers seemed oblivious to the contradictions described above, even though both covered an IML report that attributed a much lower homicide rate to gang members than did the police. The manipulative use of statistics makes it difficult for readers to put the public security consequences of the street gangs into perspective and only appears to legitimise attempts at escalating punitive measures against these groups.

Dichotomisation

Previous sections showed how gang members were portrayed as a homogeneous category and characterised as criminals. The press accentuated this stereotyping by creating a number of binary oppositions. Based on perceived physical and behavioural traits, gang members were depicted as an atypical minority and compared with idealised images of the rest of society. With these polarised representations gang members were typecast as “folk devils,” that is, as what the population should not be.\footnote{Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics, 10.} The main theme running through the media coverage was that of good versus evil. Placed into the first category were the “honest citizens,” the majority of law-abiding, hard-working Salvadorans who seek to better themselves and deserve to have their rights protected.

On the other side of the divide, on the fringes of humanity and society, were the gang members: criminal, irresponsible, “infected” with drugs and violence, dominated by evil, and unworthy of human rights defence. Most Salvadorans are, of course, decent and diligent people. However, these over-simplistic representations not only falsely suggest that gang members are the only ones who may diverge from the image of the “good citizen,” but also serve to marginalise and reject them. Thus, the way is paved for public hostility and aggression towards those who are seen as different and in opposition to “the people.”
Both papers adopted these black-and-white representations in their news reporting as well as in their editorial pages. *El Diario de Hoy* also featured a number of paid advertisements that reinforced these images and had clearly been designed to lobby for the enactment of anti-gang legislation. In addition, each side of the binary opposition was reinforced through an emphasis on “innocent victims” and evil. On the one hand, non-gang members who died as a result of gang violence, particularly children and adolescents, were spotlighted through emotional accounts that highlighted their personal attributes and achievements, such as their dedication to study and part-time work, religious values, and the pursuit of “healthy” recreational activities. By taking a narrow view of victims, and portraying these in ways that elicit the sympathy of readers, the media encouraged their audiences to identify with those on the white side (the public) and to reject those on the black side (gang members).

On the other hand, the newspapers related the gangs to evil, something that spreads easily and requires strong institutions to control it. The coverage reflected this notion partly by casting gang control as a fight of the good against the bad. However, both *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* explicitly described the gangs as satanic movements. Consider the following excerpts, the first quoting the well-known evangelical pastor “Hermano Toby,” the second based on an LPG interview with a former gang member in rehabilitation at the CNSP granja and professed member of an evangelical church:

> Para el dirigente evangélico [pastor Edgar López], las pandillas están dominadas por grupos satánicos, prueba de lo cual es que sólo buscan matar y están bien organizados (EDH, 21 December 2005).  

> Ella tiene la firme convicción de que ‘los jóvenes de las pandillas son títeres de Satanás,’ ya que se vale de ellos para sembrar el mal en la sociedad (LPG, 9 May 2006).

None of the papers pondered the plausibility of these views. Indeed, *La Prensa Gráfica* went further and reiterated the supposedly malevolent nature of gang members by depicting them as bloodthirsty vampires. Below is one illustrative passage, which tells of an LPG visit to a community known for its gang presence and acknowledges that gang members adapted their habits to the frequent police patrols:

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162 ‘For the evangelical leader, the *gangs are controlled by satanic groups* which is demonstrated by the fact that they only try to kill and are well-organised.’  
163 ‘She is firmly convinced that “gang youths are Satan’s puppets,” since he uses them to sow evil in society.’
Chapter 3: Creating folk devils

Mareros, los “vampiros” que teme La Campanera (H) Pandilleros se esconden en el día y actúan al caer la noche (ST)

…Sin embargo, la tensa tranquilidad que se vive en el lugar durante el día cambia de tono con la caída de la noche. Los vecinos saben que los pandilleros han adoptado los hábitos de los vampiros de las películas: andan bien vestidos durante el día y por la noche ocupan las calles y se hacen dueños de la zona. En algunos casos, los vecinos han colocado enrejados a la salida y entrada de los pasajeros para protegerse (LPG, 14 June 2004).

By invoking the image of vampires, parasitic beings that feed on mortals and in folklore were the embodiment of satanic activity, the paper implied that gang members were related to evil and must be warded off to avoid further danger. The article describes some of the means to do so, yet what may have been intended as a witty story has deeply sinister overtones. This was also apparent in the use of metaphors that I will examine next.

Metaphors

The vocabulary used to describe gang members included metaphors evocative of natural disasters, the animal world, disease, rubbish, and war. The first of these merely inflates the gang problem to the proportion of a national menace, thus justifying the elaboration of extreme measures. The other four metaphors, however, dehumanise gang members and, by repudiating their humanity and depicting them as enemies to society, suggest they may be eliminated. The use of metaphors was pervasive in accounts of both gang activity and gang control options. I have grouped the metaphorical language of both areas together to show how the images it invoked contained not just descriptive elements, but implied particular responses to the gangs.

Natural disaster metaphor

News reporting of La Prensa Gráfica and El Diario de Hoy likened gang activity and the deportations of gang members to natural disasters. According to El Diario de Hoy, the gangs ‘desataron una ola de violencia’ (EDH, 21 February 2004).


165 ‘unleashed a wave of violence.’
Chapter 3: Creating folk devils

The deportations were compared to a tsunami (EDH, 18 January 2005) or an ‘avalancha de deportados’ (EDH, 18 October 2005), while La Prensa Gráfica wrote of ‘el maremoto que provoca la repatriación de todos estos delincuentes’ (LPG, 17 November 2003). Thus, in each case the image was one of a sudden, unstoppable event that brings great destruction to life and property. These warning or catastrophic tones convey a sense of crisis and suggest that the gang problem is of such magnitude that it threatens to overwhelm state institutions. The public may feel more insecure and ask that remedies be taken to contain the menace. The measures that come to mind are barriers, objects that foster segregation and exclusion. However, if the disaster is recurrent and becomes more destructive over time, the population may lose its confidence in the capacity of the state to provide public security and maintain the rule of law. In the worst case, a pro-lynching mentality may develop.

Animal world metaphor

Metaphors relating to the animal world were used to liken gang members to animals, thus hinting at their inferiority to humans. The implication, actually articulated in some accounts, is that gang members can be chased and killed just like they stalk their prey in order to seize and devour it. At times, the gangs were equated with an octopus whose tentacles reach out to grasp or control people:

El ministro señaló que el fenómeno de las maras ha puesto sus tentáculos sobre 30 mil estudiantes (EDH, 19 August 2003).

Articles, editorials, headlines, and photo captions told of real or imaginary animals that pursue and attack their quarry:

Los sujetos, según la policía, estaban al acecho de sus potenciales víctimas, lobos preparados para atacar corderos (editorial, EDH, 24 May 2006).

Mareros acechan La Campanera (H) (LPG, 31 May 2004)
…cayeron en las garras de las pandillas (LPG, 9 May 2006).

The dwellings of gang members were similarly couched in metaphorical language:

La PNC pide a la ciudadanía denunciar las guaridas y los refugios de las maras en barrios y colonias (ST) (EDH, 22 August 2003).

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167 ‘Maras are lashing Soyapango.’
168 ‘an avalanche of deportees,’ ‘a seaquake provoked by the repatriation of all these criminals.’
169 ‘The minister pointed out that the gang phenomenon has spread its tentacles over 30,000 students.’
170 ‘According to the police, the characters were lying in wait for potential victims, wolves prepared to attack the lambs.’ ‘Mareros stalk La Campanera’ (H) ‘… they fell into the claws of the gangs.’
The image of gangs as predatory creatures was reinforced by the frequent use of “mara.” The word is short for marabunta, a species of migratory ants that devour anything in their path. A 1970s box-office hit showing the destruction wrought by these ants carried the title “La marabunta,” and its screening precipitated popular usage of its abbreviation in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, initially to designate a group of friends. Like pandilla, “mara” is now employed as a generic label for street gangs in the Northern Triangle countries of Central America, but, given its origin, the term is far from innocuous and implies aggressiveness. In the context of metaphorical language that dehumanises gang members, their categorisation as “mara” is reminiscent of voracious beings that roam the streets and make communities unsafe.

Finally, the media resorted to metaphors of the animal world to describe how the gangs were “hunted down.” Both Mano Dura and specific police operations were framed as hunting activities that sought to corral the animals:

- **Inicia “caería” de pandilleros (H)** (LPG, 31 August 2004)
- **El gobierno se propone acorralar y desarticular a las maras** (EDH, 31 August 2004).

Additionally, El Diario de Hoy liked to compare the anti-gang task forces, police and soldiers who jointly patrol the streets, to hunters who are dispatched to chase the animals:

- **Despliegan a los cazadores de mara (H)** (EDH, 16 September 2004)
- **GTA salen a cazar a las pandillas (H)** (EDH, 17 September 2004).

The above descriptions depict gang members as inferior to the rest of the population and create a psychological distance between different social groups. The following three metaphors reinforce this antagonistic relationship and indeed invite aggression towards those who are perceived as abnormal and lesser human beings.

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171 ‘The PNC asks the population to report the dens and hideouts of the maras in the neighbourhoods’ (ST).
174 “Hunt” for gang members begins (H) ‘Government determined to corral and dismantle the maras.’
175 ‘Deployment of the gang hunters’ (H); ‘GTA go out to hunt the gangs’ (H).
Disease metaphor

The press used metaphorical language that evoked an association between gang members and disease, thus depicting them as a harmful condition that requires a cure. For example, a community with gang presence elicited the comment ‘la zona está infectada de pandillas’ (LPG, 7 February 2005). The remark suggests that the sheer existence of gang members has led the area and its inhabitants to contract an illness whose spread needs to be contained by treating the source of the infection. On other occasions the gangs were described as a malignant tumour or an epidemic virulent disease that causes many deaths:

Las maras se han expandido como la peste (EDH, 24 July 2003)
el azote de las “maras” (editorial, LPG, 4 November 2003).

Once the existence of a disease has been diagnosed, adequate treatment must be developed, such as preventative or curative medicine or even a surgical operation. Thus, La Prensa Gráfica wrote:

Las maras y sus derivados constituyen una gravísima enfermedad social, a la que hay que aplicarle tratamientos curativos fuertes y a la vez medidas preventivas eficaces (editorial, LPG, 19 December 2005).

Deporte, una vacuna contra las maras (caption, LPG, 1 November 2004).

The need for manipulative procedures was articulated by President Flores, as indicated in this EDH article:

Para Flores, los cambios a los códigos son ‘una aspirina,’ ‘para un problema que necesita una cirugía’ (EDH, 13 September 2003).

Depictions of the gangs as a disease warrant measures that heal the sick patient and reduce the risk of infection or contagion for others. Media coverage suggested that the severity of the gang problem requires drastic measures, not just temporary relief. The source of the illness (gang members) must be removed to avoid the contamination from spreading within the social body. Such treatment might involve putting the patients in “quarantine” (prison) or pursuing long-lasting purification by eradicating the cause of the ailment.

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176 ‘the area is infected with gangs.’
177 ‘The maras have spread like the plague,’ ‘the scourge of the “maras.”
178 ‘The maras and their by-products are a very serious social illness that requires a strong curative treatment and at the same time effective preventive measures,’ ‘Sports, a vaccine against the maras.’
179 ‘For Flores, the changes to the laws are an “aspirin” “for a problem that requires a surgery.”’
Rubbish metaphor

The idea that the gang problem might be “resolved” by eliminating gang members was made explicit by associating them with rubbish. One part of this equation was entirely symbolic, involving references to the graffiti that denote the territorial presence of the gangs. For example, the press announced state-sponsored graffiti-cleaning campaigns and published photos documenting how the graffiti were being painted over. Headlines proclaiming ‘Comenzó limpieza de grafitos en Sonsonate’ (EDH, 25 October 2003) or ‘Gobernación borra huellas de las maras’ (LPG, 24 December 2003) suggested that the gangs were being wiped out. Both newspapers also publicised President Flores’ highly symbolic visit to a neighbourhood in the city of San Miguel. The area, not at all randomly chosen for another inauguration of Mano Dura, had acquired notoriety in the 1990s for the emergence of the Black Shadow death squad. Although it was the government that had selected the location, the journalistic accounts of the event did not fail to grasp the significance attached to the presentation of gang control measures in a zone known for the execution of “undesirables.”

Media coverage of gang suppression activities was unequivocal in suggesting that the gangs are rubbish or filth and that police and military were carrying out clean-up operations, sweeping and decontaminating the streets. Consider the following illustrative excerpts:

Las fuerzas conjuntas de la Policía y la Fuerza Armada continuaron ayer limpiando de pandillas juveniles las colonias… (LPG, 27 July 2003).

Barrenín a las maras (H)
Se acabó la fiesta. La Policía Nacional Civil y el Ejército barrerán a los pandilleros de los barrios y colonias de El Salvador… (EDH, 24 July 2003).

Similarly, an EDH article on the enactment of anti-gang legislation in Honduras included pictorial material showing a tattooed male in the foreground and behind him a Honduran policeman seemingly pointing his assault rifle at the youth. This is some of the text accompanying the graphic:

180 ‘Graffiti cleansing began in Sonsonate;’ ‘Gobernación wipes off traces of the maras.’
181 ‘Yesterday the combined forces of the police and the army continued to clean the communities of youth gangs…’ ‘They will sweep the maras’ (H) ‘The party is over. The National Civilian Police and the military will sweep the gang members from El Salvador’s neighbourhoods and communities.’
In gang argot “luz verde” (green light) refers to an order to kill. In case this may be interpreted as merely meaning “giving the go-ahead,” the paper reiterates the message by stating that gang control entails “social cleansing” or the physical elimination of individuals. The above passages demonstrate that gang-related media coverage was clearly reminiscent of an extermination squad mentality. This theme was continued by the final metaphor I examine here.

**War metaphor**

The dominant way of describing both gang activity and the state’s response to it was through a comparison with war. Belligerent rhetoric was often voiced by Presidents Flores and Saca as well as PNC and Gobernación officials. However, the media not only reproduced their statements uncritically, but also constructed their own “combat stories.” These accounts perpetuated two main images, one of “warring gangs,” the other of a “war against the gangs.”

Press coverage depicted the gangs as military forces with a clear chain of command and specialised units. When these armies were not confined to their barracks, they were engaged in urban guerilla warfare, turning besieged communities into battle zones, causing civilian casualties, and collecting “war taxes.” Below are some illustrative excerpts:

- *MS impone toque de queda* (EDH, 12 December 2005)
- *Las maras cobran un impuesto de guerra*... (1.PG, 4 May 2005).

Use of the war metaphor made the gangs appear more goal-oriented and threatening than they are, although this is not to deny the problems individual gang members may cause in certain neighbourhoods. Likening gang rivalry to an armed conflict is exaggerated and inappropriate. While this may reflect a careless choice of language on the part of the media, the effect is one of portraying gang violence as the problem and...
deflecting attention from the structural context. From here it is a small step to casting the relationship between the gangs and the state as a struggle between opposing forces.

The parallel between gang control and war began with the mobilisation of aggression. I showed how gang members were portrayed as essentially different from the rest of society and even associated with evil. In the same way that political opponents under authoritarian rule were constructed as enemies of the state, gang members have been depicted as the new public enemy. Once presented as abnormal and responsible for a large part of society’s problems, this antagonist can be countered with violence, including of an extreme nature.

Since the introduction of *Mano Dura* the media have been complicit in the idea of waging war against the gangs. Rather than questioning the appropriateness of framing gang control in this way, the newspapers legitimised this confrontational approach. Photos of joint police and military patrols, soldiers on armed and armoured vehicles or militaristic police conducting raids bolstered the message of the textual coverage: El Salvador had declared an open war against street gangs in order to defend the nation, defeat and disarm the enemy, and liberate occupied areas. The militarisation of parts of the country was not queried or revealed as a political show, but portrayed as necessary to support the police in their fight against a dangerous opponent. These excerpts exemplify media approval of the “war effort”:

*Guerra a las maras* (H) (LPG, 24 July 2003)
*Guerra total contra maras* (H) *El Presidente Flores anunció anoche un plan para liberar barrios y colonias de las pandillas, con apoyo del ejército y la PNC* (ST)
*Apopa, militarizada por la lucha contra las pandillas* (H) (LPG, 28 July 2003).

Media coverage of this kind has obvious negative implications for both gang control and the country’s process of democratic consolidation. The war metaphor reduces the gang phenomenon and its alleviation to the security realm, suggesting simplistically and illusorily that the solution is one of retaliation against, if not elimination of, the other side. Effectively, a vocabulary of force serves to detract from the structural factors shaping the gang problem and from the importance of social policies designed to address the needs of marginalised young people. Furthermore, neither the involvement of soldiers in public security tasks nor attempts to pit the police against perceived enemies

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184 ‘War on gangs’ (H), ‘Total war against the maras’ (H) ‘Last night President Flores announced a plan to liberate neighbourhoods and communities from the gangs, with the support of the military and the PNC’ (ST), ‘Apopa, militarised due to the fight against the pandillas’ (H).
contribute to the effective protection of citizens and the creation of a more democratic and professional police force. The press might argue that their coverage only mirrors social reality and describes government-sanctioned suppression efforts. However, by merely echoing official terminology in their news reporting and failing to question the overall approach, the newspapers have made a choice. Its result is media complicity in tolerance to, and promotion of, a crackdown on gangs that does not make citizens any safer and undermines alternative policy options.

Eulogising violence against gang members

I want to conclude this section by illustrating how the newspapers covered cases of vigilantism against gang members or suggested that such illegal reactions might be permissible in return for security. Accounts of this kind featured more frequently in El Diario de Hoy, which also published stories of lynchings in Honduras and Guatemala. Generally, the articles appeared to condone this practice by simply reporting the incidents. They failed to explain that citizens must never take justice into their own hands and that the solution to insecurity must lie in efforts to improve the justice system. Below are two excerpts:

Hartos de la ola de delitos, los habitantes de Palín tomaron la ley en sus manos e intentaron quemar vivos a dos mareros (ST) (EDH, 27 April 2006).185

Ciudadanos se toman justicia por su cuenta (H)

‘Tired of the crime wave, the inhabitants of Palín took the law into their hands and tried to burn two gang members alive.’

Cuidadanos se toman justicia por su cuenta (H)

‘La Súper Mano Dura no funciona, por eso tuvimos que tomar la justicia en nuestras manos. Hace siete meses ellos nos mataron a un hermano. Ayer me mataron el segundo. Eso fue lo último que hicieron los de esa mara.’ Aún con salpicaduras de sangre en su pantalón y con una esposa puesta en su mano derecha, Wilfredy C. confesaba el motivo que lo llevó a buscar a tres pandilleros. …El subinspector Israel,…dijo que protegerán a la familia de los que tomaron la justicia por su cuenta. Han sido amenazados (LPG, 10 July 2005).186

The LPG piece was followed up by an editorial that condemned the action. However, the article itself took no stance on the issue and instead delivered a sensationalist description of a serious incident. Disregard for the law and human rights

185 ‘Tired of the crime wave, the inhabitants of Palín took the law into their hands and tried to burn two gang members alive.’
186 ‘Citizens took justice into their own hands’ (H), ‘‘Súper Mano Dura does not work, that is why we had to take justice into our own hands. Seven months ago they killed one of our brothers. Yesterday they killed the second. That was the last thing they did, these people from that mara.” Still with blood stains on his trousers and with a handcuff on his right wrist, Wilfredy C. confessed the motive that led him to look for three gang members. … Sub-Inspector Israel,…said they would protect the family of those who took justice into their own hands. They have been threatened.’
were treated as trivial by the press and made to seem natural. Thus, media coverage legitimised private or illegal reactions to insecurity and to those perceived to cause it. It suggested that the gang problem may be dealt with by eliminating individuals, rather than by addressing the underlying structural factors of which the street gangs are but an effect. Media treatment of the variables enabling gang onset and gang membership is examined next.

### 3.2.2 Causal explanations of the gang phenomenon

The analysis in the previous section showed how media coverage portrayed gang members as a homogeneous category of aberrant individuals with a disregard for human life and a propensity to commit serious and violent crime. In a second step the research explored how the newspapers addressed the causes of gang membership as well as gang emergence and persistence. Although the term “causes” is frequently used in policy and media debates on the street gangs, it should not be taken too literally here. A number of factors associated with the gang phenomenon do not directly trigger gang joining and gang onset. Nevertheless, their existence explains why some individuals choose to be in a street gang and why these groups emerge in certain communities. If the gang problem in El Salvador is to be alleviated, it is therefore indispensable that these variables are recognised and targeted. The media play an important role in helping the public understand the nature of the gang phenomenon and, by implication, in increasing popular support for some policies and reducing it for others. Thus, the research sought to ascertain what factors the press identified as stimulating the gang phenomenon and whether some of them were considered more plausible than others. They fell into one or more of the following six areas: the individual; the family; the community; and society – the latter divided into the three subsets of the criminal justice system; a culture of violence; and social exclusion; street gangs as a communist conspiracy; and US deportation policy.

The causes of the gang phenomenon were to some extent addressed in articles, interviews, and paid advertisements, but mostly in features, editorials, and opinion columns. Both newspapers provided some space for commentators who produced lucid analyses of the problem. These pieces are important in that they offered readers an alternative perspective. However, they allow the press to shift part of the risk in publishing them to the writers and therefore tell us less about a paper’s policy stance than do reports and editorials. Both elaborate issues covered in primary-news stories, but they
do so in different ways: features may furnish deeper explanations or background, while editorials make a judgment. Press coverage of causal explanations included more of the latter, and this is a first indication that the papers were reluctant to discuss the community processes and structural conditions that cannot be left unexamined.

However, both media outlets also exhibited a tendency towards episodic framing. News reporting can take the form of either episodic or thematic forms of presentation. The former refers to the event-orientation of news and a focus on case histories. Coverage of this kind consists of brief accounts of concrete incidents and the actors involved or personalised stories that emphasise individual experiences. By contrast, thematic framing contextualises events and issues and fosters analytic comprehension of them.\textsuperscript{187} The need to respect news production schedules and journalistic attempts to make news more entertaining by taking a human interest angle both contribute to the dominance of episodic coverage. Its effect, however, is that structural processes and conditions are not given the treatment that the public would require to understand particular events or the complexity of a social problem such as the street gangs. Studies have found that episodic news framing tends to elicit individual rather than societal attributions of responsibility among audiences.\textsuperscript{188} The implication for gang-related media coverage is that the episodic format, which neither notes the systemic factors stimulating gang growth nor presents options that might counter it, is likely to increase public support for \textit{Mano Dura} policies. The ultimate ramifications of episodic framing are political in that it reflects a choice not to publish content that jeopardises the status quo.

\textit{El Diario de Hoy} maintains a conservative editorial line and, when not altogether rejecting the idea that the causes of the gang problem should be addressed, espoused explanations that favoured deterrence and punishment as gang control strategies. The paper defined social conditions as non-problems, and many of its views were echoed in opinion columns and paid advertisements. The only critical voice was that of then IUDOP director, Miguel Cruz, whose commentaries insisted on the significance of structural variables, but could hardly offset the plethora of pro-establishment items. \textit{La Prensa Gráfica} upholds a more pluralistic editorial line than its archrival, but shied away from taking a position that could prove controversial with powerful actors in the country. The paper showed a predilection for personal stories and the verbatim reproduction of roundtable discussions and interviews, such that references to structural

\textsuperscript{188} Iyengar, \textit{Is anyone responsible?}, 16.
factors were either eschewed or could be attributed to other sources. While *El Diario de Hoy* vigorously rejected the impact of social and economic disadvantage, *La Prensa Gráfica* at least alluded to it, but only in the vaguest possible terms. The boundaries of the permissible were certainly not overstepped.

**Individual-level factors**

Gang joining is a matter of individual choice, made in a context of social marginalisation and motivated by a desire to fulfil certain needs that gang affiliation can at least partly satisfy. Any attempt to understand why youths may want to be in a street gang needs to consider the interaction of psychological and structural variables, while acknowledging that dominant reasons for participation exist but do not apply across-the-board. The press addressed the issue of gang affiliation in quite different ways. *La Prensa Gráfica* rarely contemplated young people’s motivations. When it did so in a personal account, the paper merely stated that gang membership is rooted in different reasons and that the girl featuring in the story had been stirred by curiosity. Her provenance from a broken family was mentioned, but otherwise her social background remained unexplored.

*El Diario de Hoy*, which raised the question of incentives more frequently, generally presented gang members as detached from their structural environment. A backdrop of a dysfunctional family and child neglect was alluded to once, but mostly gang joining was portrayed strictly as a private decision taken by dangerous and immoral individuals. Gang members were either seen as simply antisocial and keen to vent their violent instincts or in search of social status, excitement and criminal opportunities as a substitute for work. Offending and “el vacil” (the range of gang members’ leisure pursuits) emerged as the most basic motivations both in the editorial pages and in *Radiografía del fenómeno: Las maras*, a three-part feature that enquired into the causes of the gang phenomenon. In that report the paper argued that a street gang is *‘un grupo de jóvenes que se reúnen para vacilar y delinquir’*.\(^{189}\) The claim was supported with references to studies and to Miguel Cruz and the chief of the PNC Juvenile Services Division, Hugo Ramírez. Both have acknowledged the impact of social conditions and the need for prevention, but appear here to have been selectively quoted to make the point that gang members are inclined to a frivolous lifestyle and contempt for work.

Thus, media coverage explained gang affiliation as a personal choice made by layabouts who seek to acquire by speed what others achieve through effort and sacrifices.
The prospect of fun and, to a lesser extent, illegal activity, is indeed a reason for young people to join a gang. However, crime is not the fundamental purpose of either street gangs or of most gang members and those who are susceptible to membership of these groups reside in communities that, for their very characteristics, are fertile soil for gang activity. Were the systemic influences on gang joining acknowledged, social policies would seem to be logical measures. By contrast, the reporting I described invites moral condemnation and directs state responses towards suppression.

Family-level factors

Family breakdown and the associated loss of values was one of the causal themes that dominated gang-related media coverage. In the pages of *El Diario de Hoy* this point was frequently raised in opinion columns, but also in personalised stories, editorials and the aforementioned feature *Radiografía*. The episodically framed articles were characteristically descriptive and merely highlighted the importance of disintegrated families in these case histories. The editorials blamed parental neglect and moral disorientation for gang growth, while the report made a cursory reference to dysfunctional families. Judging from the number of features and editorials, *La Prensa Gráfica* assigned greater importance to this explanation than its competitor. A handful of opinion pieces pointed to family breakdown and the loss of moral values, and the reports were structured entirely as personifying narratives, telling of broken families but oblivious to their social and economic circumstances. LPG coverage was striking for the stream of editorials that broached this issue, though mostly with obscure references such as “trastornos de la estructura familiar” or “desajustes familiares” that left readers guessing what the problem might be. Additionally, the paper offered an interview with President Saca who also identified as a causal factor the breakdown of families and the loss of values, particularly respect for life and a culture of non-violence.

The reason for reviewing these seemingly repetitive rationalisations is that they are misguided on several grounds. First, gang affiliation cannot be linked to family breakdown. Many gang members in El Salvador were indeed raised in single-parent households or by relatives, but many others were not. Families do contribute to the conditions under which youths may seek respect and affection in a street gang. However, gang research has found that family risk factors for gang joining are dysfunctional

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189 ‘a group of youths who gather to have fun and commit crimes.’
190 ‘disarranged family structure,’ ‘family breakdown.’
families, parental neglect, and domestic violence. Thus, it is not the existence of a nuclear family that is important, but the quality of the relations among its members. Second, media coverage faulted families for not imparting core values, yet it overlooked that gang-generating households are poor. Low-income families do not inevitably produce gang members, but parental abandonment can be prompted by indifference as much as by economic need. Adults who work long hours to make ends meet will find it harder to monitor their children and socialise them adequately. The family plays a pivotal role in the development and formation of young people. However, the argument that gangs are the price Salvadoran society pays for having forsaken traditional values and ways of living only skirts questions about a host of other and more fundamental issues that gang control policies need to address. The community context and social exclusion are some of them.

Community-level factors

The importance of community contexts in gang growth and gang control was not reflected in the newspapers. Community features were hardly ever mentioned, and generally journalists and commentators suggested that overcrowding was the problem. In the Radiografía feature El Diario de Hoy noted that gangs emerge in the poorest areas of the country, but the connection between gangs and the environment was reduced to one of inappropriate living conditions. La Prensa Gráfica was equally reluctant to discuss the structural aspects of community conditions. A handful of articles offered nothing more than the nondescript observation that gang youths are from poor barrios or that such places have excess numbers of residents and “precarious” public services. Press coverage implied that street gangs were merely another social problem in environments that “infect” their inhabitants with some kind of moral pollution. Both papers avoided incisive analysis into the systemic determinants of gang-spawning communities. Doing so would have been difficult without calling into question the structural variables of social and economic disadvantage in El Salvador.

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Society-level factors

In their causal explanations of the gang phenomenon the media made three types of references to society. I have grouped these as follows: the criminal justice system; a culture of violence; and social exclusion.

The criminal justice system

Advocates of Mano Dura argued that gang growth was a consequence of the impunity generated by permissive legislation and liberal judges. Press coverage echoed this position to varying degrees. La Prensa Gráfica hardly ever connected gang proliferation to the perceived lenience of the criminal justice system. The exception was an interview with the Minister of Defence who named as factors the post-war judicial reforms and an authority vacuum created by the demobilisation of the old security forces. In El Diario de Hoy, by contrast, this was a favourite theme. “Guaranteest” penal laws providing “excessive” protection for criminals were criticised in a series of articles and paid advertisements, the latter supporting the enactment of the Ley Antimaras. Opinion columns were similarly disapproving of lax laws and tolerant judges. However, it was in the editorials where these premises were most conspicuous. According to the paper, alleged judicial complicity with gang members, deduced from the low number of convictions, and the work of human rights groups were sending a message of impunity. “Leyes para suizos” (“laws for the Swiss”) were seen to favour the rights of criminals over those of the honest population. Arguably, offending was further stimulated by the authority vacuum that began to emerge in the 1970s and became consolidated with the Peace Accords. El Diario de Hoy used the argument of impunity, at times identified as the main cause of the gang problem, to call for stricter laws and the arrest and punishment of gang members. One editorial specifically urged the authorities to act firmly and suggested that this might entail shoot-to-kill orders for the police. Unless tough action was taken, it prophesied, chaos would descend on the country and people might lynch criminals and judges.

Material of this kind may well encounter receptive audiences. However, such content does not further attempts to understand and mitigate the gang problem. If gang activity has worsened over the years, it is not because of weak laws or the sheer malice of judges, but due to a reluctance to develop a coherent law enforcement strategy, professional
criminal investigations, and social policies. A news organisation that blames an indulgent criminal justice system only appears intent on detracting from these requirements.

**A culture of violence**

The history of El Salvador is inextricably intertwined with the use of violence, much of it once perpetrated by agents of the state. Generations of young people have been raised and socialised in an environment where cultural norms and attitudes favour aggressive behaviour in interpersonal relations and as a means of conflict resolution. Previous studies have suggested that this context has facilitated the reproduction of violence by gang members. In recent times, and in the most vivid fashion possible, the armed conflict served as a classroom for the use and legitimisation of force. However, although an extreme experience that accustomed and desensitised people to death and pain, it merely exacerbated the country’s legacy of violence. To be sure, the war facilitated access to weapons and precipitated the migration and subsequent deportations of youths who spread US gang culture in their native lands. The military confrontation thus created some of the conditions that would influence the local character of the street gangs, but otherwise the link between the two is tenuous. Instead, it is the culture of violence that has greater explanatory weight in the gang phenomenon.

Media coverage, however, avoided almost any reference to this factor and maintained that the war had triggered the gangs. Indeed, *El Diario de Hoy* editorialised that these groups were the consequence of the hate, rebellion, and incitement to crime preached during the “years of madness.” The unspoken assumption, articulated on another occasion in a commentary by an ARENA congressman, was that the gangs were an expression of the social resentment fostered by the FMLN’s war against the Salvadoran people. This argumentation locates blame where it does not belong and may confuse the public by detracting attention from the role of the state in generating the social conditions that are conducive to gang growth.

**Social exclusion**

One of the factors that stimulate gang growth is that of social exclusion, which translates into socio-economic deprivation of households and the social neglect of communities. Families that struggle to survive and can offer only limited education and training

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192 Ibid., 1165.
opportunities for their children are those that produce gang members. Not all destitute youths join a street gang, but all those who do live in a situation of poverty. The community context is critical to understanding why some young people are susceptible to gang affiliation. Street gangs emerge in communities with inadequate housing conditions, lack of recreational space, deficient basic services, substandard roads, often no street lighting, and derelict public buildings. These are both marginal and marginalised communities, situated at the outskirts of the cities and cut off from the benefits of economic development.

Perhaps due to its policy implications this issue was extensively treated by the media, although in very different ways. As part of its anti-violence campaign, *La Prensa Gráfica* organised a roundtable discussion on the broader problems of crime and violence. Coverage of the event merely reproduced the statements of the contributors who included Minister Figueroa; juvenile judge Aida Santos de Escobar; the UNDP country representative, Beat Rohr; and the then CNSP President, Salvador Samayoa. De Escobar reiterated her view that poverty and social marginalisation feed crime, while Rohr and Samayoa were cited as rejecting any link between poverty and delinquency. The latter, however, did acknowledge that urban marginalisation was a relevant factor. Two observations can be made here. First, given the institutional affiliation of the speakers, it appears that one of them was selectively quoted. Remarks that simply dissociate poverty from the street gangs, without clarifying that it may engender social exclusion and thus gang emergence, would seem to have come from an unlikely source. Furthermore, in the absence of reportorial comments, this inventory of contrasting opinions does not help the public understand the gang phenomenon. Second, the fact that *La Prensa Gráfica* hosted these guests and subsequently published their comments, however partially, indicates that this news organisation is at least tolerant of criticism of the status quo. Equally, though, by not endorsing any of the claims, the paper avoided adopting a position that might have displeased some sectors of society.

This ambivalence is characteristic of the LPG editorial line. The sizeable number of editorials that addressed structural factors for gang emergence did not at all reject the association between the two. Indeed, the paper appeared to argue that deep-seated socio-economic disadvantage in large measure accounted for gang development and therefore needed to be reduced. However, systemic causes were consistently phrased in very vague

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193 Ibid., 1162.
terms, such as ‘los trasfondos sociales y estructurales,’ ‘desajustes sociales,’ ‘los caldos de cultivo,’ or ‘los esquemas básicos de funcionamiento de la sociedad y las condiciones de vida de buena parte de la población.’ Overall, the paper seemed to acknowledge the importance of structural elements in explaining gang presence and developing gang control policies. In fact, this is what distinguishes *La Prensa Gráfica* from its principal competitor. Yet, the imprecision with which the role of structural conditions was articulated, indicates that the broadsheet is concerned not to alienate those audiences whose interests hinder changes in the basic arrangements of Salvadoran society.

*El Diario de Hoy*, by contrast, was at pains to deny the impact of structural aspects on gang development. The daily published a mixed assortment of commentaries, some identifying social marginalisation and lack of opportunities as causes of gang growth, others dismissing the connection between poverty and street gangs and thus the need for social programmes. A paid advertisement similarly rejected this notion, describing it as ‘lindante en la estupidez.’ Most revealing were the editorials and the *Radiografía* feature all of which sought to dispel the idea that poverty was important to gang emergence. The former either pointed to the example of Nicaragua or “prosperous” US cities to counter the “poverty myth” or simply rejected it for being a perverse “leftist” or “communist” analysis. The following excerpt illustrates this trend:

La Procuradora, al igual que los comunistas y sus aliados, sostiene que en vez de perseguir y apresar mareros, deben las autoridades atacar las “causas primarias” del problema. Y acto continuo viene el rosario de señalamientos: los hogares en abandono, la falta de educación, la carencia de oportunidades de trabajo, la “marginación,” etcétera. …El análisis izquierdista parece muy profundo y consecuente con las realidades nacionales, pero no pasa de ser una bobería, por no decir perversidad. Hay muchísimos países más pobres que El Salvador pero con índices de criminalidad más bajos y tolerables que los nuestros *(EDH, 19 August 2003).*

*Radiografía* admitted that street gangs emerge in poor communities, but contended it was young people’s living conditions, not their situation of poverty, that encouraged gang membership. The argument was supported with reference to one of the volumes of *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica,* which allegedly suggested that the gang presence was **

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195 ‘the social and structural backgrounds,’ ‘social imbalances,’ ‘the breeding grounds,’ ‘the basic arrangements of society and the living conditions of large parts of the population.’

196 ‘bordering on stupidity.’

197 ‘The Ombudsperson, like the communists and their allies, maintains that instead of pursuing and catching gang members, the authorities must attack the “root causes” of the problem. And immediately afterwards there follows the rosary of observations: child neglect, lack of education, lack of job opportunities, “marginalisation,” etc. …The leftist analysis appears very profound and consistent with national reality, but it is nothing more than an idiocy, if not a perversity. There are many countries that are poorer than El Salvador, but with lower and more tolerable crime rates than ours.’
greater in communities with access to tap water. This was indeed one of the study’s findings, but it was the remaining conclusions, which the report omitted to disclose, that were significant. The research indicated that street gangs develop not in the most deprived communities, but in those that boast relative economic equality among residents; homes with a better infrastructure; and access to basic services. Yet, the reality remains that these are far from prosperous places. Communities with a gang presence are always those that experience need and state neglect. Overall, La Prensa Gráfica conceded that the gang phenomenon was rooted in the unfavourable socio-economic conditions facing large parts of society and that gang control therefore had to incorporate social policies. El Diario de Hoy, however, essentially discarded poverty and social exclusion as gang-related factors in favour of other factors (real or perceived) that privilege suppressive activities.

Street gangs as a communist conspiracy

Some of the media coverage suggested that the gangs were part of a left-wing conspiratorial plot. The claim is similar to the idea that the gangs are the consequence of the “FMLN’s” war against the Salvadoran people, but it attributes a greater degree of intentionality to the main opposition party. The central argument is that the “communists” or “terrorist-communists,” who supposedly have always collaborated with violent groups to bring the nation to its knees, have prepared the gangs for the same purpose. Today the political left is directing a process aimed at destabilising the country, and the street gangs are the means to do so. Gang crime and violence, combined with the protests of the FMLN’s “front groups,” are all designed to create despair among the population and make people think that the “communists” are in a better position to resolve El Salvador’s problems.

La Prensa Gráfica somewhat distanced itself from these assertions, confining them to opinion columns and an interview with President Sacá. However, El Diario de Hoy has adopted this position as its editorial line. The allegations surfaced more often in pre-electoral periods and seemed principally intent on vilifying the FMLN. Gang members may well participate in social protests if they deem them worthy of support or be hired by either side of the political spectrum for partisan purposes. However, the conspiracy

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199 On the use of gang members as sicarios in a politically-motivated killing of an FMLN member, see Tutela Legal, La violencia homicida, 27-28.
theory does not account for gang onset in El Salvador. Rather, it is an explanation concocted by those who prefer to scapegoat the FMLN for the country’s social ills instead of acknowledging that the street gangs exist because of the social marginalisation of large parts of Salvadoran society.

US deportation policy

Finally, the press insinuated that a cause of El Salvador’s gang phenomenon was the US policy of returning foreign-born offending gang members to their country of origin. There are two dimensions to this argument. The first holds that the two main street gangs of El Salvador, *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Dieciocho*, originated in Los Angeles and only took root in Central America with the deportations. The street gangs are not a domestic creation, but an imported problem. This claim was encountered in EDH editorial pages and news coverage that reported or endorsed official statements, but it is misleading. As the Introduction to this thesis indicated, street gangs have existed in El Salvador since the 1970s. Deported gang members merely brought with them a US street gang culture and diffused particular gang identities among the local groups.

The second component of the argument is that the recurrent deportations exacerbate the gang problem in El Salvador. Upon arrival in their native country, repatriated individuals reunite with their gang and go on to offend, thus driving up the crime rate that the police seek to lower. Both newspapers endorsed this claim in editorial pages and news reports, but much of this coverage merely regurgitated the view of government and police representatives. I will return to this point, because officials used it to justify the failure of *Mano Dura*. For the moment I want to note that while some returning gang members remain involved in gang life or even break the law, others turn to a more conventional lifestyle. Among the former are both committed gang members and those who find themselves in a (for them) alien country, perhaps unable to speak the language, with no reinsertion opportunities or a support network other than the street gang. Continued gang membership says as much about individuals’ gang loyalty as about the Salvadoran government’s neglect of rehabilitation programmes. Statistics that might document the above trends are unavailable. In the absence of such figures, sweeping claims that deported gang members amplify El Salvador’s crime rate appear exaggerated. The street gangs are a home-grown problem that emerges in socially marginalised

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communities and comprises largely local youth. Media coverage that points to external causes and inflates the impact of deported gang members implies that the Salvadoran authorities have no responsibility other than to arrest and prosecute offenders and excuses their failure to develop a coherent public security strategy. The third and final section of the content analysis examines how the press treated the government’s gang control strategies.

### 3.2.3 Gang control: *Mano Dura, prevention, and rehabilitation*

Earlier parts of the analysis showed how media coverage of both gang activity and factors for gang joining and gang emergence tended to favour a suppressive approach. To complete the investigation I examine below how the press treated the gang control policy pursued by the governments of Francisco Flores and Antonio Saca. The research sought to ascertain how approvingly or critically the newspapers viewed the gang control strategies of suppression, prevention, and rehabilitation. The reporting encompassed three yearlong phases: the beginning (and end) of *Mano Dura*, the introduction of *Súper Mano Dura*, and the plan’s eventual “re-launch.” Some developments were phase-specific, yet many of the themes were recurrent, and to avoid repetition I have grouped the two final stages together.

#### Phase 1: *Mano Dura*

I begin this first segment by considering writings on the merit or otherwise of individual gang control approaches before addressing the *Ley Antimaras* (LAM). I then consider two recurrent issues: the spectacle of *Mano Dura* and ways of measuring the policy’s success.

#### Coverage of gang control strategies

Law enforcement activities constitute important efforts to curtail gang crime and violence. However, the timing and content of *Mano Dura* suggested to sceptical observers that the plan was electorally-driven and would prove ineffective. Bias in favour of suppression pervaded the entire news coverage, but at this point my aim is to show how the media referred to the three possible gang control strategies. To what extent was there space for criticism of *Mano Dura*, and how was it conveyed? Many of the opponents’ remarks concerned the LAM, but coverage of the acrimonious debate surrounding this
legislation is considered separately. The focus here is on the suppressive approach as such.

*El Diario de Hoy* emerged as a staunch defender of *Mano Dura* and proffered little, if any, criticism of the initiative. A series of paid advertisements by ARENA and other conservative groups openly campaigned in favour of the measure, commending the government for its endeavour and requesting society’s support for it. Similarly, the commentaries in this phase characterised the plan as entirely appropriate, faulted its opponents for being oblivious to the common good, and dismissed the need for social policies since these had failed in the past. Editorials and articles provided an even clearer indication of the paper’s stance. Unsurprisingly, given EDH hostility towards structural factors, the editorials consistently backed *Mano Dura*. Addressing the causes is a protracted affair, it was argued, and gang members could in any case not be corrected with nursery programmes. The plan was apt not only because of its immediate nature, but also because punishment had always been the best deterrence of crime. Additionally, *El Diario de Hoy* enlisted public legitimacy for its views when it editorialised that ‘*con enorme beneplácito se han recibido los operativos contra las maras*.’

By expressing what “the public” thinks, an “objective” and external reference point was used to legitimise official action, and the broadsheet’s campaigning role was exposed. In this first phase articles were the only space for human rights advocates and opposition politicians to voice disapproval of *Mano Dura* and call for prevention, rehabilitation, and a coherent crime policy. However, this criticism was often diminished by keeping it brief and confining it to the final lines of items on punitive aspects of gang control or by juxtaposing it with official statements stressing the alleged benefits of the plan. At other times the paper sought to discredit the remarks with the choice of words. For example, an article telling of the PDDH’s condemnation of the anti-gang operations carried the headline: ‘*Procuradora polemiza con PNC*.’

Unlike its competitor, *La Prensa Gráfica* did not explicitly support *Mano Dura*, and while it displayed greater tolerance for dissent in its pages, its own stance was one of muted disagreement if not neutrality. Government policy was assailed most vigorously in opinion columns and paid advertisements, the latter mostly by FESPAD and other NGOs. The main thrust of these pieces was that *Mano Dura* neglected non-gang crime and constituted a superficial initiative, pretending to resolve a problem rooted in social exclusion by means of mass detentions alone. For these observers, the solution to the

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201 ‘the operations against the maras were received with huge approval.’
country’s public insecurity could only be a three-pronged gang control policy and the criminal persecution of all offenders. LPG editorials took a similar line, but generally strove to present both sides of the argument without passing judgment. The criticism that did emerge focused on a number of points: for years official indifference to the gangs permitted their unrestrained growth, and the sudden interest in a gang policy raised questions about its electoral nature and thus the government’s deeper commitment to finding a solution. Importantly, the paper portrayed Mano Dura as a vote-catching tool, but would not draw the same conclusion about the subsequent plan. Finally, La Prensa Gráfica editorialised that law enforcement should be combined with rehabilitation and above all prevention, but without making specific recommendations or proposing wide-ranging changes to the basic structures of society.

News coverage of Mano Dura also offered scope for criticism, but reporters clearly shunned controversy. Initially, the articles in this category preferred to highlight sources in such a way that responsibility for disapproving viewpoints was made to rest with them alone. From late 2003 onwards, when the increasing murder rate began to evince the plan’s failure, the paper’s technique shifted to a reliance on “safe facts.” Official statistics indicated that only 5% of arrested gang members had been remanded in custody and annual homicide figures had climbed under Mano Dura. Journalists used this information to “objectify” their value judgments and to observe that the policy had not demonstrated its efficacy. Over time, persistent allusion to the escalating homicide rate became the paper’s preferred method of questioning the government’s approach to gang control and public security more generally. La Prensa Gráfica was thus less likely to be attacked for picking a fight with the authorities, but as a news provider it did nothing more than stating the obvious.

The Ley Antimaras

Mano Dura had been paired with a legal instrument that was designed to facilitate the arrest of gang members. The authorities invoked various arguments to make their case, ranging from the inadequacy of current legislation to the seriousness of gang offending and a deportation-induced crime wave, and contended that the LAM respected constitutional principles. Critics maintained that existing laws were sufficient for gang suppression, that gang members could not be prosecuted for their appearance and the LAM therefore infringed the Constitution and international conventions ratified by El

202 ‘Ombudsperson has debate with the PNC.’
Salvador. How did the media treat the debate on a law that created an illegitimate penalty? Did they question the validity of these rules and ultimately of *Mano Dura*, or were they inclined towards the official position? Overall, press coverage of the LAM tended to amplify rather than challenge the claims of the Flores administration. *El Diario de Hoy* clearly supported the measure and even published some false stories that misled readers about the flaws and dangers of the anti-gang act. *La Prensa Gráfica* was more receptive to alternative voices, but its preference for neutrality resulted in similar bias towards the government’s standpoint.

Initially, *El Diario de Hoy* featured a series of paid ads and editorials that raised the “permissive legislation” argument to call for the enactment of the LAM. The bulk of the coverage, however, comprised “factual” reporting, and it is here where the most glaring distortions transpired. Journalists relied on four techniques that helped skew the paper’s content. First, they largely took a passive, non-critical approach to newsgathering that relied on the reproduction of official statements with no added reportorial comments. Fictitious claims were thus given an aura of truthfulness. Second, correspondents consulted “specialists” who lacked the necessary independence and, unsurprisingly, backed the government’s initiative. By attributing expert authority to their views, the interests of the Flores administration were legitimated once again. Third, the paper repeatedly asserted that the Honduran congress had passed its own anti-gang law. In reality, only penal reforms had been passed, but *El Diario de Hoy* preferred to deceive its readers rather than acknowledge that gang control required no special legislation. Fourth, criticism, when it was included, generally followed official pronouncements and therefore saw its force voided.

When the LAM had been enacted and the courts released gang members for lack of evidence, EDH coverage continued to follow some of these patterns. Additionally, while the police were portrayed as diligent, the judges were depicted as indifferent to gang crime and their analysis cast into doubt. The paper did not refute official claims that judges were not entitled to set aside an unconstitutional law and instead made them its editorial line. The Constitution clearly provides courts with this faculty, but again the daily chose to misinform its readers.\(^{203}\) The most blatant distortion occurred when the EDH envoy reported from Geneva that the Salvadoran delegation had successfully defended the LAM before the UNCRC and the Committee had not requested the

\(^{203}\) On the principle of diffuse constitutional control, see Art. 185 of the Salvadoran Constitution.
derogation of the legislation. *El Diario de Hoy* did not subsequently publish a correction and preferred to keep alive the idea that the government had been acting lawfully.

By contrast, *La Prensa Gráfica* offered more space for criticism of the LAM, both in commentaries and news reporting, but did not itself take a stance on the issue. The broadsheet mostly limited itself to balancing contrasting views and let readers draw their own conclusions about the soundness of the arguments. Journalists indicated their awareness of the Honduran penal reforms, but tended to proclaim that the country had passed an anti-gang law and seemed to suggest that El Salvador should follow suit. With the simmering dispute about the constitutionality of the LAM *La Prensa Gráfica* maintained its tolerance for dissent in the opinion columns. However, the editorials were uncritical of the government and merely asked for the confrontations to cease and a permanent law to be applied unreservedly. News coverage was subtly slanted in favour of special anti-gang legislation, as illustrated by a feature on the Los Angeles-based “laboratory battle” against street gangs. The report highlighted a range of legal anti-gang measures and quoted the Salvadoran police chief as proposing their replication in the Central American state.

Unlike its competitor, *La Prensa Gráfica* did not assert that the judges were not empowered to set aside an unconstitutional law, but nor did it corroborate their position and explain that they acted in defence of the rule of law. By not rebutting official claims that the courts lacked the will to apply the country’s laws, the paper undermined people’s confidence in the judiciary and imperilled the life of judges who were apparently to blame for the prevailing insecurity. Finally, correspondents reported correctly that the UN had condemned the LAM and requested its derogation, but the accounts were balanced with official reactions to the contrary. Again the daily merely presented conflicting claims to its audiences and refrained deliberately from expressing the judgments which are essential for journalism. Neutrality was embraced at the expense of truth-telling.

**The spectacle of Mano Dura**

To make the public believe that the authorities were acting decisively against the gangs, the persecution of these groups had to be publicised. Inevitably, the media played an important role in selling the supposed effectiveness of *Mano Dura*. They did so in a number of ways, including by publishing the indicators of policy success that I examine below. Here I want to focus on the spectacle of *Mano Dura* that unfolded in the news
pages: the dramatisation of police operations and public exhibitions of arrested gang members.

More than other gang control strategies, it was the suppressive activities that attracted the attention of journalists. Area sweeps to detain gang members, sometimes with full, planned press coverage, satisfied both governmental public relations concerns and media interest in exciting news. Both papers, particularly *La Prensa Gráfica*, offered gripping accounts of night-time crackdowns conducted by hundreds of heavily armed officers in uniforms and balaclavas and narrated with relish how police battered down doors and raided homes to arrest suspects. An abundance of photos documented and bolstered this display of state power and authority.

After the operations detainees were rounded up and presented to the media. These ritualistic exhibitions completed gang members’ transition to folk devil status. As ‘ceremonies of public degradation’ they visibly labelled those who were characterised as deviant and had to be confronted by the repressive apparatus of the state. Subsequent news coverage would identify suspects with their full name (unless juveniles) and refer to them as “*presuntos asesinos,*” “*supuestos homicidas*” or even “*criminales,*” an implicit imputation of guilt. Pictures showed handcuffed individuals, half-naked or at least bare-chested to reveal their tattoos, guarded by armed police and sometimes displayed with confiscated weapons. The image below illustrates these practices.

Plate 5.2 Police present arrested gang members to the media (photo: EDH).

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204 On this type of “folk punishment,” see Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 95.
205 ‘suspected killers,’ ‘suspected murderers,’ ‘criminals.’
When the media acted as a platform for these exhibitions and a priori convictions of alleged offenders, they were complicit in violations of the presumption of innocence and suspects’ rights to their own image, intimacy, and privacy. The papers divulged individual arrests, but concealed information about the release of gang members. Thus, many people who were acquitted or had been wrongfully accused remained associated with crime in the public mind. The damage to their reputation is irrevocable and is in no way diminished by journalistic references to the term “suspected.”

Unlike countries such as Spain or Uruguay, where restrictions exist on the publication of photos and names of persons under arrest or investigation, El Salvador imposes no such constraints on its reporters. The reproduction of practices that undermine individual guarantees is made possible by the persistence of a degenerate culture of legality within the criminal justice system as well as a lack of ethical values among the media and the populace at large. These practices find social acceptance, and journalists who perpetuate them do so because they are themselves members of a society that has an underdeveloped notion of individual rights.

Thus, rather than disclosing and challenging the human rights violations committed under Mano Dura, the media legitimised the abuses and the actors committing them. Indeed, they were instrumental in the occurrence of these violations. In their zeal to supply sensational stories about the gang policy, the papers promoted a brutal police force, disrespect for civil rights, and prejudices against socially marginalised sectors. Once again the journalism exercised at these news organisations failed to defy political interests and acquiesced instead in the humiliations of citizens and the violations of their rights.

**Measuring the success of Mano Dura**

The press relied on four kinds of benchmarks to gauge the alleged impact and effectiveness of Mano Dura: the completion of public security tasks; tranquillity in the communities; public opinion; and the homicide figures. A brief review of each of these indicators follows.
Public security tasks

Given that Mano Dura advocated suppression as the only viable gang deterrence method, law enforcement accomplishments served to project a favourable image of the policy’s success. In both newspapers a series of PNC-sponsored paid ads (“Plan Mano Dura en acción”) highlighted the dedication and self-sacrifice of police and soldiers and furnished weekly summaries of the “war on gangs.” Against a background of visual imagery, these pieces recounted how “very effective” anti-gang activities had resulted in detentions, graffiti removals, and the recovery of “destroyers,” decreased or prevented homicides, and generally made residential areas much safer and quieter. Publicity was most evident in this format, but also permeated the police data-reliant news reporting.

The bulk of this coverage focused on graffiti removal and arrests. Journalists described how walls in community after community were repainted and quoted officials as affirming that the elimination of gang symbols revealed these places to be gang-free. At no point did the papers question the government’s priorities or the consequences the elimination of these emblems might have. Did time and resources need to be expended for graffiti removal as long as gang activity persisted? Did all this special attention and publicity possibly increase the gangs’ status in their own eyes? Did the absence of their insignia perhaps reflect gang members’ acceptance of this countermove rather than a cessation of gang activity (which is what indeed occurred)? In short, the press merely spotlighted the authorities’ promotional efforts and failed to ask whether these steps might have been premature if not counterproductive.

A similar lack of reflexivity extended to the issue of detentions. The news pages provided arrest counts, and bold headlines proclaimed how many more gang members had been taken off the streets. The fact that most of them were released was ignored, buried in the articles or dismissed by the police chief who commented that what mattered was not the number of gang members behind bars but to serve the population. For the authorities arrest figures were a sign of police effectiveness and validated Mano Dura, and the media played along. No doubts were raised about the waste of resources or the evidentiary quality of the cases taken to court nor did journalists ask whether the mass detentions reinforced gang identity and cohesiveness and ultimately exacerbated the problem.
Tranquillity in the communities

One of the more dubious claims that sought to demonstrate the positive impact of *Mano Dura* linked the plan with greater calm in the communities. Both newspapers cited police assurances that the force was bringing peace and security to Salvadoran families. Reporters were dispatched to some of the gang-affected areas where locals (how many was left unclear) concurred that PNC operations had restored serenity in the streets. Nearer the anniversary of *Mano Dura* journalists returned from their fieldtrips to acknowledge that this semblance of tranquillity in reality reflected gang members’ adaption to the now customary patrols and sweeps. However, these accounts failed to appreciate that “tranquillity” was not tantamount to security and ultimately an uncertain indicator of successful gang control. In other words, the press neglected to explain that this illusory respite in gang activity permitted no encouraging conclusions about the government’s programme.

Public opinion: popular support and surveys

The government’s gang policy could be made to appear successful and legitimate by attributing popular support to it. This occurred in two ways: through the publication of citizens’ views and media-commissioned polls. These techniques are considered in turn.

On several occasions *La Prensa Gráfica* provided a collection of readers’ comments on *Mano Dura* and the LAM. The paper ensured it printed a mix of favourable and critical estimations, but misled its audiences with sweeping headlines exclaiming that “the people” backed these measures. Thus, readers who merely skimmed the entries might have been under the impression that these gang control efforts were more consistently accepted than they actually were. Typically, journalists at both news organisations visited gang-affected communities to hear from those who could testify to the impact of *Mano Dura*. Residents were reported to have applauded the plan, and again the mood was encapsulated in broad-brush titles. Unsurprisingly, officials invoked popular sentiment to dismiss the criticism of learned observers and contend that the approach taken was successful. This argument, unchallenged by the media, could carry even more weight if substantiated by public opinion polls.

*El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* regularly commission surveys on issues such as the economy, crime, government performance, and voter preferences. My analysis
focused on polls that asked respondents about their views on gangs and gang control measures, and what follows is a brief account of the patterns the research encountered.

Unlike *La Prensa Gráfica*, which featured only one gang-related poll in this phase, the Altamirano paper presented five. The sheer volume of this format gives a first indication of the outlet’s concern to associate *Mano Dura* with popular legitimacy. The principal difficulties with the EDH reports were the withholding of survey questions, inconsistencies in the provision of figures, a manipulative use of the statistics, and unwarranted conclusions. Only the third of these survey reports actually divulged the approval rate of *Mano Dura* (70%), while the rest found that the plan was considered the second main achievement of the Flores government or was the most-remembered news story. The latter led the paper to deduce that the policy had been well-received by the population. Yet, people may have recalled the initiative because of the striking images or the quantity of stories, rather than because they endorsed it. Indeed, they may have remembered it for the illegalities it exhibited. This same poll was remarkable for two additional reasons. First, it solicited interviewees’ opinion on the causes of crime and gangs (assuming one was synonymous with the other), but while the report highlighted those that favoured punitive responses it glossed over the lack of job opportunities. Second, although it neglected prevention, it did ask participants whether they thought gang members could be rehabilitated and rehabilitation should be offered. In both respects the answers were mostly affirmative (46%/58%) rather than entirely negative (12%/6%), but the article dwelled on the backing of *Mano Dura* and ended by noting that 18% of Salvadorans felt gang members showed little possibility for rehabilitation. Not only was this formulation imprecise, it also distracted from the significant level of support for alternative gang programmes – suggesting that while people may have endorsed gang suppression, they also thought it should be complemented by other measures.

The LPG poll report was published early and, like subsequent ones, it included the survey questions. Unsurprisingly perhaps, it revealed that the majority of respondents requested the immediate enactment of the LAM and felt government genuinely sought to address the gang problem. Nonetheless, a considerable number of Salvadorans believed the policy was a vote-catching strategy. More interestingly, 69% of interviewees deemed the gangs to be the main cause of insecurity in the country. I will return to the significance of this last point in the discussion, but for now I want to stress the implications of these polls.
Surveys appear to reflect public opinion, yet they also serve to legitimate partisan beliefs and add another element of influence to media coverage. Survey design offers room for manipulation and shapes the answers respondents are said to have given. Thus, different questions could have painted a different picture of the views held by “the Salvadorans.” Furthermore, the poll results selected for dissemination, no matter how partial and inaccurate a reading they provided, retained their legitimacy as a yardstick of public opinion. Therefore, the surveys could not only construct favourable views of Mano Dura, but also affect people on how to think about the gang problem and its treatment. In short, rather than merely measuring public opinion, the polls could mould it, and such influence was significant in what was a pre-electoral year.

Homicide figures

I want to conclude this first phase by considering how the media covered the authorities’ use of homicide figures to declare the gang policy a success. Officials made two kinds of claims: Mano Dura was effective because it had saved lives and because it had decreased the homicide rate. The first assertion held that an unstated number of killings had been avoided while gang members were in custody. Clearly, this is a feeble explanation, because we will never know whether the homicide rate would have been higher in the absence of these detentions. The dubious nature of this claim notwithstanding, the newspapers did not challenge it. More frequently, police contended that Mano Dura had lowered the country’s murder rate. Any attempt to compare the published data ends in confusion, as the figures obtained by the two papers were often at odds with each other. For example, after two months La Prensa Gráfica spoke of a 40% reduction in homicides while El Diario de Hoy mentioned only 20%. To add to the ambiguity, journalists did not always clarify whether the decline was nationwide or limited to specific areas, such as Greater San Salvador. For the first few months the press failed to challenge the information they had been given, even endorsing it in headlines, even though the PNC was evidently manipulating its statistics. For instance, officers would argue that the homicide rate had diminished by 22.5% in the first 100 days of Mano Dura contrasted with the same period prior to the plan. By making such selective comparisons, police could justify their argument, but disguised the fact that the homicide rate had begun to rise in 2003. The media did not expose this law enforcement propaganda, and only later that year, when police publicly acknowledged that the annual murder rate exceeded that of 2002, did La Prensa Gráfica begin to question official rhetoric and with it Mano Dura.
At that point, however, officials started offering various justifications to explain the policy’s incipient signs of failure. For example, police insisted that the increase in homicides had occurred in the first semester of 2003 and the upward trend been halted because of Mano Dura. Justifications of this kind would become more recurrent in phases two and three which I turn to now.

**Phases 2 and 3: Súper Mano Dura and its “re-launch”**

This final section of the content analysis examines how the media treated President Saca’s gang policy from its inception until its withdrawal two years later. Although Súper Mano Dura was meant to be more comprehensive than its precursor, it retained a focus on suppression, and press coverage continued to reflect the dominance of this theme. I will therefore limit my review of these final phases to three points: media references to gang control strategies and programmes; assessments of the policy’s impact; and explanations offered to justify the failure of Súper Mano Dura.

**Gang control strategies and programmes**

I will begin by showing how favourably or critically the newspapers wrote about the three approaches to gang control before I consider coverage of actual prevention and rehabilitation initiatives. My particular interest was in the way in which the government’s Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida programmes were treated, and I have included these here merely for the relative dearth of reporting on them.

In both phases some support of the punitive response continued to be expressed, but was mainly confined to EDH editorial pages. If anything, the steady increase in homicides prompted Mano Dura opponents to reinforce their calls for a rethink of the gang policy. El Diario de Hoy, though gradually less vocal in its praise of gang suppression, was loath to acknowledge the need to revise law enforcement efforts and prioritise alternative perspectives. The little criticism that it permitted was largely restricted to opinion columns, particularly the lone voice of Miguel Cruz. In the main the government’s approach was decried as a publicity campaign and lambasted for its emphasis on crackdowns to the detriment of comprehensive crime and social policies. The commentators of La Prensa Gráfica echoed these concerns, but additionally this paper published some criticism in its news pages, though carefully attributed to the sources and juxtaposed with officials’ insistence that the plan was delivering good results. Notably, a
Chapter 3: Creating folk devils

series of LPG editorials gently insisted on the adoption of prevention and rehabilitation programmes, albeit stopping short of declaring Súper Mano Dura a failure.

Throughout that time neither newspaper demonstrated much interest in covering alternative gang control measures. Both featured some stories of private initiatives, such as a tattoo removal clinic or a handicrafts microenterprise programme, and La Prensa Gráfica included an occasional account of CNSP-sponsored recreational activities and sports infrastructure projects. Overall the media limited themselves to note the launch of Mano Amigas/Extendidas, the inauguration of the granja or the “graduation” ceremony of ex-gang members. The government’s rehabilitation “model” attracted most of the attention, but journalists merely enumerated the activities on offer or the number of gang members being treated. Spurious claims that the government would open two or possibly ten further granjas were not followed-up nor did reporters probe whether the government’s alternative programmes could be deemed at all successful or why they commenced with much delay.

Assessing the impact of Súper Mano Dura

By and large media accounts continued to reveal a fascination with large-scale police operations and public exhibitions of suspects. Moreover, news reporting persisted in legitimising violations of detainees’ rights, in the case of La Prensa Gráfica despite the recent pledge to respect the presumption of innocence. Some of the indicators that were previously used to measure policy success, notably public security tasks and tranquillity in the communities, now received little or no attention. Instead, the focus remained on public opinion and homicide figures. LPG journalists occasionally drove to gang-affected communities, but reports of these visits stopped after residents had repeatedly affirmed that the gang problem showed no signs of abating.

Both newspapers published regular surveys, but somewhat surprisingly it was El Diario de Hoy that documented the steep decline in effectiveness ratings. In each of these polls the number of Salvadorans who thought Súper Mano Dura had helped reduce violence and crime decreased. La Prensa Gráfica, however, only traced this fall in the first year of the policy. The final gang-related surveys in the period of analysis appeared on the second anniversary of the Saca presidency, and, perhaps as a face-saver, both outlets asked what government should do to address the gang problem. LPG respondents showed little support for job training and employment creation, largely requesting greater police presence and stricter laws. Even more conventionally, EDH interviewees
expressed huge support for military deployment, harsher punishment, the death sentence, and more police. Since people were likely invited to reply to a multiple-choice questionnaire, the survey design may have favoured public endorsement of punitive measures, particularly in the case of El Diario de Hoy. In sum, while the existing gang policy was widely considered ineffective, people wanted more of the same, and government was vindicated in its approach.

In the early months of Súper Mano Dura police credited the plan with the reduction of the murder rate, again using selective periods for comparison. As homicide figures continued to climb these arguments dwindled. However, the papers spared the authorities considerable embarrassment by letting them assert that the policy had saved lives or, more often, by reporting their explanations of the increase in violent crime. I will end the content analysis with a brief review of these justifications.

The homicide rate continues to climb: justifying failure

Government and police offered a series of arguments to explain why, despite the deteriorating security situation, Súper Mano Dura had remained an effective gang control plan. Most of these contentions assumed that gang members were responsible for the majority of homicides. Officials changed course only briefly when they declared that previously most murders were gang-related, but while Súper Mano Dura had succeeded in lowering their number, other individuals were now committing more killings, thus keeping the overall homicide rate high. Generally, however, it was implied that gang members were the main culprits. Homicide figures were on the rise, it was argued, largely for one or more of the following reasons: tolerant judges failed to convict gang members; gang rivalries over leadership and control of drug sales had intensified; deported gang members fuelled violent crime; gangs were eliminating those members who sought to join the government’s rehabilitation programme, and the upsurge in murders had been anticipated; gang members had turned to planning their killings, which the police were therefore unable to prevent. Additionally, two conspiracy theories were circulated: gang members deliberately committed more homicides to defy government policy, and the gangs escalated their homicides as part of an FMLN-led destabilisation process (a popular premise prior to the 2006 elections).

Again, the principal problem with the media coverage was journalists’ preference for reporting these claims without evaluating a single one of them. Not once did the papers suggest that the government’s approach to gang control, let alone its failure to develop a
comprehensive crime policy, may have exacerbated the situation. Indeed, when President Saca announced that *Súper Mano Dura* needed to be adjusted to reality, because the gangs had supposedly evolved into organised crime groups, the papers remained reluctant to write of the policy’s failure. Instead, they simply mentioned the plan less frequently than before. Eventually, *El Diario de Hoy* only remarked that *Súper Mano Dura* had become extinct, and *La Prensa Gráfica* concluded that *Maestro de Seguridad* had substituted the former. Just as the authorities quietly buried President Saca’s plan, the media seemed determined to let the matter rest, and no more was heard of a gang policy.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

I will now draw together the central points of the content analysis before addressing two questions: What factors might explain media bias towards the official interpretation of the gang problem and its solution? What audience effects did the coverage have? To answer the first of these questions I will revisit some of the issues that emerged in part two of this chapter. For the second question I will draw on a number of polls conducted by the IUDOP between 2003 and 2006.

The content analysis of gang-related news coverage sought to ascertain how El Salvador’s two leading dailies represented gang members, discussed the factors stimulating gang membership and gang emergence, and depicted gang control strategies. The investigation revealed subtle differences between the papers, but these variations were overshadowed by the similarities in news-gathering practices and an informational bias towards the government’s agenda. Journalists took a passive, non-critical approach to reporting that focused on official sources and events and relied on the transcription of speeches and press releases. Areas of controversy remained off-limits, criticism was confined to opinion columns, competing viewpoints were balanced without questioning or challenging their veracity, and episodic framing was preferred to thematic forms of presentation. *La Prensa Gráfica* is a submissive and docile paper, with a conservative though more tolerant editorial line than its main competitor. Its reporting was characteristically neutral, kept debates within the bounds of acceptable premises, and produced bland and conformist coverage. *El Diario de Hoy* is striking for its sharp language, highly conservative outlook, and disapproval of dissent. Criticism is regularly dismissed as communist rhetoric, particularly in the often offensive editorials, and news treatment displayed an ideological stance that was more explicitly and deliberately supportive of *Mano Dura* and the interests of the country’s privileged groups.
Gang members were typecast as “folk devils,” a minority of criminal and violent individuals responsible for the majority of homicides. Visual imagery “documented” their danger, while metaphoric language dehumanised gang members and rendered their extermination permissible. Gang affiliation became linked with lifestyle decisions or family breakdown and decoupled from the context. Gang emergence was associated with the war and US deportation policy, while the EDH editorial line also related the gang problem with a communist conspiracy and a lenient criminal justice system. Whereas La Prensa Gráfica alluded to socio-economic disadvantage, but did not question Salvadoran society’s basic arrangements, El Diario de Hoy strongly rejected this factor. Coverage of police operations and public exhibitions of gang members sought to entertain audiences to the detriment of human rights violations. While El Diario de Hoy resolutely defended Mano Dura, La Prensa Gráfica insisted on the need for a three-pronged gang policy, but avoided criticising suppression as such. Instead, the paper pointed to the escalating homicide rate as a way of questioning the government’s approach to gang control.

Both newspapers fanned a gang panic, amplified the official interpretation of the gang problem, and encouraged public support for Mano Dura through episodic framing. Media content did not include a consistent and coherent range of critical voices, but was saturated by the Mano Dura theme. Since alternative readings of the gang problem were scarce, the possibility that a comprehensive gang policy might be backed and adopted was diminished. Moreover, coverage promoted suppression and legitimised the human rights abuses committed by the police. In the case of La Prensa Gráfica, irresponsible and unethical journalism persisted after the introduction of the Manual, which had encouraged reporters to contextualise events, provide truthful news stories, avoid stereotyping suspects, and respect the presumption of innocence.

I now want to turn to the impact of media sector characteristics and reportorial practices on gang-related news coverage. In part two of this chapter I showed that El Salvador’s political openings increased freedom of expression, raised academic standards among journalists, and heralded the modernisation of the traditional media. However, freedom of expression encounters limits when reporting targets the status quo or the country’s power groups, defamation laws and restricted access to information discourage critical reporting; and journalistic professionalism remains curbed by limited newsroom autonomy, modest salaries, and weak ethical norms. Furthermore, the leading newspapers have retained their old political alignments and returned to stifling dissent. Salvadoran journalism encounters its principal obstacles in oligopolistic ownership.
structures, the political use of advertising, and journalistic self-censorship. Media owners’ political and commercial interests as well as reportorial practices help explain why news coverage framed the gang problem and its solutions in ways that promoted penal populism.

*El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* are both family businesses with ties to the elite and a commitment to the political and economic agenda of the ruling party and the private sector. Their owners appear willing to use news production to advance shared interests in protecting private property and maintaining the status quo, although *El Diario de Hoy* reveals its partisan leanings more than *La Prensa Gráfica*. Clearly, the ideological stance and editorial influence of Altamirano Sr. are leaving a mark on his paper, while the Dutriz family considers its broadsheet a for-profit rather than a journalistic enterprise. These differences aside, both companies are in the business of selling news and compete for audiences and advertisers. Their owners are therefore uninterested in a journalism that might kindle controversy and jeopardise their commercial interests. Both papers tolerate criticism as long as it remains within certain boundaries and appear motivated by a desire to retain an image of openness, rather than to disseminate alternative views and information.

The media’s commercial logic also encourages journalists to routinise the news-gathering process and rely on official sources for much of their reporting. This elite orientation makes it difficult for resource-poor groups to achieve coverage and renders their ideas less visible. However, the relative absence of alternative viewpoints in the Salvadoran mainstream press also derives from journalists’ tendency towards self-censorship. Reporters working for the country’s principal media are all too aware of their employers’ interests. Although they may be committed to critical journalism, fear of dismissal and limited job opportunities prompt many correspondents to censor their writings. The journalists I interviewed acknowledged that this was an ingrained practice at *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*. The dilemma between professional demands and job security is what led LPG reporters to highlight the mounting homicide rate instead of criticising *Mano Dura*.

Finally, I want to address the issue of media effects on public perceptions of the gangs and *Mano Dura*. In part one of this chapter I explained that although media depictions do not determine public opinion, they shape it and make some interpretations of social reality more likely than others. Indeed, scholars have suggested that while the

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effects of individual media messages may be minimal, the accumulated effects of repeatedly transmitted messages may be very significant.\textsuperscript{209} Subsequently I wrote that Salvadoran television and newspapers are consulted for political information and have been found to influence the population’s view of the country’s main problems. Through their agenda-setting function, the newspapers in particular exercise an important indirect influence on public opinion.

I was interested in establishing whether the media had indeed influenced Salvadorans’ perception of the gang problem and the responses it required. For this purpose I draw on a series of IUDOP polls that revealed public opinion on the seriousness of the gang problem, support for \textit{Mano Dura} policies, and perceptions of policy effectiveness. Respondents’ views were almost certainly coloured by their personal experiences and entrenched attitudes, but the survey findings suggest that media effects were palpable.

The gravity of the gang phenomenon was raised in a 2004 survey of security perceptions. When asked which crime issue needed to be tackled most urgently, almost half the interviewees (48.4\%) pointed to the gangs.\textsuperscript{210} This answer is puzzling since 68.6\% of the Salvadorans consulted acknowledged that these groups were a small or non-existent problem in their communities.\textsuperscript{211} More significantly, when people were asked whether they considered the gangs a problem in their communities, 20.8\% affirmed these youths were a great problem, and 10.6\% felt they were somewhat of a problem. Indeed, only 10.6\% stated they had ever been directly affected by gang activity. However, an astounding 91\% of respondents believed the gangs constituted a significant national problem, while 6.5\% thought this was somewhat the case. Those who had been gang victims were more likely to see these groups as a problem, locally and nationally. Yet, the poll also disclosed the impact of media messages: the greater the exposure to news, the greater the view that the gangs affected the community. Although the survey did not probe media affects among those who considered the gangs a national problem, it is safe to assume that the findings would have been similar. Since the vast majority of respondents reported no gang presence in their area, media coverage likely contributed to the perception that these groups were nonetheless a national nuisance.

\textsuperscript{209} van Ginneken, \textit{Understanding Global News}, 200.

\textsuperscript{210} José Miguel Cruz and María Santacruz Giralt, \textit{La victimización y la percepción de seguridad en El Salvador en 2004} (San Salvador: Ministerio de Gobernación and PNUD, 2005), 138.

\textsuperscript{211} For survey results concerning the gangs, see Cruz and Santacruz Giralt, \textit{La victimización y la percepción de seguridad}, 147-155.
Public support for *Mano Dura* remained steadfast, criticism and the ineffectiveness of both plans notwithstanding. According to a 2003 survey, a remarkable 79.7% of respondents thought the MD/LAM initiative deserved backing despite its unconstitutional character, while 3.7% even felt it did not contravene the Constitution and should be endorsed. Clearly, the warnings of *Mano Dura* opponents had failed to sway many Salvadorans, and a small minority accepted the government’s reasoning. Furthermore, although public support for *Mano Dura* dropped eventually, it remained surprisingly high even when respondents acknowledged that SMD had not succeeded in decreasing crime. For example, the end-of-year surveys of 2005 and 2006 showed that 82.9% and 67% respectively favoured the plan, although they believed that it had been little or not at all effective in lowering crime (45.4%/63.5%).

The media messages that were at play here also influenced perceptions of policy effectiveness. Although the homicide figures steadily rose since 2003, until mid-2005 successive surveys showed that at least 45% of interviewees thought crime had in fact decreased. When asked specifically about the gang problem, more than half the Salvadorans consulted felt that the government’s plan had succeeded in alleviating it. Interestingly, one of these polls revealed that 88.1% of respondents learned of the government’s performance through the media. It appears, therefore, that the media coverage worked to the advantage of the authorities. It was only months after the termination of the gang policy that it finally received a largely negative evaluation, although the police continued to be seen as effective in their “fight” against crime.

The survey research suggests that media content influenced Salvadorans in perceiving the gang problem as more serious than it was and in supporting *Mano Dura* policies despite their apparent ineffectiveness. The implication is that a different media framing of the gangs could have helped people understand the nature of the gang phenomenon.

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216 IUDOP, “Los salvadoreños evalúan el primer año de gobierno de Antonio Saca,” 5.
and the need for comprehensive gang control. The remaining chapters of this thesis examine how the three NGOs advocated the adoption of an alternative gang control policy.
Chapter 4

Contesting *Mano Dura*: legal advocacy and the challenge of protecting gang members’ human rights

The promotion of comprehensive and rights-respecting gang control was highly political. In El Salvador efforts to alleviate social exclusion and protect human rights have traditionally met with the resistance of society’s most powerful elements. Therefore, when NGOs protested the application of *Mano Dura* and requested an alternative form of gang control based on prevention/rehabilitation and more effective law enforcement, these efforts were likely to meet with opposition. As was previously suggested, three contextual factors were salient in affecting NGO advocacy: the persistence of elite influence over the state and policy-making, the nature of ARENA as the guardian of conservative interests, and the absence of a pluralistic media system that makes it difficult for dissenting actors to express their views and mobilise political pressure. Given these exogenous constraints on gang-related advocacy NGO strategies played a key role in contesting *Mano Dura*.

This chapter focuses on the Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (Foundation of Applied Legal Studies, FESPAD) and its criminal law centre, the Centro de Estudios Penales de El Salvador (Salvadoran Centre for Penal Studies, CEPES). Established by a group of Salvadoran lawyers, FESPAD is dedicated to the defence of human rights and the rule of law. Given the human rights violations (HRVs) associated with *Mano Dura* the gang policy necessarily entered the NGO’s advocacy agenda. Via the CEPES it pursued legal and policy research, a strategy that aimed to achieve the adoption of alternative gang control through direct policy influence. As argued throughout this thesis, the NGOs’ origin shaped their strategic choices, which, combined with organisational characteristics, shaped their policy influence. Chapters 4 to 6 are therefore broadly structured into two parts, the first concentrating on NGO formation and maintenance issues and the second examining NGO strategy and its weaknesses.

This chapter begins by outlining FESPAD’s institutional history and its mission to defend the rule of law and human rights. It goes on to provide an overview of FESPAD, its principal thematic centres and their advocacy strategies. Fundraising challenges, and how the agency has dealt with them, are also highlighted. The chapter then considers the CEPES’ attempts to contest *Mano Dura* through a variety of advocacy tools, including research and limited media work, a legal aid clinic, and a proposal for the local
prevention of gang violence. Finally, FESPAD’s relatively unsuccessful advocacy efforts serve to offer some reflections on the lawyers’ assumptions about the political process, its power dynamics, and the ways in which this thinking informed their strategic choices. Some thoughts are also presented on the NGO’s media strategy and its steps towards alliance-building as a mechanism for amplifying its political voice and influence. It is argued that FESPAD helped publicise the abuses and flaws associated with (Súper) Mano Dura and therefore contributed to the discursive and policy changes that occurred under the Saca administration. However, its advocacy tools were not powerful enough to motivate a change in state behaviour, notably as regards policing practices and the implementation of full-fledged prevention/rehabilitation programmes. Although exogenous factors hindered the promotion of an alternative gang policy, strategic limitations also prevented FESPAD from advancing its advocacy agenda more successfully. Importantly, the NGO perceived gang control as a technical issue that could be resolved through the mere documentation of HRVs and the identification of new policy ideas. The advocacy tools it chose did not put sufficient political pressure on a government that was ideologically opposed to comprehensive gang control nor did they target other key actors, such as the economic elite.

1. The institutional history of FESPAD

1.1 The law as a political instrument at the service of the most vulnerable people

FESPAD emerged during the final years of the armed conflict. In the hope that post-war El Salvador could be erected on the pillars of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, a group of local lawyers set out to translate these aspirations into reality. When the NGO was established in 1988, the objective was to put the law to a novel use and to do so from the sphere of civil society. Decades later the promotion of the rule of law may seem nothing out of the ordinary, but in a society where the legal system has traditionally impeded social change FESPAD ventured into new territory.

In the broadest sense, the founders aimed to craft a more democratic and just society built on constitutional principles and human rights. Since the legal order would become a tool for democracy-building only if both rulers and the ruled submitted to it, FESPAD deemed it necessary to resort to public institutions and existing juridical instruments to achieve its mission. Deficiencies in the normative and institutional areas notwithstanding,
formal engagement at the policy and legislative levels was considered indispensable while proposals for long-term change were being articulated. This strict adherence to democratic channels has characterised FESPAD throughout its existence and posed certain difficulties for its gang-related advocacy.

Equally, however, the founders of FESPAD believed that the application of the law extended to the realm of the citizenry. In a country where the poor had historically been denied their constitutional guarantees, many people had not come to see themselves as holders of human dignity and rights. There was thus a need not only to raise popular awareness of the notion of human rights, but also to foster a greater understanding of the law and its use in the defence of basic entitlements. As lawyers, the founders of FESPAD were certainly trained in utilising legal mechanisms for the resolution of juridical problems. However, they intended to launch what was in essence a political project: to place the law at the service of the most vulnerable people of society and accompany them in their individual and collective struggles.

This philosophy has characterised FESPAD throughout the years and allowed the NGO to play an important role in El Salvador’s transition from war to peace. From the very beginning the agency combined its academic work with popular legal education. In the marginal zones of greater San Salvador FESPAD trained community and union leaders and sought to promote community access to justice, particularly in the area of economic and social rights. These organising and campaign-building efforts did not go unaccompanied. As the peace negotiations raised the need for constitutional reform, FESPAD presented its own proposal in this matter and embarked on an extensive civic education project. Both endeavours permitted the NGO to raise its public profile and establish itself as a point of reference in the areas of human rights and the administration of justice. When FESPAD sought to promote an alternative gang policy, its reputation as a respectable and professional organisation was important in affording it access to decision-makers.

Soon the NGO expanded its contribution to the restructuring of the Salvadoran judicial system and began to monitor the implementation of the criminal justice reforms. Given the authorities’ traditionally suppressive approach to crime, the lawyers sought to inject a pro-rights culture into the country’s criminal law and policy. Since 1993 this objective has been pursued by the CEPES, one of four centres that formed FESPAD’s

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1 On the creation of FESPAD and its objectives, see FESPAD, *Documento base de FESPAD* (San Salvador: mimeo, 1988).
2 Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.
structure at the time of my research and the one that advocated an alternative gang policy.³ The CEPES emerged from the efforts of Argentine penologist Alberto Binder, an authority in his field and an advocate of legal reforms across Latin America, who helped create a critically-minded grouping that would be determined to see the country’s judicial reforms succeed.⁴ The circle from which the CEPES members were drawn grew out of a student movement at the University of El Salvador (UES) Law Faculty whose graduates include key figures of the Salvadoran left such as Farabundo Martí and Schafik Handal. Sensitised to Salvadoran political history, these students began meeting on FESPAD’s premises to be taught by one of the region’s most distinguished legal scholars. When these young people were eventually incorporated into FESPAD, they pledged to apply their knowledge in two ways. One has seen them convey their own expertise to future generations of law students, mostly in the form of a “permanent seminar” that provides space for reflection as well as academic training. Equally the CEPES members have since sought to infuse their thinking in the centre’s advocacy work.⁵ To this day FESPAD has remained faithful to its political vision, although the strategies pursued to accomplish it vary among the two key thematic centres.

1.2 Repertoire of strategies

The office-based part of FESPAD’s legal and policy work unfolds in a middle-class neighbourhood near the UES campus. Past the NGO’s own bookshop, the front door gives way to the interior of the two-storey institute. On any given weekday the small waiting area is often teeming with clients and other visitors. Posters of Archbishop Romero adorn the wall, and an internal notice board, known as the “mural newspaper,” displays memos and newspaper articles concerning FESPAD’s activities. The atmosphere is one of quiet busyness, interrupted only when one of the suited lawyers emerges from the in-house juridical library or one of the small offices dotting the corridors.

Some 60 legal and administrative staff, most of whom identify with FESPAD’s social commitment, operate in the organisation’s four centres.⁶ While each of the centres enjoys considerable thematic and strategic independence, all are required to help implement FESPAD’s political vision, which reflects the NGO’s analysis of El Salvador’s reality and

³ See Section 1.2.
⁴ Interview with Nelson Flores, Director of the CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 9 May 2006.
⁵ Interview with Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 8 July 2005.
is promoted both internally and externally. Among the employees the FESPAD leadership seeks to build consciousness by means of a weekly talk that addresses the country’s current situation. Equally, though, the directors are held to foster the dream of justice for all in the institution’s investigative and educational output. NGO staff, particularly the legal-professional category, may be fairly homogeneous in their critical thinking. Yet, differences of emphasis are apparent, notably in the advocacy strategies the two principal thematic centres have adopted.

In the promotion of human rights and the rule of law FESPAD situates itself at two main entry points for its advocacy: formal political structures and citizen organising. In its attempts to influence the design and implementation of legislation and public policies, the NGO has drawn on a variety of tools, including popular human rights education and legal aid to victims of abuses, investigation and documentation of violations, evaluation of policies and state behaviour as well as legal-political analyses and proposals. In the public eye FESPAD is mainly known for its annual thematic reports, the publication of juridical texts, and paid advertisements on issues within its mandate. While this brief portrait of FESPAD may create the impression that the NGO ably combines different types of advocacy strategies, in practice these are not given equal weight. A preference for either research or action-oriented work, though conditioned by the thematic focus, is readily apparent in the activities of the two main centres. Although only the second of these promoted an alternative gang policy, the following overview of both centres will help understand the limitations of the CEPES’ gang-related advocacy.

**FESPAD’s thematic centres**

The Centro de Estudios Constitucionales y Derechos Humanos (Centre for Constitutional Studies and Human Rights, CECDH) was created in 2000 to continue FESPAD’s initial activities concerning constitutional, economic, and social rights. Inevitably perhaps, human rights work in El Salvador had long focused on civil and political rights. As the country began its democratic transition, FESPAD opted for the comprehensive promotion of human rights. The CECDH thus retained the constitutional observatory, but also started to sensitize poor communities to society’s structural problems and means of legal redress. Like their colleagues in the CEPES,

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6 The organisational structure discussed here was in place at the time of my research and was revised in late 2007 to better implement FESPAD’s mission.

7 Interview with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.
CECDH staff place great importance on directly targeting government to enhance state compliance with human rights standards. Press monitoring and regular reports were among the principal activities, although the lawyers have also given human rights classes to public officials.

The CECDH is the centre that has most readily embraced the idea that the poor themselves must be empowered to claim their rights. By and large, educational efforts in rural and urban communities seek to help people organise themselves and channel their concerns into campaigns. This combination of research and community-based work reflects FESPAD’s identity as an academic institution that deliberately aims to combine its expertise with activism. According to the CECDH Director, blending different strategies is indispensable if human rights and the rule of law are to become a reality in El Salvador:

Debe de haber una estrategia diversificada para lograr un estado de derecho, porque FESPAD solo no lo puede. Hay que haber la participación de la gente. La parte más fuerte tiene que ser la participación de la gente. La participación genera cambios en el sistema. Por eso tratamos de hacerlo, porque no hay espacios de participación. Es necesario crearlos.  

One of the difficulties facing FESPAD is to strike a balance between social mobilisation and research. The centre that has mostly taken the latter path, generally engaging decision-makers in direct ways, is the CEPES. Its small office, where Che Guevara memorabilia and the occasional sound of revolutionary music provide a source of inspiration, accommodates only a small group of lawyers. Over the years these individuals have carried out various activities in the fields of public security, criminal justice, and juvenile justice. Annual reports offer legal analyses and assessments of policies and institutional developments. As a sign of constructive criticism, these publications include recommendations and are often followed-up by separate and more comprehensive proposals. Since FESPAD aims to stimulate improvements at the policy, legislative, and institutional levels, it holds public events where these documents are presented to the target audience and disseminated free of charge. It is through these reports that FESPAD partly sought to advocate an alternative gang policy.

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8 "The construction of the rule of law requires a diversified strategy, because FESPAD on its own cannot achieve it. People need to participate. The strongest part needs to be people’s participation. Participation generates changes in the system. That is why we try to do it, because there is no space for participation. This space needs to be created." Interview with Abraham Abrego, Director of the CECDH, FESPAD, San Salvador, 10 May 2006.
Like other members of the FESPAD family, the CEPES also relies on paid ads to publicise its stance on specific issues. Confrontational as they inevitably are, these statements have often invited counterattacks by defenders of the status quo, and the NGO’s rejection of *Mano Dura* has been no exception to this pattern. Disapproving reactions notwithstanding, the technical expertise of the CEPES is hard to deny, and government officials have quite readily consulted the lawyers on legal affairs or sent police officers to FESPAD’s training workshops on community policing. Given both the centre’s extensive range of concerns and the persistent difficulties in resolving them, FESPAD enjoys regular participation in the country’s political life and, by implication, public visibility. However, the NGO lacks the resources to make a sustained and consistent commitment to the resolution of long-term problems. Consequently, the institute has mostly limited its involvement to particular junctures. As discussed below, its gang-related advocacy exemplifies the implications of this reactive attitude.

**Fundraising activities**

The availability of appropriate material resources is crucial for organisational sustainability and operations. For FESPAD, as for other Salvadoran NGOs, securing sufficient funding has been an important challenge and inevitably constrained attempts to promote alternative gang control. FESPAD is not a human rights organisation in the traditional sense, but its activities are nonetheless political in nature. Unsurprisingly, the NGO’s position limits its fundraising options. To begin with, FESPAD has found it difficult to raise private money domestically. The main beneficiaries of the NGO’s work are the least well-off citizens and can provide no financial support. By contrast, those who could afford to make substantial contributions belong to those sectors whose vision of society is incompatible with that of FESPAD. The NGO therefore long depended on international donor assistance. However, after El Salvador’s democratisation donors focused their attention elsewhere, and these aid flows severely diminished. After the first decade of its existence, the agency found itself engulfed in its first financial crisis. Staff flight ensued, exacerbated to some extent by the lure of higher salaries outside the non-governmental sector. More financial difficulties followed in 2005, and the FESPAD leadership decided to temporarily discontinue employees’ social security payments. Though more staff resigned, at least the institution survived.⁹

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⁹ Interview with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.
The need for financial diversification prompted a search for greater self-sustainability. While this has occurred with some success, within FESPAD there is lingering resentment about foreign donors’ perceived abandonment of El Salvador. Some are alarmed that the relative absence of international scrutiny constrains domestic actors’ attempts to forestall abuses.\footnote{Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.} Unfortunate as this re-prioritisation is, it would seem that the onus is on local players to demonstrate the need for continued external support. Equally problematic, however, has been donors’ shift towards project funding and measurable impacts. The emphasis on quantitative indicators has posed difficulties for an NGO that considers greater popular human rights awareness an important achievement, but is required to mass-produce workshops and reports that will satisfy donors but not necessarily leave a lasting impact.\footnote{Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.}

The shift towards project funding, on the other hand, has had two implications. First, since financial support covers only temporary activities it has greatly affected FESPAD’s ability to address long-term problems of which the gang situation is but one. Second, donor assistance no longer includes the administrative and operational costs of the organisation, which must be covered in different ways. FESPAD has responded to this challenge largely by drawing on its most valuable source: its legal expertise. While the recent “Amigos de FESPAD” (“Friends of FESPAD”) membership programme raises some revenue, institutional sustainability is essentially maintained by means of four services: the legal editorial service FESPAD Ediciones and its bookshop; legal training courses; consultancies (including for the government and private sector clients); and the letting of the NGO’s conference rooms.\footnote{Interview with Rina Aldana, Director of the CEDFI, FESPAD, San Salvador, 23 May 2006.} The availability of commercially-generated income notwithstanding, responsibility for the writing of funding proposals lies with the individual centres. Although internal assistance is available throughout the project cycle,\footnote{Interview with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.} some lawyers privately resented having to juggle this time-consuming task with their research. Both the different funding model and the time required for fundraising activities distract from substantive work and impacted advocacy of an alternative gang policy.
1.3 Contesting Mano Dura

Like other critics of Mano Dura FESPAD objected to the policy for two reasons. First, although the NGO agreed that gang control had to include law enforcement, it insisted that suppression efforts had to respect constitutional norms and human rights. Second, it maintained that the street gangs were a social problem and therefore could never be tackled solely through legislation and police operations. Rather, a comprehensive gang strategy was required that combined law enforcement with prevention and rehabilitation. FESPAD relied on a variety of advocacy tools to criticize Mano Dura and promote alternative forms of gang control. In this section I explore the NGO’s initial steps to protest the government’s existing gang policy and later consider FESPAD’s attempts to carry forward its advocacy through the legal aid clinic and a policy proposal for gang violence prevention.

Media and research-based advocacy

President Flores had barely announced Mano Dura and the LAM when various observers began to express concerns about the “war on gangs.” Determined to defend the rule of law, FESPAD opted to publicly pronounce itself against Mano Dura. In a paid ad published in La Prensa Gráfica the lawyers condemned the LAM as an authoritarian measure and cautioned the government that the country’s crime problem would not be resolved by targeting only the gangs and that these groups, even if literally eliminated, would resurface unless the associated structural factors were addressed. At the same time, FESPAD faulted the government for not adopting prevention and rehabilitation programmes and requested that the LAM be studied in a public forum and be declared unconstitutional in the event its enactment could not be prevented. FESPAD explicitly stated that it did not side with criminals and merely asked for the crime problem to be addressed comprehensively.¹⁴

However, days later El Diario de Hoy published a series of paid ads by the Instituto Pro Libertad y Derecho (Institute for Liberty and Law, IPLD) that is associated with Mr Ivo Priamo Alvarenga, an adviser to Gobernación and a regular columnist of El Diario de Hoy.¹⁵ In these advertisements the author(s) attacked the supposed “hiper garantismo” (“hyper-guaranteeism”) FESPAD and other human rights defenders had supposedly

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expressed in support of gang members.\textsuperscript{16} One of these statements specifically vilified FESPAD for its “legal populism” and refusal to support drastic solutions to the “gang epidemic.”\textsuperscript{17} Insinuations that it was coddling criminals while leaving ordinary Salvadorans unprotected dented neither the NGO’s reputation nor its conviction. The Executive Director, for example, considered the IPLD’s comments insolent, but dismissed them for their failure to recognise that individuals do not relinquish their rights when committing a crime.\textsuperscript{18} This view, however, remains widely accepted in El Salvador, and FESPAD’s neglect to engage with this idea more critically prevented its own position from gaining greater acceptance and serving to apply greater pressure on decision-makers.

The NGO was indeed consulted on the LAM in both a judicial and legislative forum and submitted to congress the outline of an alternative gang strategy.\textsuperscript{19} The forums received considerable media coverage and briefly appeared to sway the lawmakers against the bill, but ultimately did not prevent the enactment of the LAM.\textsuperscript{20} Following this development, and the adoption of similar gang suppression strategies in neighbouring countries, FESPAD sought to move its advocacy to a different level. Like-minded civil society groups were invited to a regional seminar, but this meeting, too, led to little more than a jointly-issued paid ad that called for comprehensive gang control.\textsuperscript{21} The coalition that formed on that occasion has since remained inactive.\textsuperscript{22} Thus an important opportunity was lost to build a civil society alliance that may have acted as a counterweight to regional government and law enforcement cooperation. Equally, the difficulty with paid ads was that they permitted FESPAD to express its view, but, in the absence of more explicit lobbying, were unlikely to persuade the government to adopt an alternative gang policy.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.
\textsuperscript{17} *El Diario de Hoy*, “Sobre maras, FESPAD va del populismo a la politiquería calumniosa.”
\textsuperscript{18} Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.
\textsuperscript{19} On the “Plan contra la criminalidad de las pandillas,” see the Appendix of FESPAD, *Informe Anual Sobre Justicia Penal Juvenil*, 2003.
\textsuperscript{21} See *La Prensa Gráfica*, “Declaración de San Salvador,” 13 November 2003, 60.
As mentioned previously, however, a critical development concerned judicial opposition to the LAM and the release of gang members if there were no cognisable grounds for their arrest. Following the announcement of Mano Dura individual judges had begun to raise doubts about the constitutionality of the LAM.\textsuperscript{23} When President Flores verbally attacked judges for their refusal to apply the law, members of the Foro de Jueces Independientes y Democráticos (Forum of Independent and Democratic Judges) publicly defended their position with reference to their constitutional powers.\textsuperscript{24} Clearly, these pronouncements reflected the judges’ own resolve to defend the rule of law in El Salvador. Yet, through its support for the creation of three such judicial associations within the country the CEPES had played an important enabling role for the work of the democratic judges.\textsuperscript{25}

In the meantime the CEPES issued the first of its annual reports that evaluated Mano Dura and disclosed the HRVs associated with it as well as the myths surrounding its supposed effectiveness.\textsuperscript{26} These publications were valuable for reliably documenting and exposing illegalities to public opprobrium. However, after the initial presentation these texts were only made available on FESPAD’s web site and not followed by further lobbying activities. The reports aimed to shame the government into action, but this “shaming methodology” depends on the media’s willingness to reveal abuses and the authorities’ vulnerability to such publicity.\textsuperscript{27} Since the government was presumably aware of the adverse effects of Mano Dura, but lacked the political will to take a different approach, it would have been imperative for FESPAD to buttress its advocacy tools with greater pressure. The failure to do so was one of the most glaring omissions in the NGO’s advocacy efforts.

An important step, however, was FESPAD’s attempt to promote an alternative gang policy by resorting to international mechanisms. While Antonio Saca campaigned on the theme of Super Mano Dura FESPAD helped alert the United Nations (UN). As a member of the local Red de Infancia y Adolescencia (Network of Childhood and Adolescence,

\textsuperscript{22} Interview with Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 8 July 2005.


\textsuperscript{25} Interview with Nelson Flores, Director of the CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 9 May 2006.

\textsuperscript{26} FESPAD, Informe Anual Sobre Justicia Penal Juvenil, 2003; FESPAD, Estado de la Seguridad Pública, Julio 2002-Diciembre 2003.
RIA) FESPAD contributed to a shadow report presented to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. When this body released its findings in mid-2004 its recommendations echoed the concerns of FESPAD and other domestic human rights defenders. By projecting this information onto the international stage and triggering external demands for state compliance with human rights standards, these actors had initiated a “boomerang pattern” that helped unblock the local policy process. Although a comprehensive gang policy would ultimately not be implemented, these developments sent the message that single-minded suppression and constitutional infringements were unacceptable and forced President Saca to embark on a different approach to gang control.

**Participation in the Anti-Gang Forum**

When the incoming Saca administration convened the Anti-Gang Forum FESPAD was among the few civil society organisations that were invited to share their expertise. The NGO saw the invitation as a welcome break with the Flores government’s unwillingness to heed calls for an end to Mano Dura. CEPES members therefore decided to cooperate with the authorities to achieve two objectives: to prevent the design of further LAM-like gang legislation and to insist on the adoption of prevention/rehabilitation programmes. The two-week event received considerable media coverage that afforded the government publicity and suggested it was serious about gang control. However, from an advocacy perspective the outcome did not entirely meet FESPAD’s expectations. Although the participants decided against special anti-gang laws and reaffirmed the need for prevention/rehabilitation, the NGO had been unprepared for the way the consultations were conducted. The overrepresentation of state agencies such as the PNC skewed the voting process and permitted the adoption of many legislative changes that were of a technical-procedural nature and irrelevant for gang control. Furthermore, the government’s focus on legal reforms left little time for an in-depth consideration of

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28 Interview with Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 8 July 2005.
29 See UNCRC, *Consideration of reports*.
31 Interview with Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 8 July 2005.
32 Ibid.
alternative responses, and the recommended prevention/rehabilitation activities were subsequently carried out with much less urgency than the suppressive measures.

The CEPES members were disillusioned by this experience, but felt encouraged by President Saca’s announcement of *Mano Amiga* and *Mano Extendida*. After all, although these programmes initially lacked substance, at least the government had made the necessary public commitment and could hopefully be persuaded to back up its words with action.\(^{33}\) The NGO thus re-focused its tactics on accountability politics,\(^{34}\) writing repeatedly about the continued weakness of alternative gang control strategies as a way of pressuring the government to implement the initiatives it had announced.\(^{35}\) The gap between official discourse and practice was thus exposed, but the renewed absence of explicit lobbying activities again made adherence to FESPAD’s requests unlikely. Indeed, the weakness of the *Mano Amiga* and *Mano Extendida* plans suggests that NGO advocacy failed to make an impact.

While this campaign was underway the small CEPES was further debilitated by staff flight. When even its director resigned, the centre was engulfed in a crisis and faced additional difficulties in effectively promoting alternative gang control.\(^{36}\) Although two more advocacy tools need to be examined, both of which appeared to suffer from the CEPES’ internal weaknesses, it is important to consider why FESPAD’s initial attempts to contest *Mano Dura* were relatively unsuccessful. As argued throughout this thesis, contextual dynamics, notably elite influence over both the ruling party and policy-making and ARENA’s consequent reluctance to address the factors that facilitate gang development, were important obstacles to NGO advocacy. Since *Mano Dura* constituted a populist penal policy that sought electoral advantage rather than effective gang control, the government never had an incentive to respond to NGO calls for an alternative gang policy. This attitude did not change with the Saca administration, which acknowledged the need for prevention/rehabilitation programmes merely to placate *Mano Dura* critics. Given these exogenous constraints on NGO advocacy it was always difficult for FESPAD to reorient the gang policy. However, precisely because the government was likely to resist calls for alternative gang control, NGO strategies assumed great importance.

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\(33\) Ibid.  
\(36\) Interview with Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 8 July 2005.
FESPAD’s positive public reputation afforded it access to policy-makers. However, at the decision-making table the organisation proved less adept at managing the power dynamics involved in gang control. The reasons for these limitations pertain to the nature of the policy space and FESPAD’s apparent lack of political sophistication. On the one hand, the Anti-Gang Forum amounted to “invited” rather than “created” policy space.\(^{37}\) That is, although the NGO had helped to build pressure for comprehensive gang control, the roundtables were convened at the behest of the Saca government and did not permit FESPAD to participate on its own terms. On the other hand, the NGO appears to have misjudged the possibilities for consensus and underestimated the need to demonstrate greater negotiating power. The lawyers eventually realised that they had been co-opted for publicity purposes.\(^{38}\) Prior to the roundtables, however, they failed to anticipate this scenario and could subsequently not translate their access to decision-makers into influence over them. FESPAD possesses considerable legal expertise, but seems to lack the political experience required to advance its cause with greater strategic skill. This weakness also affected the remaining advocacy tools, which were singularly ineffective in creating additional incentives for comprehensive and rights-respecting gang control.

### 1.4 The CEPES legal aid clinic

While FESPAD remained expectant that the government would fully develop its prevention/rehabilitation programmes an additional opportunity arose to challenge *Mano Dura*. As part of its legal aid work the NGO sought to build an emblematic case that would expose and halt police harassment. These efforts did not produce the desired results and while revealing FESPAD’s inability to deal with institutional unresponsiveness, they also illustrate the limitations of using legal mechanisms in a country whose institutions remain weak and politicised.

As criminal lawyers who believe that the justice system must be accessible to all citizens regardless of their social background, CEPES staff had established a legal aid clinic to help make this aspiration a reality. Specialising in the defence of low-income juvenile offenders, the advice centre aimed to set legal precedents as a means of lobbying

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38 Interview with Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 8 July 2005.
for state accountability on certain HRVs. Exemplary cases were expected to include charges of police harassment, police malpractice, and abuses in juvenile detention centres.\textsuperscript{39}

When Óscar Díaz, a 30-year-old ex-gang member, contacted FESPAD in early 2005 the lawyers did not hesitate to assist him. Although his age made him an atypical client, Mr Díaz could offer an experience that the NGO felt could strengthen its criticism of \textit{Mano Dura}.\textsuperscript{40} His family had fled war-torn El Salvador for Los Angeles where he ended up joining \textit{La Mirada Locos}, a local rival of the \textit{Dieciocho}. In time he was arrested by members of the LAPD Rampart Division and sent to prison for possession and sale of drugs. Eight years later, when it emerged that police had planted evidence in cases against some 100 gang members, including Mr Díaz, the Salvadoran’s conviction was overturned and his deportation authorised.

Long before returning to his home country Óscar Díaz had decided to distance himself from gang activities and start a new life. However, in El Salvador he was subjected to frequent police harassment. The very day of his arrival PNC officers detained him, pocketed the money he carried, and held him on charges of illicit association only to release him a few days later. This incident in March 2003 was the first of five similarly unfounded arrests over the next two years. In February 2005 Mr Díaz finally became weary of the repeated arrests and the blows he had received. When police battered down the door of his home as part of a nightly raid conducted to impress upon FBI observers the effectiveness of \textit{Mano Dura}, he decided to take legal action against the PNC.

Once it had been approached for help, the CEPES began preparing a formal complaint. Since their client could provide no evidence against any specific policemen, the Fiscalía General de la República (Attorney-General’s Office, FGR) was to be requested to investigate the arbitrary acts before anyone could be held responsible through the courts. In the expectation that a criminal complaint lodged directly with the FGR might not advance due to institutional inertia, the CEPES intended to request the responsible justice of the peace to order investigations. In April 2005 CEPES members sought to lodge their petition, but met with immediate resistance. The court clerk refused to accept the document, and a file was only opened when the lawyers identified themselves as FESPAD staff and insisted on being seen by the judge.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} The following account of Mr Díaz’ case and FESPAD’s legal action draws on an interview with Emilia Gallegos, Juvenile Justice Programme Assistant, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 9 June 2006.
Meanwhile, Mr Díaz happened to spot some of his tormentors in FESPAD’s offices where a group of plainclothes policemen were attending a workshop on community policing. The incident constituted a reminder that such limited technical assistance is unlikely to improve policing practices in the absence of the necessary PNC-internal commitment or broader efforts at police reform, which might constitute the basis for more effective gang enforcement. Regrettably for Óscar Díaz, his case did not advance beyond this point. Lack of evidence was one problem, but another was institutional reluctance to oppose police misconduct. The public prosecutor assigned to the case considered it “political” and flatly refused to investigate police who merely sought to tackle El Salvador’s gang problem. By July 2005 the FGR had closed its file, and for FESPAD another avenue had closed.

When the CEPES lawyers grasped that parts of the criminal justice system were unwilling to curb police abuse a feeling of powerlessness set in. Attempts to set a legal precedent on police abuse against gang members and subsequently challenge Mano Dura failed partly because horizontal accountability continues to be ineffective in El Salvador. The illegality FESPAD had hoped to see punished are infinitely harder to sanction if the criminal justice system allows them to occur. In the case of Óscar Díaz institutional unresponsiveness occurred, because the FGR is politicised and tends not to investigate police abuse. Additionally, however, the post-war legal reforms had failed to transform the judicial culture and, therefore, to improve the responsiveness of the system. In this sense, the barrier to judicial access may well have been a social one since institutions are operationalised by individuals who are situated in social structures that may blame a particular group or class for society’s unresolved problems. The public prosecutor assigned to Mr Díaz’ case was a professed evangelical who believed that gang members deserved to be punished, but not police who merely fulfilled their duties, and therefore decided to archive the case. Clearly, the persistence of such arbitrary conduct made it difficult for FESPAD to press ahead with its advocacy agenda. However, the NGO

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41 Ibid.
42 Personal communication by Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador.
44 See David Morales, Las Acuerdos de Paz, su agenda pendiente y los derechos humanos en El Salvador de hoy (San Salvador: mimeo, 2007), 33.
46 Personal communication by Nelson Flores, Director of the CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador.
simply abandoned its campaign instead of seeking to develop these efforts in more creative ways. Even so, given the justice sector ineffectiveness in the protection of human rights, FESPAD needs to reconsider the utility of formal legal channels for advocacy purposes.

The need to stem police abuse against gang members resurfaced in 2006 with a different incident in La Campanera, a gang-affected community in northern Soyapango. The case, which FESPAD was alerted to by Homies Unidos who were working in the area at the time, concerned police harassment and subsequent murder of a gang member. His mother had been called on by a policeman who pointed at his identification number and asked her to remember it, because he would soon return to kill her son. Although the said officer did not return, other policemen did, and days later the youth was shot dead near his house. The mother asked FESPAD for legal assistance, and the lawyers again initiated the necessary steps. However, when the woman was repeatedly intimidated and masked police raided her home to seize all documents pertaining to her deceased son, she chose to desist from the complaint. Given their client’s wish not to pursue the matter further, FESPAD resigned to the apparent impossibility of challenging Mano Dura through the legal aid clinic and instead began working on the following local project for gang violence prevention.

2. Walking the tightrope between denuncia and propuesta

2.1 Gang violence prevention: the COAV Cities Project

FESPAD has never relied exclusively on the documentation and public condemnation of HRVs. Since its founding days, technical assistance, legal analyses, and the identification of alternative solutions to political-juridical problems have constituted the organisation’s raison d’être. However, given its emphasis on monitoring policies and state behaviour, the NGO was frequently assailed for exposing failures and abuses rather than suggesting improvements. Eventually FESPAD came to think that it might be appropriate to collaborate more closely with the authorities. The idea was not to abandon its critical perspective, but to make it the basis of more proactive advocacy work. FESPAD

47 Information about the incident and FESPAD’s reaction was received in a personal communication by Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador.

48 On Homies Unidos’ work in La Campanera, see Chapter 5.
therefore shifted its strategic emphasis on *denuncia* (public condemnation) to that of *propuesta* (proposal-making).\(^{49}\)

This shift, and the predicaments it invites, are well-illustrated by a project that the CEPES worked on for much of 2006. The Children in Organised Armed Violence (COAV) Cities Project followed a ten-country study which had investigated different expressions of the arguably global phenomenon of COAV.\(^{50}\) The street gangs of El Salvador had been included in this earlier research and were also incorporated into the subsequent Cities Project. In the case of El Salvador, the objective was to develop a municipal-level policy proposal for gang violence prevention. Both the international survey and the actual policy merit scrutiny, but are here only briefly reviewed to allow for a fuller consideration of the policy process and the implications of the turn to proposal-making. This discussion aims to cover three points. First, the policy design process is stressed to explain the resource limitations of FESPAD’s advocacy strategy. Second, the policy is given only a cursory appraisal, because it did not advance beyond the drafting stage and ultimately failed to be implemented. It is useful, however, to identify its main aspects since this helps highlight the importance of policy-making capacity. Third, the NGO’s collaborative attitude serves to discuss the possible tensions between *denuncia* and *propuesta* in the contemporary Salvadoran context.

The international study *Neither War nor Peace* had been coordinated by the Brazilian NGO Viva Rio whose own work with youths in the drug factions of Rio’s favelas had inspired the research. This particular experience notwithstanding, Brazilian NGO staff felt that countries across the world were witnessing the involvement of young people in situations of armed violence. Hence a comparative, policy-oriented analysis was considered a valuable approach to examining groups which, though not homogeneous, exhibited similarities in origin and purpose.\(^{51}\) In a second stage, the COAV Cities Project was meant to convene local actors for the elaboration of appropriate prevention and rehabilitation programmes. Overall, the initiative aimed to help policy-makers and practitioners develop a strategic approach to the problem of COAV in their locality.\(^{52}\)

Both the study and the policy component of the programme relied for their execution on in-country research partners. The CEPES had been asked to carry out the

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\(^{49}\) Communication by Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 8 July 2005.

\(^{50}\) Dowdney, *Neither War nor Peace*.

\(^{51}\) Dowdney, *Neither War nor Peace*, 11.

\(^{52}\) E-mail communication by Luke Dowdney, coordinator of the COAV Study and COAV Cities Project.
initial investigation, but had to decline due to staff and time shortages. Although the centre’s internal situation had not improved as the second stage approached, its support remained in demand, and it was decided to conduct the Cities Project jointly with the IUDOP, which had prepared the research report on El Salvador. These local coordinators were expected to establish the parameters of the policy process, but the project drew heavily on the study’s suggested framework for understanding and addressing youth involvement in COAV. Some comments on the enquiry are thus warranted to contextualise the policy’s rationale and some of its pitfalls.

The survey engaged with an important and multi-faceted issue. However, in its endeavour to formulate recommendations and facilitate the exchange of policy-relevant knowledge, it grouped together quite distinct phenomena. For example, youths in Rio’s drug gangs or in the Central American street gangs may both be described as “young people with guns.” Yet, the parallels between these groups, whether in the factors prompting individual involvement or the use of violence, should not obscure category divides. Given the varied nature of the entities that were examined, the comparative approach may have been more illuminating had it been applied within categories (e.g. “street gangs”) rather than across them. Glossing over these distinctions, when forms of COAV in fact need to be analysed and addressed on their own terms, would not seem to benefit the search of a model programme.

In any event, the study put forward two main points which would shape the COAV Cities Project. First, based on the similarities ascertained in the country reports, the study offered a common analytical framework which identified a number of risk factors and influences facilitating youth involvement in COAV. Guided by this framework, a working group in each of the selected municipalities would propose a policy aimed at boosting young people’s resilience against these dynamics through prevention and rehabilitation initiatives. Participation of governmental and civil society actors in the working groups was required. Second, the research acknowledged that the alleviation if not elimination of structural risk factors would be a lengthy and difficult process. As a result, local-level intervention was viewed as more appropriate in the short term. Nevertheless, it was understood that local approaches would be more effective if combined with macro-level programmes.

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53 Personal communication by Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador.
54 See Carranza, “Detención o muerte.”
55 See particular Part IV of Dowdney, *Neither War nor Peace.*
Proceeding from these provisos, the CEPES and IUDOP staff identified a suitable municipality, and over a six-month period convened twelve workshops which I was permitted to attend. The target site was Zacatecoluca, a town of some 62,000 inhabitants an hour’s drive away from the capital San Salvador. As of 2004, the city had a per capita murder rate of 91 and ranked sixth among the 20 municipalities with the highest homicide rate in the country. It was also known for drug trafficking and the presence of the \textit{Dieciocho} 460 members of which the PNC had officially registered by 2006.\textsuperscript{56}

Each workshop was structured around one of the risk factors and influences the study had spelled out, such as social exclusion and peer involvement in gangs.\textsuperscript{57} The working group itself was not specifically created for this purpose, but had been established two years earlier to work on the wider problem of violence in Zacatecoluca. Since it brought together members of government, police, and civil society, the project coordinators opted to use this existing mechanism. In each meeting participants were expected to discuss the local manifestation of a problem and its causes, before identifying possible solutions and the actors responsible for implementing them. CEPES and IUDOP staff were required to write down the recommendations in a policy paper and submit it to a local stakeholder for future implementation. This individual was meant to be the FMLN mayor who had previously convened the committee and attended with interest the COAV Cities sessions. However, the 2006 municipal elections brought in an ARENA government. The incumbent mayor declined any involvement in the workshops and long refused even to accept the policy document. Although he did so eventually, no pilot intervention was subsequently undertaken.\textsuperscript{58} CEPES staff were dismayed to learn that another advocacy tool had dissolved into air, but acquiesced. The sudden collapse of the COAV Cities Project, and the NGO’s reaction to this outcome, invite some observations about this gang violence prevention effort and FESPAD’s role in it. The lack of a pilot programme was perhaps the project’s starkest weakness, but ultimately it was only one of many. The principal shortcomings are here briefly reviewed to explore how FESPAD may have contributed to the project’s circumscribed outcome.

The selection of Zacatecoluca as the target site is itself not problematic, because gang dominance was a recognised concern. If anything, the location was chosen for convenience, because the CEPES sought to sidestep the difficulty of citizen mobilisation

\textsuperscript{56} See IUDOP and FESPAD, \textit{Documento para la discusión de política pública municipal de prevención de la violencia de pandillas: municipio de Zacatecoluca} (San Salvador: mimeo, 2007), 6-8.
\textsuperscript{57} Adapted from the model in Dowdney, \textit{Neither War nor Peace}, 162.
\textsuperscript{58} E-mail communication by Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador.
and hoped to rely on the existing committee and the mayor’s support for it. Greater difficulties concern the pre-programme assessment, the policy design process, and the final policy guidelines. The first two highlight FESPAD’s resource constraints, while the latter points to the need for expertise which is itself as a resource.

An initial assessment of violence and gang crime in Zacatecoluca was meant to guide policy formulation. The final working paper makes reference to some data, but does so in a cursory and incomplete manner.\(^{59}\) Though aggregate homicide figures are listed, virtually no information is provided on gang crime issues, such as violence, homicides, the use of firearms, and drug sales. Moreover, no local data was collected that would describe the communities and the gangs which the programme would have targeted. Carefully collected and time-sensitive data, permitting an analysis of trends, is indispensable for gang violence prevention. However, when the COAV Cities Project was planned, FESPAD was already weakened by staff flight and lacked the financial resources to hire a researcher. Thus, an on-the-ground assessment was dispensed with, and the coordinators merely pooled the scarce data available through the PNC and the IML.

Resource constraints and expediency also influenced the policy design process. The need to balance the COAV Cities Project with the CEPES’ many other responsibilities injected an unhealthy sense of urgency into the workshops. For one, the four-hour meetings afforded participants little time to discuss very complex issues. The contributions that the organisers might have wished for were further limited by the fact that attendance was often low (although the PNC was routinely overrepresented) and some important actors were absent altogether (e.g., the Ministry of Education had ruled out its participation). Moreover, insofar as the gang policy implied criticism of existing agency approaches to the gangs, participating public sector workers may have self-censored potentially valuable contributions for fear that their remarks might cost them their job.\(^{60}\) More importantly, FESPAD’s preference for consulting the existing inter-institutional committee may have seemed the easier route, but was perhaps of doubtful benefit for the design of a gang programme. The state agencies had not sent any senior-level representatives who needed to acknowledge government responsibility for the gang problem and its solutions. Crucially, none of the participants had either generic or local expertise on street gangs nor was anyone familiar with the design of gang control programmes. Rather, committee members often seemed to speculate what the appropriate answer might be based on their intuition and personal experiences. Thus, at

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\(^{59}\) See IUDOP and FESPAD, *Documento para la discusión*, 6-11.

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an early stage FESPAD’s internal constraints and a sense of pragmatism prompted some
decisions that interfered with the programme formulation and the policy’s continuity.

The final policy document merits a comment less for the actions it proposed than for
what it conveys about FESPAD’s approach to the formulation of a gang policy. The
paper offered a number of objectives plus a list of actions to achieve them. Although no
one would doubt the importance of the stated objectives, it is unclear how, under the
current circumstances, some of the actions might be carried out (“improving the
economic model”) or how they might relate to gang control (“restricting alcohol sale”).
As a gang policy the proposal seemed poorly articulated, chiefly due to the degree to
which it ignored issues of targeting, gang processes and structures, and community
contexts.61

These weaknesses can be appreciated, though not excused, considering that
FESPAD had agreed to a project of policy design, not implementation. Therefore, the
NGO did not aim to create a full-fledged preventive programme, but a set of guidelines
which the mayor was expected to convert into a more detailed policy and subsequently
help execute. This post-project stage would have required the development of
community-specific prevention programmes as well as the recruitment of gang control
experts to design them. Arguably, it is positive that FESPAD opted for a limited
proposal over none at all. In this sense the document constituted an advocacy tool which
at least sustained the idea of alternative gang control for a little longer. However, the
decision not to design, let alone implement, a comprehensive policy remains
questionable. Why spend time and money on discussions if all they lead to is the
conclusion that the effort needs to be repeated in a more extensive manner? If the
obstacle was one of expertise, FESPAD could have solicited the collaboration of
individuals with the appropriate knowledge. Instead, the responsibility for doing so was
merely passed on to the mayor. In the eyes of its donors the NGO may have successfully
concluded this project, but as an advocacy organisation its standing in the issue is on thin
ice. Over the years FESPAD has become involved in a great variety of issues, but of
course it has done so largely from a legal perspective. For the CEPES, which coordinated
the COAV Cities Project, the challenge was to bring to the task the sociological and
criminological expertise that it lacked. Although the need to do so was acknowledged

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60 One public health worker privately stated this to be case.
61 On these elements of gang control, see Klein and Maxson, Street Gang Patterns and Policies, 261.
within the CEPES, it failed to act on this recognition. This contrasts with the CECDH whose ambition to monitor the government’s social and economic policies has led it to hire an economist. In the future the CEPES, too, may be well-advised to make use of consultants for specific projects. Not addressing this capacity gap at all, however, and conducting projects for which the lawyers are ill-prepared, is likely to result in broad but empty recommendations. If FESPAD lacks the specialised expertise it requires to propose changes, it has ultimately little standing to argue what the state should do.

The third point covered in this discussion relates to FESPAD’s shift from *denuncia* to *propuesta* as illustrated by the COAV Cities Project. Before offering some general remarks about this turn to proposal-making, and the tensions accompanying it, I want to make some final comments on two further aspects of the project: the local approach to gang control and the policy’s non-implementation.

A local preventive programme was pursued in compliance with the international study’s requirements, but also reflected the CEPES’ interest in working with a municipal government on an issue that received no serious attention by the central government. Community-based programmes are indeed required if a gang control strategy is to achieve results. However, one problem in the Salvadoran context is the highly centralised nature of the state. Decision-making power and financial resources are generally concentrated at the national level such that local initiatives are unlikely to prosper in the absence of inter-institutional cooperation at the highest level. What, for example, might a local approach to gang prevention and rehabilitation achieve as long as the police do not redefine their role in gang control? Furthermore, the nature of problems such as social exclusion or the lack of job opportunities may vary among different communities, but they remain structural issues that need to be addressed at the macro-level. An initiative in one town might be able to provide some youths with a job and thus steer them away from gangs, but unless social and economic exclusion is addressed through national policies, the impact on the overall gang problem will be nil. It seems, therefore, that local programmes need to be paired with a national gang strategy.

In the case of the COAV Cities Project, such a broader approach may have ensured the economic and political viability of local programmes in two ways. First, if successfully lobbied for, a comprehensive national gang control policy would seek to tackle the structural risks of gang development which cannot be alleviated at the local level alone.

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62 Communication by Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador.
63 See Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*, esp. chapters 7 and 8.
Second, if institutionalised nationally, such a policy would endure a change of government, and state agencies would be required to commit the resources and the political will necessary for the adoption and sustainability of the proposed programme. Admittedly, FESPAD turned to a municipality precisely because its advocacy efforts targeted at the central government had not delivered the desired results. Yet, as the NGO shifted its strategy to a lower level, so it relocated the difficulty of institutionalising a gang control policy and with it the risk of drafting a proposal that might not get implemented. The fact that this risk became a reality allows the following conclusions.

FESPAD failed to anticipate the possibility of a change of government and the new mayor’s reticence to support the project. This seems to indicate a certain neglect of political developments and the ways in which they might interfere with the NGO’s work. More importantly, the non-implementation of the proposal speaks to the lawyers’ lack of political experience, which is required to carry forward their advocacy more successfully.

In short, two things remain questionable. One is the lawyers’ assumption that the gang problem is a technical one that can be resolved by submitting a proposal and requesting its implementation. The other is the CEPES’ decision to concede defeat as soon as the most immediate lobbying mechanisms were exhausted. Like previous attempts to contest *Mano Dura*, the COAV Cities Project was a campaign that was permitted to peter out at a time when it needed to be reinforced.

The potential concern about FESPAD’s shift to *propuesta*, then, is the following. FESPAD has largely maintained the adversarial relationship with the state that was dominant during the authoritarian period. Yet, the NGO also reconfigured this relationship to supply proposals and other forms of technical assistance. This non-confrontational mode reflects the view that a different and more collaborative form of engagement is possible. However, as FESPAD’s *Mano Dura* critique reveals, less conflictive strategies may be inappropriate under a government that permits different viewpoints to be expressed, but is ideologically opposed to more than tactical concessions. This does not mean proposal-making is necessarily an ineffectual exercise, but it may be if legal and policy changes are considered technical rather than political problems that can be resolved through proposals alone. In the absence of political will, proposals will not motivate government action unless accompanied by persistent campaigning. FESPAD, it appears, needs to rethink its advocacy strategies and identify more appropriate targets. A first step in such a re-conceptualisation could be an analysis of the political landscape.
2.2 Mapping the political landscape

Advocacy strategies are shaped by assumptions about the political process and the power dynamics driving it. FESPAD’s own work has been characterised by two broad tendencies. One entails the belief that the law should serve the struggle of the people, yet sees the NGO more habitually involved in direct advocacy than in popular education and social mobilisation. This is not to deny that the latter two strategies are being pursued, but they are not applied as consistently as the organisational vision implies. More often, FESPAD seeks to effect legal and policy change by directly targeting decision-makers. From here it is a small step to the second tendency whereby the NGO has employed its legal expertise to prepare analyses and proposals for the government.

To a degree these predispositions reflect the view that the state is the actor with the responsibility to enact legal and policy change. However, the preference for formal mechanisms also reveals something about the NGO’s own understanding of politics and power and its limited ability to reflect on the limitations of its advocacy strategies. The existence of these weaknesses was demonstrated by the analysis of FESPAD’s attempts to contest Mano Dura. Now that these efforts have been examined, some observations are warranted on the reasons for this ineffective campaign. The outcome can partly be attributed to the government’s ideological preference for suppression over prevention/rehabilitation. However, I argue that FESPAD’s narrow advances were also occasioned by its advocacy strategies. That is to say, while the agency does not neglect in its advocacy planning elements such as organisational self-assessment and contextual analysis, it appears that it subsequently fails to base its advocacy goals and strategies on this appraisal.64

As indicated earlier, FESPAD’s choice of advocacy issues and strategies is often determined by an inclination to respond to particular junctures rather than to prioritise problems based on prior analysis of the political context. The promotion of an alternative gang policy is a case in point. This is not to belittle the developments the NGO helped stimulate. However, FESPAD’s reactive attitude entails a key strategic weakness, which is the failure to carefully assess the organisation’s internal resources as well as external opportunities and constraints in addressing a particular problem. For FESPAD the street gangs may have seemed merely another reminder of the government’s traditional indifference to social problems. Yet, by dispensing with a

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64 On advocacy planning phases, see VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power*, 83-85.
macro-analysis of El Salvador's social, economic, political, and cultural structures, the lawyers may have misjudged the possibilities for, and obstacles to, gang-related advocacy. What would have been the purpose of a structural analysis? For advocacy strategies to be effective, they need to respond to the particular characteristics of the political environment. By implication, tactics will vary depending on how this context is studied and understood.\(^{65}\) Advocacy groups need to examine, for example, the nature of the regime, the political space in which organised civil society operates, and the power dynamics through which some actors are marginalised from the policy process.\(^{66}\) El Salvador has witnessed important political openings, but policy-making continues to be controlled by those who seek to further elite interests. NGOs that aim to have majority concerns addressed therefore need to grasp where power is located and how it operates before they can decide which actors to target and how to influence them.

To be sure, FESPAD periodically undertakes both a contextual analysis and an organisational assessment. Its five-year strategic plan, developed by the NGO’s Executive Director and the leadership of each centre, charts both El Salvador’s national reality and the agency’s internal situation and constitutes the basis for annual action plans.\(^{67}\) The difficulties, however, are twofold. First, the analysis does not scrutinise power in all its forms, an omission which can lead to poor strategic choices.\(^{68}\) Second, this reflective exercise is carried out at the highest level, but not necessarily within the individual centres, and this has obvious implications for subsequent advocacy activities. To be clear, the NGO “FESPAD” is committed to a combination of advocacy strategies. The centres, however, function quite independently and, indeed, may be seen as separate NGOs that are free to plan and conduct their own campaigns. The individual centres do not necessarily combine different approaches when tackling a particular issue nor is their strategic choice based on a prior mapping of the political environment and its power dynamics. I want to explain how power can be understood and why an appreciation of its complexities is significant for advocacy work. Of course these observations also apply to the other NGOs examined in this thesis, but since FESPAD was the only one that sought direct policy influence it is appropriate to consider the nexus between power and advocacy at this point.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 75.
\(^{66}\) Ibid., esp. chapter 7.
\(^{67}\) Interview with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.
\(^{68}\) VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power*, 39.
Steven Lukes famously argued that power is three-dimensional. Though operating on different levels, the three dimensions of power are interactive, and collectively they set the parameters of the political process. Visible power is associated with observable decision-making, including aspects such as formal rules and institutions. Visible expressions of power can be detected, for example, in laws or policies that favour one social group at the expense of others. Hidden power is similarly exercised in the public arena, but this view illuminates how certain individuals and groups control the political agenda so as to exclude other actors and their concerns. Agenda-setting may be influenced by preventing important issues from being voiced, thus rendering them invisible and potentially skewing policy-making to suit dominant interests. Media barriers or biased media coverage can further reduce campaigners’ visibility and legitimacy. In this regard, Chapter 3 showed how mainstream news reporting favoured the official definition of the gang problem and its solution rather than increasing the diversity of the public debate. Hidden power dynamics also affected FESPAD’s own media work which is discussed below. Finally, invisible power operates by shaping people’s beliefs, values, and attitudes, thereby keeping issues not only from the political agenda, but also from popular consciousness. This form of power works through culture and ideology and sees institutions such as the state, the education system, and the media promote norms that sustain the status quo. A pertinent example is ARENA’s tendency to foster nostalgia for authoritarian measures.

Once it is understood that power operates on different levels, it becomes apparent that individual advocacy strategies challenge some forms of power but not others. The promotion of legal and policy reforms, one of FESPAD’s key activities, is an important strategy. However, since it targets only visible power it does little to advance an issue unless accompanied by other actions. For hidden and invisible power to be addressed, strategic emphasis needs to focus on social organising and consciousness-raising respectively. This last approach is undoubtedly the most critical yet also the hardest one to pursue successfully, because its fundamental aim is to reshape a society’s political culture. Ideology remains a significant barrier to change and was ultimately the battleground on which proponents and critics of Mano Dura confronted each other. Whether or not FESPAD’s advocacy could have reoriented El Salvador’s gang policy had it designed a more sophisticated strategy remains a moot point. However, experienced

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activists have argued that change is less likely to occur unless lobbying, citizen mobilisation, and popular education form part of a unified approach.\textsuperscript{72}

A single organisation may not be able to pursue all of the required activities simultaneously. Within FESPAD resource constraints have certainly forced staff to make important strategic choices, with very different outcomes. While the CECDH tried to combine lobbying and popular education but prioritised the former, the CEPES focused exclusively on monitoring, research, and lobbying. Resource limitations notwithstanding, a campaign may be more effective if groups build alliances in pursuit of common objectives.\textsuperscript{73} FESPAD’s own steps towards this goal, and the challenges this entails, are discussed below. Meanwhile, the NGO’s promotion of an alternative gang policy need not have ended as prematurely as it did. The lawyers’ inability to press for further changes in policy and state behaviour suggests that they understood neither how to conduct an exhaustive structural analysis nor how to identify appropriate targets. Who to target depends partly on how an advocacy issue is framed. If one prioritises gang violence prevention from among the many issues posed by the broader problem of street gangs, a critical target might be the economic elite whose interests shape public policy-making. If one chooses to encourage respect for gang members’ human rights, certainly one of the more difficult tasks given El Salvador’s political culture, one might target the media to change reporting practices and to influence public opinion. FESPAD’s media strategy is examined next.

2.3 The media as a site for political action

FESPAD’s efforts to advocate legal and policy change routinely include some form of media work. As indicated earlier, this tends to involve press conferences or the publication of paid ads. Useful though such activities are, the NGO’s campaign against \textit{Mano Dura} raises questions about the effectiveness of its media strategy. To shed light on FESPAD’s attempts to reach and persuade external audiences I want to begin with the following news story.

In early December 2005 \textit{La Prensa Gráfica} featured a three-page illustrated report on a meeting between the country’s “most dangerous convicts” held in the maximum security prison in Zacatecoluca and a supposedly FMLN-led delegation. Under the headline

\textsuperscript{71} On advocacy tactics and the mechanisms of power they can target, see VeneKlasen and Miller, \textit{A New Weave of Power}, 50.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 52.
“FMLN aboga por reos más peligrosos” (“FMLN defends most dangerous criminals”) the paper mentioned that a prisoners’ committee (which included gang members) had invited the FMLN and FESPAD to communicate its concerns about solitary confinement. For the most part the article then recounted the opposition party’s suggestion to repeal a disputed provision of the Penitentiary Law before summarising the government’s reaction as one of indignation. 74 Two additional pieces concentrated on the comments of President Saca and other senior officials who agreed that the FMLN was linked to organised crime and gangs and had committed an act of high treason. 75 At that point the authorities disregarded FESPAD’s attendance of the gathering and directed their attacks exclusively at the FMLN, accusing the party of backing gang crime in order to finance its 2006 electoral campaign. 76

It was only on the third page of the report that details were recounted of the meeting and the delegation, which had included FESPAD and the IDHUCA. A photo showed the guests facing the handcuffed prisoners, themselves sitting in front of a row of security guards in bullet-proof vests. The story itself insinuated that a LPG journalist had witnessed the event or had gained access to the minutes of the meeting. 77 For the unsuspecting reader this coverage permitted two conclusions. First, the FMLN and two human rights NGOs had unjustifiably “negotiated” with some of the country’s worst criminals. Second, La Prensa Gráfica had embarked on an investigative piece on the said event, and the cited officials made their declarations as a result of what they had learned through these enquiries. These impressions were reinforced when the authorities subsequently held a press conference, again publicised in La Prensa Gráfica, and affirmed that the FMLN and the NGOs were manipulating the prisoners and using the banner of human rights to destabilise El Salvador. 78

The FESPAD leadership was taken aback by these remarks, because it remembered the event in Zacatecoluca very differently. 79 A group of prisoners had indeed requested a meeting, but the invitation had also been extended to the authorities. 80 Apart from the responsible prison surveillance judge, however, none had accepted the offer. The FMLN

76 La Prensa Gráfica, “Están en contubernio con las pandillas.”
79 Information on the meeting was received in an interview with Nelson Flores, Director of the CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador, 9 May 2006.
80 Including the FGR, the Ministerio de Gobernación, and the Director-General of the Prison System.
congresswoman did not participate as a party representative, but in her role as President of the congressional Committee of Justice and Human Rights. Crucially, the LPG coverage suggested that the event unfolded in the presence of the media, but this had not been the case. The event had been filmed, but the visitors ignored the arrangements since the video cameras were operated by prison officers. The photo that accompanied the LPG story must therefore have been extracted from that material, but was given a different and more sinister connotation.

The leaking and self-interested use of the picture spoke largely to the unethical conduct of La Prensa Gráfica and the ruling party. However, although the NGOs became embroiled in the affair, the fabrication of the story is better understood if placed in the electoral context of that time. Weeks earlier, relatives of prisoners had marched in downtown San Salvador and occupied the cathedral as a way of protesting the denial of basic rights inside Zacatecoluca and other penal complexes. As on previous occasions, the government tried to link the popular expression of grievances to the FMLN, arguing that the party was seeking to destabilise the country prior to the 2006 elections. When journalists asked to be shown evidence of these allegations, Minister Figueroa asserted that proof had to be withheld for security reasons. In fact, the assertions were unfounded and aimed once again to delegitimise ARENA’s principal adversary. The Zacatecoluca news story, then, can be seen as an opportunistic move to turn a lawful endeavour into spin. The NGOs, well-intentioned but ill-prepared for such manoeuvring, became caught up in the party-political crossfire. Their reactions to the LPG report differed considerably though, and again FESPAD’s response was revealing on a tactical level. When the IDHUCA’s director contacted the Minister of Gobernación and threatened legal action, an apology followed. FESPAD, on the other hand, hoped to publish a paid ad in La Prensa Gráfica, but the paper rejected the request.

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81 This point was confirmed in an interview with Roberto Burgos, Lawyer, IDHUCA, San Salvador, 15 February 2006.
86 Communication by Nelson Flores, Director of the CEPES, FESPAD, San Salvador.
subsequently wrote to both the Minister of Gobernación and President Saca, but never received a reply.\footnote{Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.}

For FESPAD the Zacatecoluca incident constituted the first direct attack by the government and was therefore considered serious enough to merit a response.\footnote{Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.} Generally, the NGO ignores bullying tactics and relies on other avenues to counter the stereotyped images of human rights advocates as defenders of criminals. Legal expertise, reliable research, and a deliberate rejection of ties to the FMLN have enabled the organisation to maintain its authority and credibility. While outsiders’ distorted messages have not besmirched the name of FESPAD, they continue to raise doubts about the human rights discourse, quite successfully so. The NGO’s inability to dispel public misgivings about gang members’ human rights reflects partly the persistence of an authoritarian political culture. However, FESPAD has also failed to design a media strategy that would have turned news about \emph{Mano Dura} into contested terrain.

FESPAD has undeniably recognised the importance of communication in its advocacy and employs a number of strategies to reach external audiences with its messages. The most common media tools include press releases, news conferences, and paid ads in El Salvador’s main newspapers. Additionally, reports and briefings are made available via the institution’s own website. The country’s principal media outlets also regularly consult the lawyers on juridical matters or request their appearance in televised interviews. FESPAD’s reputation for veracity and accuracy has after all allowed the agency to become a respected source, despite the mass media’s bias towards insider institutions. With these activities the NGO aims to reach a variety of audiences, particularly decision-makers and the general public, and seeks to make issues visible, shape policies and state behaviour, inform the population, and change public attitudes. Given the mass media’s influence over public opinion and values, targeting them is valuable in that it permits the organisation to reach those who have yet to sympathise with its agenda. However, FESPAD’s media advocacy has faced a number of obstacles some of which are self-made.

Some of the hurdles pertain to the audience FESPAD seeks to reach and the kinds of media it chooses to transmit its messages. It is not uncommon for the NGO’s concerns to be raised in TV or radio programmes, but the agency more often targets El Salvador’s print media, particularly the mainstream press. Paid ads, for example, are only published in \textit{La Prensa Gráfica} or \textit{El Diario de Hoy}. Generally, choices about delivery depend on
factors such as a group’s resources, its desired audience, and country characteristics. Funding constraints certainly require FESPAD to make some difficult decisions, but in a country where people’s primary sources of information are radio and TV, the agency’s decisions reveal much about who it thinks it needs to reach. To be sure, the mass media are a critical arena for some of FESPAD’s key objectives, such as exposing injustices and proposing policy alternatives. Unlike the alternative press, however, the mass media do not give challenger perspectives a fair hearing.

Independent media are a key ingredient of democracy, informing the public and facilitating political debate. As indicted in Chapter 3, however, news corporations are embedded in the broader economic and political context. Individual media outlets may not be subject to state censorship, yet their politics and business interests shape news production and impinge on the media access sought by civil society groups. FESPAD’s work encounters challenges insofar as the agency’s advocacy goals may conflict with the politics and editorial lines of the media it tries to work through. One of the persistent uncertainties FESPAD faces is whether its messages will be conveyed as planned or distorted if not suppressed entirely. As the Zacatecoluca incident demonstrated, this is no easy matter. NGO staff are all too aware of the constraints the Salvadoran media landscape imposes on them and remain unwavering in their efforts. However, while not ignoring the mass media, FESPAD has not designed a media strategy that might enable it to overcome barriers of access and coverage.

In terms of coverage, the problem relates to the kind of reporting the NGO receives rather than to the lack of it. FESPAD has found, for example, that the mainstream media generally dispatch journalists to the press conferences, but afterwards often do not disseminate the stories. On other occasions journalists consult the NGO on a specific issue, but the lawyers’ perspective is later fragmented or decontextualised so as to meet mainstream news criteria. Possibilities for change are restricted when the media control the range of views to which audiences are exposed and marginalise or silence voices that counter the official version of reality. FESPAD’s persistence in trying to gain media coverage means that not all space in the media is ceded to dominant individuals and institutions. However, while the NGO has been able to gain attention, it has proven less adept at countering the bullying tactics that are used to discredit critical voices. Damaging though such attacks may be, they provide at least some indication that the alternative

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88 Ibid.
89 See Ryan, Prime Time Activism, 52.
viewpoints cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, bar serious cases FESPAD does not expend its resources to respond to these ongoing tactics, and this decision may do the NGO’s advocacy work a disservice.

The mass media routinely rely on familiar cultural themes both to stereotype social and political actors and to promote the dominant interpretation of reality. For example, “human rights defenders coddle criminals” and “suppression best deals with crime” are but two ideas that retain widespread currency in El Salvador. Given that these themes are not only extensively promoted, but also reinforce existing values and attitudes, FESPAD’s omission was politically costly. After all, the NGO squandered opportunities to counter society’s dominant myths and to show that there exist other ways of perceiving reality. FESPAD’s efforts to contest Mano Dura highlight the dangers of this approach. With respect to news coverage, then, the problem is twofold. First, given the NGO’s involvement in a variety of subjects, media coverage created actor visibility rather than issue visibility. Second, even though FESPAD manages to publicise its perspective on specific questions, its standpoint is diffused by the dominant framing of reality. The Mano Dura campaign clearly demonstrated that the organisation’s mere presence in the public debate was insufficient to produce policy change. Ultimately, the NGO’s neglect to advance its standpoint more strongly prevented it from turning the news about Mano Dura into contested terrain.

Yet, the relative anonymity of FESPAD’s perspective resulted not only from the difficulty of finding space in the media, but also from the agency’s general approach to media work. Staff members seemed to assume that press work is tantamount to a set of practical details that can simply be added to a campaign. Each centre complied with news routines, but did not appear to see media work as a central political element of advocacy planning. Instead, communications was a separate department, and the lawyers did what they are most familiar and most comfortable with: using formal channels to access decision-makers. They seemed not to appreciate the importance of the media as a strategic arena of political contention where many of the ideological struggles over Mano Dura and other policies have been waged. Although the media are a tool for influencing public opinion, they are themselves an institutional power that must be targeted if the political space for alternative ideas is to expand. A variety of activities might be thought of to win over the media as an audience in their own right. Perhaps one of the most

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90 Interview with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.
91 Ryan, Prime Time Activism, 86.
critical ones is that of joining forces with other civil society groups to challenge media priorities and biases.\footnote{Ibid., 188.} For FESPAD, whose involvement in multiple issues is time- and resource-consuming, consolidating its media work implies even greater resource demands. However, past failures to make this choice permitted its gang-related advocacy to retain relative media invisibility, with detrimental consequences for FESPAD’s attempts to sway public opinion against *Mano Dura*.

In this context it must be remembered that the population strongly supported *Mano Dura* despite the HRVs it entailed and its ineffectiveness in controlling street gangs. Although FESPAD’s pronouncements against *Mano Dura* were aimed at impacting public opinion, the persistent support for the measure confirms that society remained relatively indifferent to NGO advocacy. The ability to affect public opinion could have been a critical factor in increasing NGO leverage over the government and persuade it to implement a comprehensive gang policy.\footnote{On “leverage politics,” see Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 23.} Given the climate of tolerance for state and extralegal violence against gang members, FESPAD’s advocacy could find little resonance in a country where many people continue to believe that criminals lose their rights when breaking the law. The perception that human rights benefit the “wrong” people allows authoritarian responses to crime and violence to flourish. The challenge for FESPAD was to convey to the public that abuses are always unacceptable, whatever the victim’s characteristics. Future demands for state adherence to constitutional norms will likely lack the necessary weight, unless the population accepts that security is not an antidote to human rights. In the long term, consciousness-raising is one step in that direction, but given the magnitude of the undertaking, it is hardly an option that FESPAD can pursue alone. Instead, the NGO might form alliances with other social organisations to amplify its political voice and influence. The final section considers how, and to what extent, FESPAD has confronted this task.

### 2.4 The disjointedness of civil society action

The lawyers’ opposition to *Mano Dura* permits some brief reflections on the agency’s position vis-à-vis other civil society groups and the Salvadoran social movement. FESPAD’s advocacy helped induce an important but ultimately limited shift in the government’s gang policy. Although the socio-political environment cushioned the impact of the NGO’s lobbying and proposal-making efforts, these activities reflected
strategic shortcomings. Admittedly, resource constraints exacerbated these weaknesses. However, if the campaign was to gain more strength, the lawyers could have converted their resource limitations into a tactical advantage. That is, instead of conducting its campaign single-handedly, FESPAD might have joined forces with like-minded actors. Since both the street gangs and the structural factors facilitating their development will endure for many years to come, these problems offer scope for future alliances. Indeed, some in FESPAD acknowledged the importance of civil society partnerships, but the end of the armed conflict engendered a strategic dislocation that remains to be overcome.

For social organisations the post-war period created political openings, but also a number of challenges. One of these is the context, which continues to favour the guardians of the status quo, not its critics. Organising is no longer as risky as it was in the past, but those who find fault with public policies and HRVs have been facing a Janus-faced regime. Successive ARENA governments have cultivated a democratic image, but routinely blocked demands for social and economic change. The Saca administration in particular has maintained an aura of openness and dialogue behind which lurks a high degree of unresponsiveness. In the view of one FESPAD member, the predicament for civil society groups is this:

> El contexto es más desfavorable, porque la labor de las ONGs tiene que ser con mayor astucia. …El gobierno de Saca no es más conciliador que el de Flores, aparentemente sí, pero en el fondo es más autoritario, porque el comportamiento del gobierno ha sido más tajante en muchos temas. Tenemos que ser más astutos en lo que vamos a hacer, porque, por ejemplo, no hay condiciones para promover propuestas alternativas desde la sociedad civil. Eso limita el trabajo, porque uno puede tener una propuesta, pero topa si no hay voluntad política de concertar.94

FESPAD recognises that it could achieve a broader impact if it collaborated with other NGOs and found ways of supporting the Salvadoran social movement. However, this has proved more difficult than anticipated. First, the social movement now lacks the sense of unity and vision that characterised it during the war. There is a feeling that these loosely-connected groupings have veered off course and remain in search of a compass to show them the way. Again the current situation is best encapsulated in the words of one interviewee:

> The context is more unfavourable, because the work of NGOs needs to be more astute. …The government of [President] Saca is not more conciliatory than that of [President] Flores. In appearance it is, but in reality it is more authoritarian, because the behaviour of the government has been harsher on many issues. We need to be more astute in what we do, because, for example, the conditions to promote alternative proposals from within civil society do not exist. This limits our work, because one can have a proposal but not achieve anything if there is no political will to build a consensus. Interview with Abraham Abrego, Director of the CECDH, FESPAD, San Salvador, 10 May 2006.

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En este país sigue siendo un reto la alianza estratégica, sigue siendo un reto la coordinación de fuerzas. Lamentablemente, esos retos no se están alcanzando, justamente porque hemos perdido el rumbo, porque estamos demasiado fraccionados, porque tenemos visiones e intereses diferentes. Hay una crisis de dispersión del movimiento social y no tenemos respuesta de cómo resolverla.\(^{95}\)

Second, for FESPAD it is unclear what its supportive role might be as long as the social movement’s conceptual ambiguities remain unresolved. In 2006 the agency hoped to begin to reflect on questions concerning the nature of the social movement and its relation with NGOs and political parties. Specifically, FESPAD expected to clarify whether it formed part of the social movement or was merely a bystander providing occasional accompaniment. However, the analysis was postponed and priority given to the resolution of some of El Salvador’s many pressing problems. In 2007 FESPAD therefore helped form the Concertación por la Paz, la Dignidad y la Justicia Social (Alliance for Peace, Dignity, and Social Justice), a coalition of some thirty social organisations that aims to counter HRVs in the country. The idea is to unite activists and induce a shift from protest behaviour to proposal-making, but so far this grouping has been largely reactive in nature and its impact unclear.\(^{96}\)

Some interviewees felt that such alliances tend to be of limited use, achieving some visibility and political space, but more often conveying an impression of unity that does not exist.\(^{97}\) More importantly, however, FESPAD seems to find it difficult to bridge the social distance between its lawyers and the social movement. The popular education programme of the CECDH constitutes an attempt to delve into the reality of deprived Salvadorans, but it remains an exception. Overall, FESPAD lawyers see themselves dedicated to fighting for the poor, but for some this commitment appears to dwindle when it requires them to go beyond their traditional role as legal professionals. For example, there is general reluctance to participate in protest marches.\(^{98}\)

FESPAD as an institution aspires to implement a political vision, but some of its lawyers may lack the preparation that is required for this task. For the Executive Director, an attitude that favours research and analysis but rejects social movement

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\(^{95}\) ‘In this country strategic alliances remain a challenge, the coordination among actors remains a challenge. Unfortunately, we are not overcoming these challenges, precisely because we have lost our way, because we are too fragmented, because we have different visions and interests. The social movement is in a crisis of dispersion, and we do not know how to resolve it.’ Interview with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.

\(^{96}\) Email exchange with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador.

\(^{97}\) Interview with Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, FESPAD, San Salvador, 4 May 2006.

\(^{98}\) Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.
participation is the product of the elitist nature of law school training. As such, some FESPAD members believe the faithful application of juridical tools is sufficient to create change and are uncomfortable with activities that take them outside the office or a courthouse.\textsuperscript{99} Others have complemented their legal training with political education, but the fact that some see themselves purely as lawyers renders the NGO elitist and limits its advocacy work.\textsuperscript{100} FESPAD members’ professional experience does of course not automatically circumscribe their work, but their limited contact with the reality they seek to transform may affect their campaigns. In the absence of the social distance between some of the lawyers and victims of HRVs, efforts to contest *Mano Dura* might have been pursued with greater urgency and persistency.

If FESPAD’s campaign against *Mano Dura* provides two lessons, it is these. First, legal rights and policy advocacy is not purely a technical-legal challenge, but also a political one. Above all, it needs to go beyond a focus on deficient laws and policies and tackle excluding political processes. Second, one NGO by itself cannot address all of the factors associated with a problem as complex as the street gangs. Even if it tries to do so, as FESPAD has largely done in the case of *Mano Dura*, it is too small and politically insignificant to pose a threat to the government. When the authorities are inaccessible or indifferent to the claims of individual civil society groups, these must use ‘the power of their information, ideas, and strategies’ to effect change.\textsuperscript{101} In this sense, alliances would serve to generate more strength and visibility and ultimately a broader collective impact. Ultimately, such social pressure needs to be applied on the elite, which has nothing to lose from continued gang crime and violence, but everything to gain from the persistence of social marginality that enables gang onset.

**Conclusion**

With its legal and policy research FESPAD explicitly contested *Mano Dura* and sought to promote gang control that combined rights-respecting law enforcement with prevention and rehabilitation. Contextual factors, notably elite influence over policy-making, the nature of ARENA as the guardian of conservative interests, and an oligarchic media system, constituted significant barriers to gang-related advocacy. Since opposition to the NGO advocacy agenda could be expected, strategic choices were all

\textsuperscript{99} Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.
\textsuperscript{100} Interview with María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, FESPAD, San Salvador, 11 July 2006.
\textsuperscript{101} Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, 16.
the more important if advances were to be achieved. The criticism by FESPAD and other actors, combined with judicial opposition to Mano Dura, led the Saca administration to commit itself to comprehensive gang control and to adopt Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida. However, as was argued in Chapter 2, these programmes lacked substance, and suppression remained the government’s preferred approach.

FESPAD employed a variety of advocacy tools, including research reports, paid ads, a legal aid clinic, and a proposal for the local prevention of gang violence. These activities were important in that they permitted the NGO to publicise the abuses and weaknesses of (Súper) Mano Dura and thus to contribute to the discursive and policy changes that were introduced by the Saca administration. However, there followed no transformation of state behaviour, particularly as regards gang enforcement and the implementation of prevention/rehabilitation programmes. FESPAD’s policy influence was impacted not only by exogenous factors, but also by its strategic and tactical choices, which in turn were shaped by the NGOs’ identity and its organisational characteristics.

FESPAD had emerged from the aspiration of a group of lawyers to defend human rights and the rule of law in El Salvador. The agency’s leaders had both the capacity and the commitment to sustain the vision of these organisational entrepreneurs. FESPAD’s nature as a legal NGO that seeks to build democratic institutions, and adheres to them for its work, informed the staff preference for formal channels over more confrontational tactics which in turn hampered gang-related advocacy. Maintenance issues, too, have posed a challenge for FESPAD and affected its ability to propose alternative policy ideas. Financial difficulties and staff shortages surfaced temporarily, and the project funding model, in particular, eroded the NGO’s capacity to follow-up long-term problems such as the street gangs. Additionally, the organisation had developed neither the gang-specific expertise that was required for the design of a gang prevention initiative nor the necessary media work. Although FESPAD itself had cultivated some media skills and could gain public visibility, the lawyers tasked with legal and policy research had done so to a lesser extent, thus failing to advance their position on the gang problem more successfully. However, given their professionalism and legal expertise staff remain the main organisational asset and have substantially contributed to raise FESPAD’s status. The NGO’s positive public reputation afforded it access to policymakers at a time when the redefinition of gang control was at stake. Subsequently, however, the lawyers proved less adept at exercising policy influence, a weakness that was partly conditioned by FESPAD’s ideology and strategic choices.
In their advocacy efforts the lawyers appeared influenced by the prevailing view that the formerly antagonistic state/civil society relations are now inappropriate and activities such as proposal-making and consensus-building instead constitute legitimate political behaviour. Yet, this perspective can depoliticise NGO work and considerably weaken its ability to lobby for policy change. In the case of FESPAD the shift towards a more collaborative attitude reinforced the organisation’s traditional preference for formal channels at the expense of more confrontational tactics. Such behaviour may be frowned upon in El Salvador’s democracy, but seems required to elicit action from a government that has no incentive to respond to more subtle pleas for alternative gang control.

On the other hand, FESPAD’s strategic emphasis also limited the potential impact of its advocacy. The tools it relied on were important in their own right, yet not potent enough to induce a break with Mano Dura. The reports, for example, reminded the government of abuses and policy gaps, but the relatively “silent” presentation of facts was unlikely to effect changes where the necessary political will did not exist. The paid ads, though useful as part of a broader strategy, were simply drowned out by the dominant anti-gang discourse. They were not combined with more extensive media work that might have sought to transform reporting practices and influence public opinion, thus creating more pressure for an alternative gang policy. The legal aid clinic, for its part, was an interesting method, but FESPAD displayed no capacity to deal with institutional reluctance to counter police harassment of gang members. Similarly, the proposal for gang violence prevention could have bolstered the NGO’s advocacy demands, but the lawyers lacked the political experience either to anticipate a change in local government or to reorient their approach once it had proved ineffective. Overall, FESPAD failed to undertake more explicit and persistent lobbying activities and neglected to target other relevant actors, notably the economic elite (for public spending and job creation) and civil society (for alliance-building). The following two chapters consider the advocacy strategies of Homies Unidos and the Polígono both of which followed different strategic priorities and promoted alternative gang control through indirect ways.
Chapter 5

*Pandilleros calmados: peer rehabilitation and empowerment among El Salvador’s street gangs*

Homies Unidos (HU) is El Salvador’s only NGO that is both managed by, and works with, gang members. Founded by a long-time US civil rights activist, the agency aims to empower gang youths to cooperate with a view to solving their own problems and to nurture in them a vision of a life without drugs and violence. The organisational entrepreneur departed after the initial stages of establishment and left NGO leadership and operations in the hands of individuals who had yet to overcome their identification with gang culture and values. Years later these developments would be crucial to understanding Homies Unidos and its advocacy efforts. Although the agency publicly argued that a comprehensive and rights-respecting gang policy was required, it maintained an unconventional view of both the gang problem and its solution and was likely to encounter further hurdles in its activities.

Like other NGOs that called for an end to *Mano Dura*, Homies Unidos faced a domestic configuration of power that made the government resistant to calls for an alternative approach. In addition, however, the stigma attached to gangs by both the authorities and the mainstream media meant that HU staff could expect particular difficulties in accessing these actors. Given these contextual constraints NGO strategic choices were highly significant if gang control was to be reoriented. Homies Unidos continued to pursue its empowerment strategy, which, though not seeking direct policy influence, could serve to alter the policy context. The approach largely relied on the implementation of gang outreach programmes, and although these activities need to be evaluated for their effectiveness in reducing gang violence, this is not the objective of this thesis. Rather, it analyses how Homies Unidos sought to bring about a different form of gang control through indirect policy action.

Since both endogenous factors and strategic decisions affected the NGO’s ability to exercise policy influence, the chapter begins by examining the characteristics of Homies Unidos. It first shows how the agency and its programmatic content emerged from the organising efforts of a committed activist and a gang study he had helped conduct. The chapter then highlights both the link between HU identity/ideology and the concept of *pandilleros calmados* and its implications for gang-related advocacy. Having considered the organisational entrepreneur’s attempts to set up a functioning NGO, the chapter goes on
to scrutinise HU staffing issues, programmes, maintenance difficulties, the use of storytelling, and job routines. It then examines two of the organisation’s advocacy tools, information politics and a bakery microenterprise project in a gang-affected community, before offering some observations on the arrest and subsequent conviction of one HU director as well as the collapse of the community-based gang work.

It is argued that the Homies Unidos empowerment strategy was ineffective in promoting alternative gang control, because staff were interested in improving the welfare of their peers rather than in effecting policy change. Empowerment was insufficiently combined with additional advocacy tools (such as lobbying activities, media work, and alliance-building) that could have heightened political pressure for different forms of gang control. Since the interests and values of Homies Unidos were directly opposed to those of the suppression-focused authorities, their relationship was strained and too limited to allow the NGO to influence either policy-making or policing practices. Furthermore, a skills and resource deficit meant that personnel were too preoccupied with organisational survival to dedicate the necessary attention to their gang work let alone to the development of a sophisticated advocacy agenda.

1. The story of Homies Unidos

1.1 Foundations

Homies Unidos emerged due to the inspiration and organising efforts of Magdaleno Rose-Ávila. The Mexican-American, once himself a gang member with a history of drug dealing and consumption, had turned his life around when working with the César Chávez United Farm Workers Union. When his wife was appointed director of the El Salvador office of Save the Children-Sweden (SC), the long-time civil rights activist moved with her to the capital where he eventually established contact with gang members. At a SC-sponsored workshop with deported gang youth Magdaleno became immediately fascinated by the participants’ stories of war-induced migration to the United States and subsequent gang life. He quickly decided that he wanted to learn more about their experiences and began meeting them in their hangouts. After some time Magdaleno sought to persuade the youths to conduct a gang study and to establish their own NGO. Although the gang members initially did not warm to the idea of an

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1 The Homies Unidos founding history, and Magdaleno’s role in it, was reconstructed on the basis of information obtained in a telephone interview with Magdaleno Rose-Ávila, founder of Homies Unidos, 20 March 2007.
organisation, some of them agreed to collaborate on the research project. Having secured the financial and research support of Save the Children and the IUDOP, Magdaleno recruited 22 active members of different gangs, mainly the MS and the Dieciocho, who would play a central role in the design and execution of the study. The characteristics and key recommendations of the research are highlighted below as they help understand the nature of Homies Unidos and its choice of strategy and programmatic content.

The IUDOP’s 1998 publication Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del gran San Salvador: Más allá de la vida loca reported the results of a survey among more than 1,000 active gang members. Its main objective was to explore their reasons for gang joining and perceptions of gang life and personal needs. The 22 gang members Magdaleno had hired were trained as co-researchers and tasked to make contact with the target population and to assist in the design, administration, and analysis of the survey. The lead researchers had decided to incorporate gang members into the team for two reasons. First, researchers often face difficulties in gaining access to, and establishing rapport with, gang members who are often suspicious of outsiders and therefore reluctant to collaborate. Given their own gang affiliation Magdaleno’s recruits were expected to find it easier to locate potential interviewees and secure their cooperation. Nonetheless, the research team met with considerable mistrust, because many respondents feared the information they supplied might be forwarded to the police. Second, the project coordinators, academics without gang association or previous gang research experience, argued that they could only be “pseudo-experts.” Gang members, however, had first-hand experience of the study topic and could therefore provide a more accurate portrayal of gang life and propose more informed solutions than outsiders.

While access may well have been a problem, the issue of expertise is more controversial than the research directors acknowledged. However, my aim is not to criticise their viewpoint but to emphasise the following. Active gang members did not merely participate in the research, but injected, inevitably perhaps, their ideology and values in the survey design, analysis, and recommendations. Homies Unidos, which emerged from this study, based its philosophy and work on the principal research findings. Below I briefly review these results before highlighting their implications for HU advocacy efforts. In addition to presenting socio-demographic data about gang members, the research discussed why youths joined gangs; how they viewed their gang experience, including drugs, violence, and the least/most favoured aspects; and how they

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2 Cruz and Portillo Peña, Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas, 175-176.
perceived their social conditions and personal needs. Based on the youths’ responses, it offered two main conclusions. First, gang joining is facilitated by structural, community, and individual factors such as poverty, social exclusion, the lack of educational and job opportunities, and dysfunctional families. Second, respondents had been asked if they wanted to adopt the status of *pandilleros calmados* rather than to withdraw completely from gang life. 85% of interviewees indeed expressed their desire to abandon drugs and violence, but not to sacrifice the perceived benefits of gang membership such as friendship, solidarity, and respect. Given these findings, the study called for the provision of opportunities to help gang members reinsert into society and suggested gang programmers accept the status of *calmado* instead of insisting on gang desistance.

The concept of *pandilleros calmados* will soon be considered more fully. The point to note is that the research suggested a particular way of viewing and addressing the gang problem which Homies Unidos subsequently assumed. On the one hand, the HU vision would centre on the idea that youths can renounce drugs and violence, but may remain emotionally attached to their gang. This perspective, however, was espoused neither by the authorities nor by some NGOs. The Homies Unidos philosophy thus helps understand why the organisation neglected to combine gang work with additional advocacy tools and why its relationship with other actors was limited and inhibited advocacy efforts. On the other hand, Homies Unidos strategy and programmes were proposed and developed not by internal but by external sources (the study and the organisational entrepreneur). The NGO did not have, nor did it subsequently acquire, the capacity to build on this vision and adapt its advocacy to contextual requirements. Homies Unidos would be able maintain the appearance of a functioning NGO, but not to mature sufficiently so as to effectively advance its agenda.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of a peer rehabilitation NGO had already surfaced prior to the study, but had met with little enthusiasm among gang members. After the research project some of the interviewers continued to reject the idea of working with rival gang members. However, Magdaleno managed to assemble a sizeable group, and in a symbolic gesture to all deceased gang members Homies Unidos-El Salvador was founded on 2 November 1996. The following year a branch was also established in Los

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3 Ibid., 174.
4 Ibid., 155-162.
5 Ibid., 107-109.
6 Ibid., 172.
7 Ibid., 181.
8 Much of Latin America commemorates 2 November as the Day of the Dead.
Angeles, which witnessed most deportations of Salvadoran gang members. My ethnographic research, however, concerns only the office in San Salvador.

The identity and purpose of Homies Unidos (Homies United) is largely reflected in its name. In the gang argot “homie” is used to refer to one’s peers. According to its director, ‘homie significa ser mucho más que un amigo. Un homie es como un familiar, pero [implica] mucho más que el amor de un familiar. Es una amistad mucho más grande.’ The NGO aimed to empower gang members by bringing together former rivals who would design solutions to the problems facing their peers and reach out to gang youth to encourage them to abandon drugs and violence. The HU objective was to act as a bridge between gang members and the conventional world and provide access to opportunities. Gang violence reduction was not to be sought by working towards gang desistance and dissolution. This position was adopted partly because of the physical risk associated with attempts to break up gangs, partly because of the belief that gangs have positive functions such as offering friendship, a sense of family, and respect. A related idea was that gang members possess talents such as leadership and organising skills that can be co-opted for pro-social causes. HU staff recruitment and training was therefore reserved for gang members, because they were thought to identify with, and respond to, their peers more readily than those with no experience of gang life. This is “the story of Homies Unidos,” and it occupied a prominent place in the NGO’s organisational life. However, these assumptions entailed two weaknesses, which were built into the organisation from the start and later affected HU advocacy.

First, despite the perceived benefits of gang affiliation, gang life is destructive and isolates socially-excluded youths even further from legitimate opportunities. Gang scholars have therefore argued that gang control efforts must be aimed at dismantling gangs and persuading their members to adopt a conventional lifestyle and values. Since this was also the view taken by the Salvadoran authorities and some NGOs, Homies Unidos was likely both to encounter difficulties in accessing and influencing the government and in its cooperation with other civil society actors. Second, HU staff were expected to reach out to gang youths more effectively because of their shared experience. However, researchers have found that ex-gang members often lack the professional skills

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9 “homie” means much more than a friend. A homie is like a relative, but it [the term] entails much more than the love of a relative. It is a much bigger friendship.’ Interview with Luis Ernesto Romero Gavidia, Director, Homies Unidos, San Salvador, 22 July 2005.

Chapter 5: Pandilleros calmados

to carry out gang work. In exceptional cases they have successfully channelled their abilities into civil rights organising, but generally gang members are inadequately prepared for such purposes. Moreover, some programmes involving former gang affiliates suffered from poor implementation and malfeasance. I am not suggesting that Homies Unidos was bound to follow this path. However, my research shows that the NGO was affected by a leadership and skills deficit that hampered its advocacy work. If anything, the experience of Homies Unidos demonstrates that the NGO was founded with high hopes and expectations that staff later struggled to meet. Given his own personal transformation, the organisational entrepreneur believed strongly in both the agency and the gang members he had brought together. His activist experience notwithstanding, Magdaleno himself lacked professional gang intervention skills and may have overlooked the pitfalls of an organisation run solely by gang members who were both insufficiently trained and continued to identify with gang values. The analysis of how HU identity and ideology shaped NGO advocacy leads me now to discuss the concept of pandilleros calmados.

1.2 Pandilleros calmados

HU staff generally introduce themselves as ex-gang members, yet this notion is more complex than might be assumed at first blush. Gang members often maintain that membership is for life, a myth that has also served to feed public perceptions of gangs. Yet, existing research suggests that youths can, and do, withdraw from these groups and that active gang members merely foster the impression that leaving the gang is nearly impossible to ensure the survival of the group. The desistance process can be difficult, however, because it means rejecting one’s friends. Loyalty is central to gang culture and commonly expressed through tattoos. Severing all ties to one’s gang, including symbolically through tattoo removal, is thus seen as a form of disrespect or betrayal that can be punished with death.

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12 Ibid., 83-84.
15 Ibid., 61, 66.
activities and their emotional attachment to their former peers are most easily classified as ex-gang members. However, to avoid retaliation for leaving the gang youths often choose to gradually withdraw from its activities.\footnote{Decker and Lauritsen, “Leaving the Gang,” 64-65.}

In Salvadoran gang argot *calmarse* (literally “to calm down”) refers to the process of retiring from the gang, notably from participation in violence and drug consumption.\footnote{Carranza, “Políticas juveniles y rehabilitación,” 48.} Adopting the status of *pandillero calmado* allows individuals to assume a more conventional lifestyle while distancing themselves from their gang with due respect towards the group. Some *pandilleros calmados*, however, continue to identify with gang culture and to consider themselves gang members. One former MS affiliate described these circumstances as follows:

*Dentro de la pandilla tú te podés desligar porque vas a formar una familia, porque te haces cristiano y entregas tu vida a Dios, o porque vas a seguir tus estudios y querés formarte profesionalmente. Tenés la oportunidad de desligarte. Pienso que de salirte no, porque hay una parte de ti que se queda dentro de la pandilla. Yo soy ex pandillero, pero me uno al dolor de los pandilleros activos que están sufriendo las consecuencias de la Mano Dura. Hay algo que queda dentro de ti, aunque tú no estés activo dentro de la pandilla, pero tenés aquel sentimiento de lo que están sufriendo tus ex compañeros.*\footnote{You can disengage from the gang, because you are going to start your own family, because you become a Christian and give your life to God, or because you are going to continue your education and want to undergo job training. You have the opportunity to disengage from it but I think not to leave it, because a part of you remains in the gang. I am an ex-gang member, but I feel the pain of active gang members who are suffering the consequences of *Mano Dura*. Something remains in you even though you are not active in the gang; you share the suffering of your former mates.’ Ernesto “Smokey” Miranda conducted gang prevention work and was killed in 2006. The quote stems from a 2005 interview with him reprinted posthumously in Raíces, “Para mí la pandilla es como una religión,” 16 May 2006, available at http://www.raices.com.sv/Poder/detalles.asp?NewsID=657 (accessed 13 January 2007).}

For society the difference between *pandilleros calmados* and ex-gang members may be immaterial as long as those who remember their gang past with nostalgia are no longer involved in crime and violence. The problem lies with those cases in which individuals continue to identify with gang values (as do HU staff), but hope to carry out gang work. In the context of gang control programmes a number of scholars have suggested that ex-gang members are unsuited for such work, because they tend to over-identify with gang values and norms and risk showing pro-gang/anti-police attitudes that help make the gangs more cohesive and more delinquent.\footnote{Klein, *The American Street Gang*, 45; Spergel, *The Youth Gang Problem*, 258. See also Spergel, *Reducing Youth Gang Violence*, 25.} My own research did not aim to evaluate the impact of HU projects on gang behaviour. I argue, however, that HU staff identification with gang culture limited their policy influence, because it informed their strategic
choices and shaped external perceptions of the NGO which in turn restricted their relationships with other actors.

How was the persistence of emotional ties to the gang expressed within Homies Unidos? For illustrative purposes I will briefly refer to some of the scenes I witnessed during my research experience. Gang norms stipulate that affiliates must not enunciate the name (Dieciocho or Mara Salvatrucha) or number (18 or 13) of the rival gang. HU staff Miriam, herself an ex-Dieciocho member, was unable to say the name of the opposing group. On other occasions she spoke of the pain she feels when one of her former peers dies or cheered at the death of a perceived enemy. These examples aptly demonstrate the continued identification with gang culture in Miriam’s case. In subsequent parts of this chapter I will provide additional anecdotes that concern old gang exploits, language, dress, choice of music or the use of street names and which serve to support my argument in more appropriate ways than abstract descriptions could.

Some further comments are required on Homies Unidos’ uses of the term “ex-gang member.” In their gang work HU staff deliberately exploit their identity as pandilleros calmados, a status that is generally backed up by the many years one has given to the gang and stood up for it.\(^\text{22}\) By doing so they can allude to the respect they have previously gained which in turn affords them access to the target population. In their dealings with other sectors of society, by contrast, HU staff present themselves as ex-gang members, because this idea finds greater social acceptance than that of pandilleros calmados (or gang members not active in violence).\(^\text{23}\) For Homies Unidos, as for other NGOs, its moral and financial support, and the organisational survival that comes with it, depends on exogenous perceptions of the agency. HU compliance with the prevailing view of what constitutes past gang membership is therefore aimed at promoting a likeable public image as well as at building and maintaining the necessary relationships.\(^\text{24}\) However, gang identity often remains fixed both for other gang members and for law enforcement officers. In other words, individuals may have left their gang, but continue to be vulnerable to gang-related attacks or police arrests.

Even if HU staff had been ex-gang members, for the Salvadoran authorities they may have remained “criminals” just as all gang members are categorically pigeonholed as

\(^\text{22}\) Carranza, “Políticas juveniles y rehabilitación,” 78.
\(^\text{23}\) Interview with Luis Ernesto Romero Gavidia, Director, Homies Unidos, San Salvador, 3 July 2006.
delinquents who deride rehabilitation efforts. Furthermore, my research found that HU personnel’s identity as *pandilleros calmados* was generally known both among officials and NGOs, and I argue that this knowledge weakened the status of Homies Unidos and therefore its advocacy relationships with these actors. On the one hand, the authorities see gang members as enemies of society and are committed to suppressing them. Given this generalised suspicion of gang members and differences in values and interests Homies Unidos was likely to face difficulties in gaining access to the authorities and promoting alternative gang control. For example, the fact that the NGO was not invited to the 2004 Anti-Gang Forum suggests that it was not considered to have a legitimate role in the policy process. On the other hand, opposing values between Homies Unidos and other NGOs, some of which rejected, or at least doubted, the viability of the status of *calmado*, meant that potential allies viewed HU staff with wariness and possibilities for alliance-building were restricted. I will return to this point in a moment. In part, however, HU advocacy efforts also experienced shortcomings, because organisational identity coloured the ways in which staff themselves perceived, and engaged with, other actors. As former gang members HU personnel had been socialised into the gang culture and its norms that express distrust of, and antagonism for, the authorities, particularly the police. Given their continued identification with gang culture HU staff maintained pro-gang/anti-police attitudes and therefore constructed only limited relationships with the institutions tasked to implement alternative gang programmes (government) and policing practices (PNC). Later parts of this chapter will illustrate how this posture affected HU advocacy.

### 1.3 Homies Unidos: the formative years

As is argued throughout this thesis, organisational formation and maintenance are critical for understanding the nature of NGO policy influence. Homies Unidos took shape because Magdaleno decided to help gang members change their life and invested time and resources in the start-up of the NGO. Sustaining an organisation, however, is always more difficult, and the ability to do so successfully is essential for NGO operations.

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25 This unqualified belief was conveyed in interviews with Porfirio Chica, Ministerial Adviser, Ministerio de Gobernación, San Salvador, 31 May 2006; Sub-Commissioner Julio César Santana Vela, Director of the División Policía Técnica Científica, PNC, San Salvador, 27 January 2006.


27 My account of the NGO’s formative years was reconstructed on the basis of information received in a telephone interview with Magdaleno Rose-Ávila, founder of Homies Unidos, 20 March 2007; and an e-mail
Adequate funding and qualified, committed staff, for example, are key ingredients. In Homies Unidos, however, deficits in these areas threatened organisational survival and neutralised advocacy efforts.

Once Magdaleno had persuaded a group of gang members to establish a peer rehabilitation initiative, he started using his organising skills and fundraising contacts to create a functioning NGO. The office was provisionally located in his house, and staff training sessions also commenced. The great majority of HU staff were deportees and hard-core gang members. Organisational criteria required them to have abandoned violence and drugs or to be in the process of moving away from both. However, the recruits had limited educational and legitimate work backgrounds and had yet to achieve an adequate transition to conventional norms and values. None of them had previously worked in an NGO and were acquainted with any of the tasks they would need to perform. Grant-seeking and book-keeping skills, for example, were non-existent. However, Magdaleno was convinced that gang members possessed many talents and that these could be applied to licit activities. In his view the only difference between a drug deal and a legal transaction carried out on behalf of an NGO was the production of a receipt. Yet, by the time I conducted my research Homies Unidos had still not mastered these challenges. These persistent difficulties reveal as simplistic the assumption that gang members can be turned into professional NGO employees.

During Magdaleno’s time emphasis was placed on staff development, the internalisation of the HU mission, and press conference training. Programmatic content was designed and initially comprised mural painting projects and outreach activities aimed at spreading the message of non-violence among gang youth, including rap performances that highlighted the themes of migration, cultural alienation, parental neglect, and social exclusion. In addition, HU representatives met with police chiefs to discuss how gang control might be exercised with greater respect for human rights. Staff were meant to deepen their knowledge of the subject through a human rights course to be prepared and taught by Julienne Gage, a US journalist on an Amnesty International grant. However, these activities failed to materialise at a time when Magdaleno and his


team were mostly concerned to kick-start the organisation and deal with the manifold difficulties that arose in the establishment phase.\textsuperscript{30}

Some of these impediments were of a contextual nature; others were associated with endogenous factors. First, given the stigmatisation of gang members HU staff met with suspicion from various quarters. The US embassy, for example, reportedly suspected Magdaleno of pooling money for drugs and advised the Salvadoran government to be vigilant of HU activities.\textsuperscript{31} Second, Homies Unidos struggled to raise sufficient funds to sustain its operations. Although Magdaleno invested some US$35,000 of his own money into the organisation and helped raise more money, these contributions were quickly absorbed.\textsuperscript{32} Third, the nature of gang life made staff recruitment and retention a greater problem for Homies Unidos than for other NGOs. An estimated five to six HU members were killed in shootings, and Magdaleno himself received threats both by police and by gang members who disagreed with the HU mission and incited others to kill him.\textsuperscript{33} Clearly, the frequent personnel changes hampered the professionalisation and sustainability of Homies Unidos. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the HU leadership neglected the need to transform HU members’ values and thinking patterns and to monitor whether they did indeed withdraw from drug use or sales, crime, and violence. A series of incidents suggested that staff required counselling, yet these were not decisively addressed.\textsuperscript{34} For example, sexual harassment was rampant, but largely ignored. Similarly, during a weekend retreat one of the gang members was asked to reflect on how they had been respecting human rights in recent days. When he giggled: ‘well, at least we didn’t rape anyone,’ his remark was glossed over. On other occasions staff member (later HU director) Sigfredo “Ringo” Hernández appeared at internal meetings with photos of his toddler son dressed in gang attire and holding a pistol. However, no one explained to him that this was no laughing matter.

For human rights volunteer Julienne, the HU partner organisation Save the Children seemed prepared to exploit Homies Unidos for publicity purposes, but not to assist the gang members in changing their life.\textsuperscript{35} In her view HU staff, though principally attracted by the prospects of job training, were willing to draw a line under their gang past, but on their own unable to return to the conventional world:

\textsuperscript{30} E-mail exchange with Julienne Gage, 13 April 2007.
\textsuperscript{31} Telephone interview with Magdaleno Rose-Ávila, founder of Homies Unidos, 20 March 2007.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Information on these incidents was received in an e-mail exchange with Julienne Gage, 13 April 2007.
\textsuperscript{35} E-mail exchange with Julienne Gage, 20 March 2007.
It seemed obvious to me that [they] were interested in changing psychologically and emotionally, they just did not know how to. The organisation was supposed to be there to show them the way, and when the organisation was weak, the guys went back to doing what they had been doing before. It was the only thing they knew.\textsuperscript{36}

Given the failure to address the psychological aspects of gang desistance, it was perhaps unsurprising that some HU staff might find it difficult to forsake gang life. When the gang members were sent on errands they would sometimes disappear to take care of other business. Although no solid evidence of criminal activities exists, it appears that some HU personnel may have been involved in drug sales in the capital’s San Antonio Abad neighbourhood.\textsuperscript{37} In 1999 Sigfredo also met his death in one of the area’s bars where he and other gang members had gathered for drinks. While Sigfredo’s friends insisted on his innocence, eyewitnesses affirmed that he had in fact started the shooting in which he and a bartender died. The events of that night remained shrouded in mystery, and Homies Unidos subsequently refused to concede that one of their staff might have been implicated in the act.\textsuperscript{38} In my interview with him Magdaleno acknowledged that after his departure the organisation experienced an institutional deterioration, because some of the new entrants merely sought to find a cover for continued gang activity:

Some people saw Homies Unidos as a money tree. There were people with strong gang politics coming in, and it was difficult to control the situation. … Some elements of bad blood came in; some of them went to jail later.\textsuperscript{39}

These developments suggest that Homies Unidos struggled early on to establish itself as a professional organisation. Without the contribution of Magdaleno, who tried to build the NGO under enormous physical risks and financial cost, it might never have formed. When the organisational entrepreneur terminated has participation in the project, he left NGO maintenance and operations in the hands of individuals who had yet to overcome their gang past. It is not my intention to fault Magdaleno for not leaving a more lasting legacy than he did. The point is simply that after his departure staff had yet to successfully address both their personal situation and institutional strengthening.

\textsuperscript{36} E-mail exchange with Julienne Gage, 13 April 2007.
\textsuperscript{37} E-mail exchange with Julienne Gage, 20 March 2007.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Telephone interview with Magdaleno Rose-Avila, founder of Homies Unidos, 20 March 2007.
before Homies Unidos could be reasonably expected to conduct gang-related advocacy. The following section reviews the NGO’s contemporary characteristics and programmes.

1.4 Homies Unidos today

A fleeting visit to the offices of Homies Unidos provides few clues of the organisation’s turbulent history. Tucked away in an apartment building near San Salvador’s largest shopping centre, a nondescript door gives way to a quiet and sparsely-furnished flat. The walls are adorned with diplomas, posters, and the HU banner that proclaims the possibility of gang rehabilitation and of integration between gang members and society. Over the years the NGO has defied the odds and demonstrated its capacity to survive despite recurrent maintenance difficulties. I argue that these organisational weaknesses, as well as a concern with internal power struggles and direct assistance to gang members, precluded the development of a more effective advocacy strategy. To this end, I offer below a portrait of Homies Unidos, including staffing issues, programmes, sustainability problems, the use of storytelling, and a snapshot of job routines.

Staffing bias

As indicated previously, Homies Unidos aimed to empower gang members by encouraging rival gang youths to cooperate in solving their own problems and to persuade them to abandon drugs and violence. During the formative years Magdaleno worked to bring together MS and Dieciocho personnel in equal measure. However, given the long-standing hostilities between the two gangs it proved challenging to maintain a balance, and one of the groups tended to dominate the organisation at one point or another.40 By the time I conducted my research the NGO had come to be staffed exclusively by former Dieciocho members whose work also focused mostly on this gang. My aim is not to ascertain the feasibility of the HU founding philosophy, but to make two points. First, HU staff were primarily interested in improving the welfare of their own peers rather than in designing and executing a coherent advocacy agenda. Second, the staffing bias was known among other NGOs, some of which viewed the organisation with scepticism and seemed unprepared to collaborate with Homies Unidos. This antagonism in turn diminished possibilities for networking or alliance-building and hence greater political pressure for the implementation of an alternative gang policy. The

40 Ibid.
complexity of gang integration can be understood with reference to the social psychology of group identification and inter-group relations.

By identifying with either the MS or the Dieciocho, gang affiliates, like members of other social groups, divide the world into in-groups ("us") or out-groups ("them"). This categorisation provides people with a social identity or cognitive representation of themselves and others as group members and profoundly affects their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour. Social identity is intrinsically linked to inter-group behaviour, which refers to the way in which individuals in certain groups perceive, think about, act towards, and relate to people in other groups. Inter-group behaviour in turn influences the nature of the relations between groups. In an environment where social identity plays a crucial role, as it does in the gang world, the social identification with an in-group elicits feelings of liking, trust, and cooperation towards in-group members that are not extended to the out-group. Given that much inter-group behaviour reflects competition or the perception of threat by the other side, the main behavioural characteristic of inter-group relations is in-group favouritism or discrimination against the out-group. However, expectations about, and negative attitudes towards, the members of another social group are not necessarily started by real or direct competition. They can also be triggered by exposure to members of the group that stimulates such sentiments.

The idea of Homies Unidos was precisely to re-categorise members of pre-established groups (rival gangs) into a common in-group identity model (HU staff) and empower them to cooperate towards a shared goal. The underlying expectation was that personnel would see themselves as constituents of a single social entity and develop more positive attitudes towards each other. However, inter-group conflict, which renders interaction between social groups aversive, may be difficult to eradicate. Bringing members of different groups together may lead to friendlier relations between these particular individuals, but is considered an ineffective way of changing inter-group attitudes or improving inter-group relations. In other words, Magdaleno’s presence may have permitted a temporary collaboration between rival gang members, but was unlikely to ensure the subsequent adherence to the organisational ethos he had sought to foster.

45 Baron and Byrne, *Social Psychology*, 210.
46 Ibid., 235-236.
The fact that Homies Unidos did not maintain the original balance among its personnel indicates that its staff remained opposed to gang integration. Indeed, the killing of the first HU president, a MS member, by Dieciocho members of the NGO suggests that some staff worked to ensure that their own gang would gain control over the organisation. The prospects of a salaried job may have been a strong enough incentive.

When I asked staff why the agency was run exclusively by ex-Dieciocho members and essentially limited its activities to this group, they gave evasive answers, claiming that Homies Unidos had once comprised MS members and continued to assist them on request. Notwithstanding the merits of this argument, the staffing bias, and its evident contradiction of the HU founding idea, meant that some NGOs distrusted Homies Unidos. Mistrust of this kind constituted a barrier to networking or alliance-building that might have strengthened HU advocacy efforts. However, in some circles Homies Unidos had also acquired a reputation for being unreliable and presumptuous. Some of my interviewees spoke of occasions when HU personnel had failed to keep up regular participation in networks or had implied that their gang past afforded them greater authority on the subject than those who lacked such first-hand experience. Those who had encountered these episodes were, understandably perhaps, disinclined towards further collaboration. The NGO’s status reduced its chances for networking or alliance-building and therefore a more effective promotion of alternative gang control. As discussed below, however, Homies Unidos also neglected to seek out such opportunities more pro-actively.

Programmes and institutional sustainability

Officially Homies Unidos carries out six programmes that are designed to further its empowerment strategy: staff development; prevention or information politics (testimonio); education (school placement and provision of access to university scholarships); health (sexual health education and HIV/AIDS awareness sessions); rehabilitation (provision of access to drug treatment, tattoo removal, job training and development); and human rights (activities related to the defence of gang members’ human rights). In addition, the NGO has become a reference point for journalists, students, and researchers, largely

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49 Personal communication by Roberto Ramírez Campos, Probation Officer, Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor, San Salvador; interview with Tránsito Ruano, Director, Centro de Formación y Capacitación de la Vicaría Divino Salvador, Archdiocese of San Salvador, San Salvador, 19 July 2005.
from abroad, who seek information about, or access to, the street gangs. To facilitate these efforts Homies Unidos makes available a (rather unsystematic) newspaper archive on gang-related arrests, deportations, and deaths, and tries to secure interviews with gang members. The material that has been produced over the years, such as various media reports and the 2008 documentary *La vida loca*, can raise the NGO’s public profile and raise awareness of the gang problem and the need for policy alternatives to *Mano Dura*. However, these activities presume that Homies Unidos is being sought out by interested parties as the NGO neither promotes research initiatives nor undertakes media work that might help publicise its projects and the gang situation. Before I discuss HU advocacy more fully I will identify the principal maintenance difficulties since these constituted critical barriers to more effective NGO work. The focus is on three areas that are fundamental to successful NGO operations, but in which Homies Unidos exhibited important weaknesses: funding; job routines; and staff skills.

NGO management is more demanding than might be assumed, and according to some of those involved in establishing and running Homies Unidos staff underestimated the sheer difficulty of this task. The financial viability of the organisation is one of the challenges that personnel have found difficult to meet and has repeatedly resulted in unpaid bills and salaries if not the temporary closure of the office. Like other Salvadoran NGOs Homies Unidos is constrained by the project-driven nature of donor assistance and a hostile domestic funding environment, but its fundraising situation is compounded by personnel’s past gang membership and criminal involvement. The fact that Homies Unidos has been able to brave threats of permanent dissolution has been portrayed as a sign of commitment and hard work. However, it may also be interpreted as a sign of HU members’ lack of ability or motivation to hone their grant-seeking skills and strengthen organisational sustainability. For example, at the time I conducted my research the NGO had still not obtained its legal personality, even though this is a funding requirement and staff had received application guidance by another NGO. The most recent grant proposal had been prepared by a personal friend of HU members, and the funding was subsequently channelled through the bank account of the NGO that had also counselled Homies Unidos on its legal status. In addition, the HU director pursued a series of stop-gap measures to keep the organisation afloat, such as soliciting donations

51 Personal communication by Heriberto Henríquez, Director of Rehabilitation, Homies Unidos, San Salvador; telephone interview with Magdaleno Rose-Avila, founder of Homies Unidos, 20 March 2007.
52 Interview with Luis Ernesto Romero Gavidia, Director, Homies Unidos, San Salvador, 22 July 2005.
53 Interview with Ryna Garay, Executive Director, FUNSALPRODESE, San Salvador, 24 May 2006.
by e-mail or from visitors of Homies Unidos. The point is not the appropriateness or otherwise of such methods (though voluntary contributions of that kind are insufficient on their own), but that they signal an inability to make the NGO financially secure enough for it to implement its programmes.

The second endogenous limitation to HU work concerns the extent to which staff carried out basic job routines. If Homies Unidos was to function as an organisation, its employees had to internalise conventional values and to conform to the agency’s norms. However, personnel were highly individualistic and often failed to adhere to NGO-internal rules and practices. For example, rules on computer use and office cleaning were as swiftly broken as they were established, and the weekly staff meeting, designed to plan activities for the days ahead, was regularly cancelled at short notice. Again the aim is not to disclose random details about HU organisational life, but to show that the NGO lacked strong leadership, the commitment to perform tedious but necessary chores, and the ability to plan and organise its advocacy agenda. Clearly, these weaknesses were conditioned by maintenance difficulties in a third area, that of skills and professionalisation.

Given the nature of the organisation Homies Unidos has probably had to cope with a higher staff turnover than other NGOs. Over the years some of its members transitioned to a more conventional lifestyle and left their job, others abandoned both the agency and the rehabilitation process to return to the street. Yet others tried to return to the United States, one ex-director received threats and chose to resign, and an estimated twelve individuals were killed. These frequent personnel changes weakened the organisation and required time and resources to be invested in staff training rather than advocacy efforts. During my time with Homies Unidos the organisation was initially run by four paid staff and one volunteer, although for reasons discussed below this number was subsequently reduced. The idea of volunteering had been introduced during the establishment phase and was designed to ensure that recruits would only enter the salaried workforce once they had demonstrated their commitment to Homies Unidos and its activities. The HU director spoke to me of repeated occasions when he had been approached by gang members whose interest in HU affiliation was not genuine and only meant to camouflage continued gang activity.

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55 Personal communication by Luis Ernesto Romero Gavidia, Director, Homies Unidos, San Salvador.
However, the challenge for Homies Unidos has not only been to screen staff rigorously enough, but also to sufficiently prepare everyone who has been permitted to work with the organisation. HU staff are streetwise and emotionally dedicated to gang members, but have not developed the professional skills required either for NGO maintenance or for gang-related advocacy. The personnel have been trained in various areas, including basic book-keeping, computing, and health education, and have used HU funding to begin the completion of their secondary or university education. However, I noticed that they did not consistently apply their existing skills and instead solicited the assistance of outsiders, for example for an HIV/AIDS awareness workshop I discuss below. Despite their apparent skills deficit HU staff have resisted the recruitment of outsiders who have no gang past but abilities that might strengthen Homies Unidos and therefore its advocacy. The HU director justified this decision with the argument that gang members are committed to working with their peers even in difficult times whereas salaried professionals would abandon the NGO if their wages could not be paid. Yet, this appears to be an unproven assumption, especially since Homies Unidos has never tried to hire qualified staff. In this context I want to highlight the use of storytelling, which I found to be a characteristic of the NGO and served to explain discrepancies between the story of Homies Unidos and the reality I encountered.

**Storytelling**

Arguably, individuals in all organisations rely on storytelling to make sense of their life at work. The tales people narrate can aid in communicating certain experiences, explaining successes or failures, or sustaining a particular impression of the agency. The stories told by HU staff were of two kinds (rationalisations and image-management) and concerned maintenance difficulties and NGO activities. Below follow three examples relating to the staffing situation, the absence of a media strategy, and HU activities. First, when asked about the possibility of bringing in more highly trained personnel, Homies Unidos referred to the commitment gap between gang members and external professionals to dismiss any such suggestion. Given the obvious disadvantage this decision has for the NGO the argument seemed designed to justify the exclusion of...
individuals who might control how HU staff spend their time and thus limit the freedom and flexibility they enjoyed thus far.

Second, during my research it became apparent to me that Homies Unidos lacked a media strategy, which might have helped strengthen their advocacy efforts. When I was asked in a staff meeting to suggest improvements I therefore raised the need for media relations, but the HU director insisted that the NGO had a strategy in this area. However, on another occasion a senior staff member affirmed that Homies Unidos had ceased all media work because previous coverage had been perceived as negative.59 Engagement with the Salvadoran press could have served to publicise the programmes of Homies Unidos as way of raising greater awareness of the nature of the gang problem and the need for alternative responses to it. However, staff preferred to blame unfavourable reporting for their neglect of an important advocacy tool.

Third, the most prominent story came to the fore whenever NGO personnel were required to speak about their activities, particularly when visitors stopped by to learn about Homies Unidos and its work. Staff had developed the habit of documenting workshops and other events with photos, and these were presented together with “the story of Homies Unidos” to construct a particular account of the organisation and its contribution to alternative gang control. However, the pictorial material only showed activities that the NGO had at one point carried out or with which it had merely associated itself (on which more below). In other words, the information conveyed little about the organisation’s contemporary situation and seemed instead designed to sustain a positive image of Homies Unidos and its work. Below I offer a snapshot of some job routines, which serve to demonstrate the NGO’s largely reactive approach to gang-related advocacy.

“Hanging out” and “cruising” with Homies Unidos

HU staff spent much of their time outside the office, often attending meetings they had been invited to and responding to human rights cases or other situations that had arisen. On one of these occasions I accompanied Luis to attend to the case of a 14-year-old girl who had aroused the infatuation of an MS member in her community. Luis, also known by his street name Panza Loca (Crazy Belly), has been working with Homies Unidos since its founding and is the organisation’s current director. Prior to his 1992 deportation he

59 Personal communication by Heriberto Henríquez, Director of Rehabilitation, Homies Unidos, San Salvador.
had been a *Dieciocho* member in Los Angeles. Although his family had sent him to the United States to protect him from the Salvadoran civil war and allow him to finish his high school education, his stay with relatives was short-lived. In his own account loneliness led him to join the gang and encounter drugs, violence, and crime. When I enquired why he had remained emotionally attached to his gang despite the harmful dimensions of gang life, Luis acknowledged that it may be difficult to understand why he might feel friendship for individuals who received him with violence and supplied him with drugs. However, the gang was prepared to share everything with him, and it is their support he appreciated. With hindsight he described the experience as painful but necessary and expressed his hope to use his gang past to prevent others from making the same mistake.

As we left the office Luis clutched the photo ID that indicates his affiliation with Homies Unidos and is meant to prevent his arrest on grounds of his tattoos. We boarded his dilapidated car, and with the sound of Luis’ favourite crooner songs (a reminder of gang life) we set off to meet the teenager at a restaurant. Over pizza Luis counselled her to stay away from gang hangouts, and later we accompanied the girl back to her home in Soyapango, a populous industrial city outside the capital. Luis tensed up, because the drive took us through rival gang territory. However, we arrived without incident at our destination where we followed a bumpy path to traverse a dusty community with laminate shacks, sporadic electricity services, and no potable water. After a brief stop at the family’s home we returned to the office. The trip was one of many that absorbed valuable time and resources, but appeared to do little to further the NGO’s advocacy agenda.

*The human rights programme*

The promotion of alternative gang control could have been substantially advanced by the human rights programme, which was implemented most consistently and enthusiastically. However, the activities that were carried out reflected the aforementioned organisational and strategic weaknesses and could hope to achieve little more than to address immediate problems in an isolated fashion. The programme was important in that it sought to deal with the discrimination, police harassment, arbitrary arrests, and appalling detention conditions facing gang members. However, the difficulties associated with it were twofold. First, the authorities took the view that gang members break the law, but then
use the human rights discourse to escape justice.60 Since government and law enforcement officials were largely unreceptive to calls to respect the human rights of gang members, even less so if these requests came from former gang members themselves, Homies Unidos would find it difficult to promote rights-respecting gang control. Second, by following media coverage of other actors’ critique of *Mano Dura*, HU staff learned how to speak the language of human rights and when to deploy it. Yet, they had not developed a strategy that might have permitted them to advocate these principles in practice.

The activities Homies Unidos has pursued over the years sought to counter gang suppression in various ways, but were generally of limited reach. In 2003, for example, NGO staff joined with the Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Ombudsperson, PDDH) in submitting constitutional challenges to the LAM, but their own appeal was subsequently rejected.61 On other occasions they supported rallies organised by relatives of detained gang members to protest the prison situation. However, Homies Unidos essentially acted as a bystander, showing its solidarity with the cause but not incorporating such events into a broader advocacy strategy. The NGO had some success in alerting the PDDH to human rights violations by PNC officials. These reporting activities served to expose abusive policing practices in some instances, but did not develop into a more sustained effort to reorient the PNC’s approach to gang control. Instead, staff privately expressed their disappointment that not more cases had achieved a positive outcome for the perceived victims. A PDDH representative, however, explained to me that although some investigations had confirmed the occurrence of police maltreatment or harassment, in other cases gang members had been lawfully arrested and were required to face trial.62

These efforts aside, HU staff spent much of their time visiting police stations to track down recently-arrested gang members and secure their release from custody, often without success. Generally, personnel were keen to demonstrate their support for their detained peers, but did not engage in advocacy activities that might have served to actually improve the situation of gang members. Homies Unidos’ reaction to the arbitrary prison transfer of one *Dieciocho* member illustrates this point. One afternoon staff were notified that the authorities, which suspected Carlos Barahona (“El Chino Tres Colas”)...
to be a gang leader, had decided to move him from Chalatenango to Cojutepeque, both prisons reserved for members of the Dieciocho. With the transfer officials hoped to ascertain the extent of his power within the gang and thereby to confirm or refute their hypothesis. Homies Unidos, however, knew of gang-internal disputes and was concerned about Carlos Barahona’s welfare in the new setting. Staff therefore decided to head out to Cojutepeque and maintain a presence outside the prison. At the said location we waited for his arrival, saw him being led into the building, and subsequently returned to the capital. No further action was taken in the case, and although this display of solidarity may have encouraged the individual it was aimed at, it was nothing more than the sum of several unproductive hours spent away from the office.

Overall, the human rights programme was perhaps the one element of HU work that most clearly offered scope for lobbying activities, possibly through the targeting of government, media outreach, or collaboration with other NGOs. Media work, for example, could have sought to publicise abusive policing practices as a way of promoting rights-respecting gang control. Civil society-based alliances could have strengthened the political voice of Homies Unidos. However, as discussed earlier, such collaborative efforts stalled as a result of the NGO’s dented reputation. Furthermore, staff did not seek out opportunities for networking or alliances except to solicit help to resolve the immediate problems of their peers. Homies Unidos had not even built an advocacy partnership with HU-Los Angeles, which had until 2006 been directed by a female with no previous gang affiliation and maintained strained relations with HU-El Salvador. Thus, although staff had adopted a human rights programme, they did not flesh it out with tools and methods designed to promote alternative gang control. Instead, they invested time and scarce resources in activities that responded to the personal needs of some gang members, but were unlikely to further their advocacy agenda. Having highlighted endogenous NGO characteristics, I will now consider specific strategies and projects of Homies Unidos and the impact of one employee’s criminal conviction on the agency’s advocacy possibilities.

2. The Homies Unidos empowerment strategy in practice

2.1 Information politics

As part of its empowerment strategy Homies Unidos implements a prevention programme whereby staff use their first-hand experience of gang life to warn about its
perils and insist on the need for alternative responses. These public speaking engagements, generally performed during school-based events and seminars on gang violence, seek to raise awareness among the target audience and constitute a form of “information politics.”\textsuperscript{63} This term refers to the provision of ‘information that would not otherwise be available, from sources that might not otherwise be heard.’\textsuperscript{64} In the case of Homies Unidos it implies that the facts or even personal stories that are told about the gang problem can help alter the policy context and increase pressure for comprehensive gang control.

Information politics had the potential to advance NGO advocacy, and HU staff spoke of organising a number of public appearances in 2006. However, the talks did not get beyond the planning stage, partly because renewed funding difficulties made organisational survival a greater priority, partly because the arrest of one staff member temporarily displaced any concern for routine work. The reason for discussing the use of information politics is to show that it could have furthered HU objectives and to emphasise the extent of organisational limitations, since the performances require no particular funds or preparation and are easily implemented despite resource constraints.

The speaking engagements take the form of a \textit{testimonio}, or testimonial discourse, which is a narrative

told in the first person by a narrator who is also a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience. … The situation of narration in \textit{testimonio} has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on.\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Testimonio} purports to offer a true story previously marginalised or obscured by official history. It is less concerned with the life of the narrator than with a problematic collective social situation that the speaker shares with the audience.\textsuperscript{66} The witnessing posture implicit in its convention lends the \textit{testimonio} both a “flesh-and-blood authenticity”\textsuperscript{67} and an aura of truth, which the audience is bound to respect.\textsuperscript{68} At the

\textsuperscript{63} Keck Sikkink, \textit{Activists Beyond Borders}, 18.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 19.


\textsuperscript{68} Beverley, “The Margin at the Center,” 27.
same time, the first-hand experience of what is being conveyed affords the narrator authority. The genre’s main objectives are the self-representation of the voiceless; awareness-raising; the condemnation of injustices; and the inclusion of issues in the domestic political agenda. Testimonio engages listeners (and sometimes readers) in the hope to win their support for a cause and has played an important role in the development of international human rights and solidarity movements.

Testimonio is a way of listening to, and looking at, the life and culture of a given social group. Narratives related by ex-gang members permit outsiders a glimpse of an experience that is removed from most people’s world and difficult to access. The account is often transmitted orally, which is the option Homies Unidos has chosen. However, there also exist a growing number of print versions by “reformed characters” who decided to publicise details of their time in the gang as a way of warning others about the violence that accompanies this lifestyle. Since I was unable to listen to stories by HU staff I will draw on these works to highlight the characteristics of a gang testimonio. Generally, such accounts describe the personal circumstances leading up to gang joining before offering a stomach-turning description of gang life and depicting the writer’s return to the conventional world. The stories address the question what it means to be a gang member and draw attention to conditions of social marginality facing gang youth. As an advocacy tool a gang testimonio illustrates not only the possibility of positive change, but also underscores the need to prevent the destruction of more human lives.

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71 Some of the classics include Nidia Díaz, Nunca estuve sola (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1998); Ana Guadalupe Martínez, Las cárceles clandestinas de El Salvador (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1998); Rigoberta Menchú et al., I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala (London: Verso, 1984).
Although these stories aim to contribute to gang control, scholars disagree on their impact. Some researchers have suggested that talks aiming to educate young people about the consequences of gang involvement are unlikely to have a deterrent effect, because they fail to target those who are at risk of gang joining. Others have argued that accounts by ex-gang members can help both to drive home the dangers of gang life and to empower peers to transform their own lives. My aim is not to assess the extent to which HU staff may have helped reduce gang violence in El Salvador, but to emphasise that organisational weaknesses precluded the NGO from making more frequent use of a valuable advocacy tool. Media work, in particular, could have helped to bring the information to a wider audience and educate the public about the nature of the gang problem and the need for an alternative gang policy. Through attempts to influence public opinion on the subject Homies Unidos could then have applied greater political pressure for the adoption of prevention and rehabilitation programmes. Instead the NGO was unable to deal with internal weaknesses effectively enough to concentrate on its advocacy efforts. The work that Homies Unidos focused on for much of 2006, a rehabilitation project with a Dieciocho clíca, met a similar fate and is examined below.

74 Klein and Maxson, Street Gang Patterns and Policies, 99.
2.2 The bakery project in La Campanera

As indicated earlier, Homies Unidos seeks to provide access to a variety of services in an attempt to reach out to gang youths and persuade them to abandon drugs and violence. Whenever possible the NGO works with gang members in their own social milieu to respect their lifestyle and facilitate their attendance of workshops.\textsuperscript{76} The empowerment strategy also covers skills and job development, and Homies Unidos has reportedly placed a number of ex-gang members in vocational training institutes where they took classes in computing, automobile mechanics, and carpentry.\textsuperscript{77} However, employment opportunities have been more difficult to secure due to the lack of meaningful jobs in El Salvador and the reluctance of the private sector to hire gang members. Self-employment in the form of a microenterprise can constitute a valuable source of income for individuals with tattoos or a criminal record. Homies Unidos began one such experiment in 2006 at the request of the gang members in La Campanera, Soyapango. The NGO agreed to provide the inductions and infrastructure for a bakery and offered to organise a series of workshops on issues such as HIV/AIDS and human rights. The remainder of this chapter focuses on Homies Unidos’ work in this community and highlights the impact of both resource constraints and strategic limitations. It is argued that staff not only neglected to tie the project into a broader advocacy strategy, but also failed to prevent it from collapsing due to insufficient monitoring of the gang members and strained cooperation with the police.

When I first visited La Campanera, accompanied by HU staff member Heriberto, the bakery project had been launched a few weeks earlier. Heriberto or “Erick Boy” was at the time director of rehabilitation and tasked to engage gang youths in the communities and seek their release from police custody. In his own account he was recruited by the army at age 14, but quickly left war-time El Salvador for the United States. In Los Angeles Heriberto became entangled in gang life and drug use before going through the prison system and being deported. His tattoos and a defiant attitude survived the intervening years, and in the field Heriberto regularly carried a weapon for his defence since a shooting incident in 2005 left him injured.

In La Campanera we drove down the long entrance road and parked the car outside the bakery. By the time of my visit the gang graffiti had largely disappeared, but the community remained affected by extortions and other crime, a situation that had invited

\textsuperscript{76} Interview with Luis Ernesto Romero Gavídia, Director, Homies Unidos, San Salvador, 3 July 2006.
\textsuperscript{77} Interview with Luis Ernesto Romero Gavídia, Director, Homies Unidos, San Salvador, 22 July 2005.
a heavy police presence. At our arrival a police patrol was disappearing out of sight, and the community seemed eerily quiet. Seconds later, however, one gang member after another emerged from their hiding as if to illustrate the ineffectiveness of gang deterrence. Soon a small group of gang members had surrounded us while others sauntered down the road. Nearby, a girl with a large “18” tattooed across her face cuddled her toddler daughter. My surprise at seeing this rare display of gang loyalty by a female must have been reflected in my face, because Heriberto, nodding in her direction, remarked with unconcealed pride: “¿Viste eso?” (“Did you see that?”).

That day I was able to absorb the scenes unfolding before my eyes while Heriberto exchanged respectful greetings with the gang members. The bakery, however, which had got off to an apparently successful start, was closed. A baker had been hired for an induction, and the gang members had been expected to prepare a daily load of bread and pastries, which non-tattooed helpers would sell on their behalf. The intention had also been to offer the gang members a short course in business administration and to turn the bakery into a lasting and self-sustainable project. However, prior to our visit some of the youths had been arrested, and the work had come to a standstill. Heriberto promised to stop by the police station in nearby Ilopango where the gang members were likely to be held.
Along the way the stereo in his Pick-up blasted out 50 Cent. “¡Bonita historia!” (“Nice story!”), Heriberto shouted over the noise, nodding at the CD player. His preference for a music genre that romanticises gang life and glorifies violence is quite widely shared, but reflected nonetheless his continued emotional attachment to gang culture. At the police station the commanding officer was apparently unavailable, and we soon returned to the office where the rest of the afternoon was spent chatting over coffee and cheesecake. Over the coming months the gang members participating in the bakery project were harassed and arrested on several occasions. Homies Unidos repeatedly solicited an appointment with the PNC’s Director-General, and when all of these requests had gone unmet the NGO sought to achieve his appearance before a congressional committee. However, that request was also unsuccessful, suggesting that the organisation lacked the capacity to gain access to, let alone exercise influence over, officials and press for changes in policing practices. The bakery project was to encounter yet greater problems, but in the meantime Homies Unidos faced its own internal crisis that temporarily distracted from the pursuit of advocacy activities. To understand more fully the barriers to HU advocacy I discuss below the arrest and subsequent conviction of Heriberto and its implications for the organisation. The case, and the NGO’s reaction to it, is instructive in that it reveals staff priorities and highlights their neglect of media work, despite the negative publicity of these developments.

2.3 Shadows of the gang world

One morning in mid-May 2006 police arrived at the NGO’s office and arrested Heriberto for the murder of a Dieciocho member in July 2005 in a nearby nightclub. Routine tasks were set aside as staff began to mobilise support for him. The IDHUCA was approached for legal assistance and responded positively to the request. However, in a line-up a witness for the FGR identified Heriberto as one of the perpetrators of the homicide. The court ordered that the case proceed to the pre-trial phase, and although Heriberto was released on bail, the judicial order was revoked a week later and Heriberto sent to Chalatenango prison. The IDHUCA, which defends victims but not suspected

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78 For a cultural analysis of “gangsta rap,” see Eithne Quinn, Nuthin’ but a “G” thang: the culture and commerce of gangsta rap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
79 The reconstruction of the case history is based on the following sources: interview with Jorge Torres, Lawyer, Unidad de Recepción de Casos, IDHUCA, San Salvador, 23 June 2006; case notes held at the IDHUCA; court file on the criminal case against José Heriberto Henríquez and Carlos Alberto Rivas Barahona, held at the Tribunal Quinto de Instrucción de San Salvador, consulted on 18 August 2006;
perpetrators, withdrew at this point, and HU volunteer Geovany resigned in the midst of these developments. The country’s media quickly seized on the case, and Homies Unidos’ international donors phoned in to follow up some of these reports. News of the arrest quickly spread and did not fail to dent the NGO’s reputation. A number of individuals from both NGOs and public institutions expressed their wariness of an organisation that had already been perceived as biased and unreliable. However, HU staff seemed less troubled by the events than one might have expected under the circumstances and remained focused on Heriberto’s welfare. No public relations effort was made to restore some of the NGO’s previous status. Instead, HU members sought to use the situation to their advantage and enlisted Heriberto for an arts workshop inside the prison.

One afternoon I thus accompanied Luis and Miriam (“La Happy”) to a retail store to purchase mirrors, paint, and artificial flowers. At the checkout Luis realised he needed to withdraw more money at the bank next door. While he joined the slow-moving queue, Miriam and I waited in the car park where she offered (unsolicited) to “entertain” me with some stories about her gang experience. The purpose of recounting these anecdotes here is not to disclose random details about her private life, but to show that Miriam, like her colleagues, continued to identify with gang culture. This young mother of two girls joined the Dieciocho at age 13, by her own account because she felt mistreated by her mother. Miriam was never a clica leader, but always enjoyed respect and influence since she first used a knife. In the car park she remembered her feelings of surprise yet delight at discovering the sensation of driving a blade into a human body. Without outward signs of regret, Miriam spoke in gory detail of grenade and knife attacks, some involving weapons typically used by soldiers. Her first pregnancy had no calming effect on her, and it was only some years later that she finally withdrew from gang activities. Her story was cut short when Luis re-emerged who took everyone home and was expected to deliver the purchased material the following day.

Tribunal Quinto de Sentencia de San Salvador, Sentencia en el proceso penal en contra de José Heriberto Henríquez y Carlos Alberto Rivas Barahona, case number 300-3-2006, issued on 13 February 2007.

80 The remaining staff members informed me that he had secured a paid job elsewhere, but I was unable to contact him to confirm the reason for his departure.
82 These impressions were communicated in informal conversations with staff at CRISPAZ, FESPAD, the Polígono, the CNSP, and a probation officer familiar with the work of Homies Unidos.
83 Homies Unidos has no institutional permission to enter the detention centres.
That same month Heriberto’s signature was required, and Luis invited me to accompany him to Chalatenango. Homies Unidos is officially not permitted to enter the prisons and has come to appreciate the door-opening effect of a foreigner. It was visitors’ day, and by the time we arrived at the prison a long queue of relatives had already formed at the gate. Some of the tattooed females recognised Luis and greeted him as we edged through the crowd to enter the building. I flinched when Luis presented me as an OAS official who had come to interview Heriberto, but the security guard holding my German passport failed to see the contradiction, and minutes later we waited for Heriberto at the cell block. Two guards watched us from a short distance, but did not notice how he pocketed a wad of dollar bills Luis had handed him. Soon our time was over, and after lunch we began our long journey back to San Salvador where we finally arrived in the late afternoon. Another day had gone by dealing with internal affairs rather than substantive work.

The criminal case against Heriberto Henríquez

In July 2006 Heriberto was moved from Chalatenango to the maximum-security prison in Zacatecoluca, although he had yet to face trial. The authorities justified the transfer by alleging acts of intimidation committed from behind bars.\(^{85}\) The court delivered its judgment in February 2007, finding Heriberto and the co-defendant guilty of the murder. Below I summarise the case and the verdict and consider the behaviour of HU staff both in the pre-trial period and before the tribunal.

The homicide had occurred at around 1 a.m. on 27 July 2005 in the car park of the César’s Club. Like a number of Salvadoran nightclubs, this barra show (striptease club) had the reputation of a front for money-laundering, drug trafficking, and prostitution.\(^{86}\) It is reportedly linked to the Zeta and is frequented by Dieciocho members to carry out their drug deals.\(^{87}\) A number of similar shooting incidents have occurred there, often involving gang members.\(^{88}\) According to the FGR, Heriberto visited the bar around midnight in the company of three others, including the aforementioned Carlos Barahona. The soon-
to-be-victim, José Cortez, and a companion arrived shortly afterwards. As Heriberto and his party exited the building, they were returned their weapons. In the car park the group was joined by José Cortez, a conversation ensued, and suddenly Heriberto Henríquez and Carlos Barahona began firing at the victim, causing his death. The perpetrators then fled in Heriberto’s Pick-up, leaving behind Carlos Barahona’s own car.

Heriberto always denied any wrongdoing, even likening the accusations against him to a politics of harassment launched by the authorities. Homies Unidos, for its part, publicly maintained that it had hosted the director of HU-Los Angeles, Silvia Beltrán, for a dinner party that night. The group left the restaurant at around 1.30 a.m., whereupon Heriberto gave his colleagues a lift home. Therefore, he could not have been at the crime scene, and his innocence was established.

When the proceedings progressed to the trial phase in early 2007, the FGR presented a whole range of evidence against the defendants. A ballistics test confirmed that five out of sixty cartridge cases found at the crime scene had been fired by Heriberto’s semi-automatic pistol. Traces of cocaine were detected in both cars which, though insufficient to support the FGR’s claim that the murder was prompted by a gang-internal dispute over drug sales, permitted the inference that the defendants had been involved in such activities. In addition, the prosecutor’s case rested on the testimony of an anonymous witness who had been placed under a special protection programme. “Armando” (a pseudonym) not only identified the two men as regular customers of the bar, but also affirmed having seen them shoot the victim.

The defence maintained their previous line of argumentation and presented four witnesses, including Miriam and Geovany and a gang member who claimed to have been injured in the incident, but that the defendants had not been present and thus not involved in the killing. The judges admitted the FGR’s evidence in full and found no irregularities in it. They weighed all forensic and testimonial evidence and considered the authorities’ evidentiary elements more credible and coherent, whereas the witnesses for

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90 Personal communication by Luis Ernesto Romero Gavidia, Director, Homies Unidos. I sought to verify this version of the events with Silvia Beltrán. However, she did not reply to my e-mail and has since resigned from HU-Los Angeles.
91 In El Salvador the use of anonymous witnesses has been controversial. However, numerous witnesses have been killed, and a witness protection programme of some kind is required. In recognition of this dilemma the judges admitted this anonymous witness who had made his identity known to the FGR and the court, but had no ocular contact with the defendants during the trial.
the defence had become entangled in contradictions and were seen to be partial. Both Heriberto Henríquez and Carlos Barahona were sentenced to 16 years.\textsuperscript{92}

The personal circumstances of one individual are not meant to suggest that Homies Unidos is a front for criminal activities. However, the verdict and the NGO’s role in the case are instructive, because they show two things. First, the leadership did not screen recruits rigorously enough so as to ensure that the staffing problems of the early years would not repeat themselves and continue to weaken the organisation and therefore its advocacy possibilities. Second, staff remained unconditionally supportive of Heriberto even though it appeared that he had not abandoned crime and was an unlikely spokesperson for Homies Unidos’ cause. With their behaviour before and during the trial HU personnel demonstrated that they are willing to put their peers above the organisation and the advocacy work it was designed to perform. The aim is not to question that decision, but merely to stress the implications of peer loyalty for gang-related advocacy. These attitudes were reflected in Homies Unidos’ failure to incorporate the Campanera project into a broader advocacy strategy, let alone prevent it from collapsing, and are discussed below.

\textbf{2.4 Empowerment in La Campanera?}

When I returned to La Campanera the NGO had experienced staff losses and would soon struggle to continue its work in the face of increased police harassment of the gang members. However, the following scenes reveal the organisation’s strategic limitations and show that these contributed both to the premature end of the project and to missed opportunities for more effective advocacy.

One morning I accompanied Miriam and Luis again to the community where they had planned to hold an HIV/AIDS awareness workshop, the first in a series of thematic talks for which the NGO had enlisted the support of expert speakers. Prior to the event we stopped by the bakery. Pastries were in the oven, but it was apparent that the microenterprise was experiencing difficulties. A gang member who had been appointed supervisor of the bakery voiced his frustrations, explaining that the group had incurred financial losses and several participants tended to abscond during the day, requiring him\

\textsuperscript{92} Heriberto Henríquez appealed against the sentence, but as of August 2008 the Supreme Court of Justice had not issued its ruling. E-mail exchange with Judge Sidney Blanco, Tribunal Quinto de Instrucción, San Salvador, 29 August 2008.
to work more hours than he wished to. Luis seemed genuinely surprised, but merely instructed the youth to share his responsibilities with another team member.

Outside the bakery we sat down for lunch while a street vendor prepared the meals that the workshop participants would receive. By the time we arrived at the nearby church where the gang members have gathered to avoid police harassment the workshop was already well underway. Depending on the funding situation, Homies Unidos also distributes pamphlets with HIV/AIDS prevention messages in the gang vernacular and helps organise HIV testing sessions. That day, however, the goal was more limited. Some fifty male gang members, mostly bare-chested and tattooed, lolled on the chairs and listened with moderate attention. HU staff filmed the event, thus adding to the existing pictorial material that was used to chronicle the NGO’s work. After the talk Luis addressed the crowd, and Miriam subsequently distributed among the youths a generous amount of condoms.

Our day in the community ended soon afterwards, and I want to offer some observations on this (first and last) workshop before focusing on the bakery project. The nature of the event raises doubts about the NGO’s ability or commitment to empower individual gang members to abandon drugs and violence and, more generally, to promote gang control. First, if staff were trained in conducting health-related workshops, why hire an external speaker? The episode might suggest that they were happy enough to fill their stomach and claim credit for the talk, but were not prepared to do the job it entailed. Second, personnel obtained photographic material that showed the organisation to be involved in gang work, but was not publicised as part of a media strategy aimed at raising awareness of gang members’ needs. The limited use of photos and videos could well imply that they have no purpose other than to show Homies Unidos in action. Third, the distribution of food and condoms may encourage gang members to attend the workshops, but it is unclear how the sum of these activities contributes to gang violence reduction. The question remains unanswered since the NGO did not ascertain whether the gang members actually sought to embrace a more conventional lifestyle. It appears that HU staff were primarily concerned with the welfare of their peers rather than with finding ways of translating their rhetoric of gang empowerment and alternative gang control into a more powerful advocacy agenda.

When I next visited La Campanera, this time accompanied by two probation officers, the community was literally under siege and the bakery closed. The entrance to the area was blocked by a checkpoint, and the strengthened police and military presence was
palpable. A number of youths in full gang attire were loitering outside the bakery in anticipation of a press conference. The event had been convened to allow them to communicate their concerns about police harassment and interference with the rehabilitation initiative. Homies Unidos joined the gang members in condemning police abuse, raids, and repeated arrests and in blaming the PNC for the closure of the bakery and thus the breakdown of the project. The police, however, defended their entry into the building by arguing that they were required to pursue the criminals who sought refuge there. These mutual recriminations, and the NGO’s backing of the gang members’ version of the events, need to be contextualised a little more. In previous weeks the situation in La Campanera had become increasingly tense because of recurrent police harassment, including beatings and death threats. One policeman in particular had attracted the ire of the gang members, and in early July 2006 one of the youths shot him dead during a police chase. The PNC responded by increasing its presence in the area and raiding a nearby church where close to 200 gang members were holding a wake. In the course of the operation heavily-armed police forced the males to strip down to their underwear, shouted obscenities, and beat the youths before arresting them.

The incident offered an opportunity to highlight police abuse against gang members and press for more rights-respecting law enforcement. However, Homies Unidos shut down the Campanera bakery and ceased all its activities in the community, arguing that gang suppression had made its work impossible. In late 2006 the NGO simply launched another microenterprise, this time in a small town near the Guatemalan border. The Chalchuapa bakery again brought together a small group of Diecincho members who spoke to reporters of their continued emotional ties to the gang and admitted taking drugs and hanging out much as before. My concern is less with the replication of the self-

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95 Personal communication by Christian Poveda, a French documentary-maker who spent a year in La Campanera filming the life of the Diecincho clíca and stated to have recorded instances of police abuse.
96 Personal communication by Christian Poveda.
99 Personal communication by Luis Ernesto Romero Gavidia, Director, Homies Unidos.
employment option than with the abrupt closure of the Campanera bakery. Three comments are warranted here, one about the project’s role in gang-related advocacy, two about its collapse.

First, Homies Unidos officially maintained that the government needed to implement comprehensive and rights-respecting gang control, yet with its empowerment strategy it pursued only indirect policy influence. Nonetheless, the bakery project could have helped to alter the policy context and put pressure on the authorities to pursue an alternative to *Mano Dura*. Specifically, the NGO could have combined it with media work to explain that gang violence reduction required also the provision of employment opportunities and to show that it could offer a way of addressing the problem. However, staff merely responded to gang members’ request for skills and job development and neglected lobbying and media work that could have strengthened their advocacy.

Second, although Homies Unidos insisted on a different form of gang enforcement, it made few (let alone successful) attempts to persuade the authorities to reorient their policing strategies and prevent their interference with the bakery project. One obstacle was surely the government’s view that police need to interrupt such initiatives, because gang members scorn rehabilitation efforts and remain criminally involved. However, HU staff were also identified with, and protective of, gang youths regardless of their delinquent behaviour. Had the NGO personnel sought to share with the police information about illicit activities, it might have helped identify and remove from the community those gang members who did commit crimes and permit the rest to continue with the rehabilitation project. While police abuse did occur in La Campanera and deserved to be publicly condemned, Homies Unidos did little to facilitate the law enforcement side of gang control.

Third, and related to the previous point, the NGO did not monitor the bakery project to determine whether participants were beginning to withdraw from crime and violence. Monitoring was required partly because skills training and job opportunities do not automatically lead to gang desistance, partly because *Mano Dura* had encouraged an increasing number of gang members to approach Homies Unidos with a request for a rehabilitation initiative. Although the NGO believed that these circumstances boosted its outreach possibilities, the risk was that gang members might seek out such programmes to hide from the police, but not to abandon gang life. A self-employment

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102 Interview with Luis Ernesto Romero Gavídia, Director, Homies Unidos, San Salvador, 3 July 2006.
option would make this easier precisely because of its independent nature. I do not argue that none of the youths of the Campanera bakery was interested in rehabilitation and the group merely sought to convert the place into a gang hangout. However, I received information that the gang members were unaccountable for much of the time and that drug consumption at the site continued. Had the NGO exercised greater supervision over the youths, it might have helped reduce the growing tensions between the gang and the police. Yet, staff merely responded to their peers’ request by providing the infrastructure of a microenterprise and seemed to lack the creativity or motivation to design a professional project that might have fulfilled the dual purpose of rehabilitation and gang-related advocacy. Ultimately, the Campanera project seemed to suggest that Homies Unidos is interested in improving the life and welfare of gang youth, rather than in developing the capacity to advocate alternative gang control, rhetorical commitments notwithstanding.

**Conclusion**

As a peer rehabilitation NGO Homies Unidos aimed to empower gang members by uniting former rivals who would propose solutions to the problems of their peers and reach out to gang youth to encourage them to abandon drugs and violence. The organisation’s work was informed by the view that gang violence reduction could not be achieved with *Mano Dura*, but required the implementation of a comprehensive and rights-respecting gang policy. Contextual constraints, notably elite influence, the nature of the ruling party, and an oligarchic media system, were likely to hamper the accomplishment of this advocacy goal. NGO strategic choices were crucial if policy-making and policing practices were to be changed.

Homies Unidos carried out programmes covering prevention/information politics, provision of access to services and school or job placements, and human rights. A key objective for the organisation was to act as a bridge between gang members and the conventional world, thus facilitating the integration between the two. Although HU advocacy activities sought little direct policy influence, they had nevertheless the potential to alter the policy context and create incentives for the implementation of gang prevention/rehabilitation and more targeted law enforcement. In practice, however, they

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103 The absences from the bakery were noted and communicated by Christian Poveda. Marijuana consumption was known to, and communicated by, Roberto Ramírez Campos, Probation Officer, Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor, San Salvador.
contributed little towards that end. Exogenous factors played a role, but so did HU strategic choices which in turn were shaped by staff ideology and NGO characteristics.

Homies Unidos had originally emerged from the inspiration and organising efforts of US civil rights activist Magdaleno Rose-Ávila. His ideas, logistical support, and fundraising were critical in creating the NGO and guiding it through its establishment phase. Similarly, the gang study he helped devise inspired the programmes of an agency that had yet to develop an organic capacity for gang rehabilitation and empowerment. These early activities constituted the basis of an NGO run by gang members since these were expected to reach out to gang youths more effectively because of their shared experience. However, the departure of the organisational entrepreneur left a vacuum, and the extent to which staff managed to fill it had important consequences for their advocacy work.

HU personnel are pandilleros calmados who, though often presenting themselves as ex-gang members, have remained emotionally attached to their gang and identified with its culture and values. Given these continued ties to their gang past, HU staff believed in the positive functions of gangs and preferred their peers’ withdrawal from drugs and violence rather than gang dissolution. Their status as pandilleros calmados, though, was known in NGO and official circles where Homies Unidos was viewed with some scepticism and its ideological position was not necessarily shared. While this diminished possibilities for networking or alliance-building, it also restricted the organisation’s access to the authorities. The fact that government and law enforcement categorised gang members as criminals strained their already limited relationship with Homies Unidos. However, the NGO did little to ease this antagonism. Although they rightly tried to expose police harassment of gang members, HU staff were protective of gang youths regardless of their delinquent behaviour and did not share with the police information about gang activity. Some form of collaboration could have increased Homies Unidos’ access to the PNC and its opportunities for the promotion of rights-respecting gang policing. The absence of such steps raises doubts about the NGO’s commitment to gang control.

HU advocacy was also affected by a series of institutional sustainability problems, principally related to financing and staffing issues. On the one hand, the agency’s lack of grant-seeking skills and external factors, such as project-driven donor support and a hostile domestic funding environment, made it difficult for Homies Unidos to raise sufficient revenue. The NGO survived repeated resource shortfalls, but financial
insecurity considerably weakened the organisation and limited its work both quantitatively and qualitatively. On the other hand, given the nature of its recruits the NGO has experienced frequent staff turnovers and serious skills shortages. HU members’ first-hand experience of gang life was meant to make them the ideal spokespersons for their cause. However, they seemed more concerned with internal power struggles than with the professionalisation of the NGO. Whether due to incapacity or frustration at difficult work, staff struggled to perform both job routines and substantive activities. For example, a rehabilitation project that could have served HU advocacy purposes was not only not incorporated into a broader strategy, but also ended prematurely. Despite the NGO’s skills deficit, however, staff resisted the recruitment of qualified non-gang members whose presence and supervision might have served to improve the work of Homies Unidos. Instead, the NGO’s reputation and legitimacy were further eroded by the arrest and subsequent criminal conviction of one staff member.

Finally, strategic limitations also limited the potential impact of HU advocacy. The human rights programme served to alert the PDDH to police abuse against gang members and pursue a number of individual cases. However, these were not followed-up with activities designed to draw attention to the findings and increase pressure for rights-respecting gang enforcement. Testimonio/information politics could raise awareness of the gang problem and the need for gang prevention/rehabilitation. Yet, these speaking engagements had become increasingly rare even though they were easy to organise. The bakery project could have been publicised in the media to highlight the role of job opportunities in gang rehabilitation and creating pressure for an alternative to Mano Dura. However, the NGO merely provided the infrastructure for the microenterprise and did not seek to prevent that continued gang activity and suppressive policing would bring about the collapse of the project. Overall, HU staff were too concerned with organisational survival and the welfare of their peers to conduct their advocacy more effectively. Besides, they pursued a strategy that, unless combined with lobbying and media work, was unlikely to effect policy change by a government opposed to comprehensive and rights-respecting gang control. The next chapter examines the work of the Polígono, which also pursued indirect policy influence, but was widely respected for its work and maintained closer relations with the government.
Chapter 6

Reason, religion, and loving kindness: Padre Pepe’s preferential option for marginalised Salvadoran youth

The Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (Industrial Park Don Bosco, Polígono/PIDB), founded and directed by a Spanish Salesian priest, arose originally to assist socially-excluded Salvadoran youth in gaining job skills and opportunities. Located in a gang-affected community in eastern San Salvador, the NGO eventually initiated a residential education and training programme for at-risk youth and gang members and has become widely respected for having modelled a successful reinsertion initiative. The Polígono maintained that the gang problem would not be resolved with *Mano Dura*, but required an alternative response that combined law enforcement with prevention/rehabilitation. Contextual constraints in the form of elite influence, the ruling party’s status quo nature, and an oligarchic media system, conspired against the promotion of comprehensive gang control. The adoption of a creative advocacy strategy was therefore critical if the official approach was to be reshaped.

The Polígono sought to stimulate this change by implementing an innovative programme and demonstrating to the government a better way of dealing with the gang situation. Although this method pursued indirect policy influence, the existence of a viable initiative could serve to increase the pressure on the authorities to abandon single-minded gang suppression and shift their focus to comprehensive gang control. The programme was at the heart of the Polígono’s advocacy efforts and is below considered in some detail. However, the aim is not to evaluate its actual contribution to gang violence reduction, but to highlight its main premises and characteristics as this helps understand why the NGO’s constructive criticism was unlikely to yield the anticipated policy outcome.

The chapter begins by tracing the Polígono’s emergence as a community-based development organisation committed to the Salesians’ special concern for marginalised youth and identifying its contemporary characteristics. It then reviews the programme content, particularly the education and job training/development components, and examines the philosophy behind this approach and its implications for gang-related advocacy. The chapter moves on to consider participant selection criteria and organisational capacity to rehabilitate gang members. Both aspects raise questions about the nature of the presumed model gang programme and help understand why the
Polígono promoted its work the way it did. Finally, the chapter shows how the NGO showcased its initiative to officials and publicised its position through limited media work in an attempt to reorient gang policy. It also emphasises the agency’s role both in addressing the gang problem in its own community and seeking to build an alliance of advocacy actors as a way of strengthening its political voice.

It is argued that the Polígono primarily sought to sustain its programme and demonstrate its viability as a policy option rather than undertake explicit advocacy efforts. Staff are qualified to provide marginalised youth with education and job skills, but did not demonstrate their capacity to conduct gang rehabilitation, and strict admissions criteria largely exclude gang members from the project. However, a lack of evaluations allowed the NGO to portray itself as a successful gang programmer and exploit its reputation to persuade the government to implement prevention/rehabilitation. The model initiative, for its part, proposed self-reliance rather than improvements of the social context. These were uncontroversial goals that enabled the Polígono to gain access to policy-makers and state funding. Yet, the agency sought to influence the government only through quiet pressure and failed to pursue pro-active media work, mobilise community residents, or construct strategic alliances to bolster its advocacy efforts. Indeed, given its acceptance of official funding the NGO not only guarded its criticism, but also helped relieve the government of its responsibility for gang prevention/rehabilitation. Ultimately, the showcasing of a model gang programme had the effect of raising the institutional profile, but was an ineffective advocacy strategy.

1. The Salesian roots of the Polígono

1.1 The origin and evolution of the PIDB

The Polígono emerged and developed largely due to the creativity and fundraising efforts of its founder and director, Father José Moratalla. A member of the Salesian congregation, “Padre Pepe” designed the institution to meet the particular needs of the local community where it is based, but retained the Salesians’ traditional concern with the most underprivileged youths in society and their education. Both dimensions derive from the preventive system of Saint John Bosco who established the religious order in 1859.
The preventive system of Don Bosco

John Bosco’s own childhood in the countryside near the Italian city of Turin was marked by deep poverty. His decision to become a priest and help the neediest youths was strengthened when he moved to Turin soon after his ordination and discovered the serious social problems that the incipient industrial revolution had triggered. While ruthless entrepreneurs greatly increased their wealth, the workers remained trapped in exploitative conditions. Don Bosco deplored the moral climate surrounding young people as much as their demeaning jobs and overcrowded living quarters. Determined to ensure the spiritual and material welfare of youths, Don Bosco devised a pastoral-educative service directed at their comprehensive development. The methodological pillars of this system were those of reason, religion, and loving kindness. The first element stressed human and Christian values, while the second aimed to familiarise individuals with the message of Jesus and the sacraments. Loving kindness, on the other hand, referred to an educational style whereby the teacher was not thought of as superior, but acted like a father, brother, and friend who offers advice and corrects misbehaviour in a polite but firm manner. The Salesian education system is thus based on the trust between teachers and students which in turn is built in an atmosphere of family spirit, informality, and dialogue.

For Don Bosco personal relations and recreational activities were central to this approach to prevent boredom and create a stimulating learning environment. His efforts began with an oratory dedicated to prayer and cultural pursuits that soon became a full-fledged boarding house engaging youths in a long day of study, work, prayers, and recreation, and a “Good Night talk” symbolising the family environment. To allow for the continuation and expansion of his activities Don Bosco subsequently founded a religious order. The Salesians have since worked among the poorest and most disadvantaged youths of society. Today they maintain a presence in many countries around the world where they run schools, oratories, and parishes. In El Salvador, where the Salesians started their operations in 1897 by transforming a public agricultural school into a vocational training institute, the Polígono is one of their projects.

3 Ibid., 129.
4 Wirth, Don Bosco and the Salesians, 297.
5 On the beginnings of the Salesians’ work in Latin America generally, and El Salvador specifically, see Wirth, Don Bosco and the Salesians, 187-197, 243.
The Comunidad Iberia

Father Moratalla’s attempts to alleviate the social marginality facing Salvadoran youth began in 1985 when he took up a teaching post at the Salesian School Don Bosco in the Comunidad Iberia. Situated in eastern San Salvador, the community grew out of a temporary settlement that had developed after a 1965 earthquake. Though initially conceived as a short-term solution, for many low-income families who had sought shelter there the area became a permanent housing option. For years the terrain was covered with champas (cardboard or laminate shacks) erected along dusty paths and lacked basic services. During the war the overcrowding worsened as hundreds of families fled the violence in the countryside and took refuge in this and other marginal zones.6

Upon his arrival in the Iberia Father Moratalla found a community rife with alcoholism, drug consumption, and high levels of crime and violence. In the absence of meaningful jobs many girls had turned to prostitution while male youths were involved in criminal gangs. By his own account Father Moratalla felt he wanted to do more than give classes and for the next two years spent most of his evenings visiting with the locals and listening to their stories and concerns. Over time he realised that education and job training alone did not permit individuals to secure decent employment. A possible solution to this problem lay in the creation of co-operatives, which would provide jobs and enable people to overcome a culture of dependency. When the Salesian school was damaged in a 1986 earthquake and had to be relocated, Father Moratalla remained in the Comunidad Iberia to help establish the Polígono.7 The mayor of San Salvador was persuaded to make a piece of land available under a 99-year ground lease, and on what was then the municipal rubbish dump the youths started to build their future workplace. In 1988 the Polígono commenced its operations with ten small, mostly industrial, co-operatives and in 1994 also opened a multi-storey educational institute.8

Today’s visitors are greeted by a picture of progress. The roads are paved; shacks were largely replaced by more durable housing made of mixed-system-materials; most residents possess legal housing titles; and access to water, sanitation, and electricity was

7 Interview with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 22 June 2006.
8 On the founding years of the Polígono, see José María Moratalla, El Polígono Industrial Don Bosco: una alternativa de paz y progreso para El Salvador (San Salvador: mimeo [n.d.]), 21-23; Lorena Cuerno et al., El Polígono Industrial Don Bosco: una opción de vida para los jóvenes en conflicto con la ley (San Salvador: UNICEF, 2004), 21.
increased. However, social problems have persisted in this community of an estimated 45,000 inhabitants. Bordered by a defunct railway line, factories, a market, and one of San Salvador’s main bus terminals, the zone lacks parks or public squares. In addition to noise and air pollution, people experience overcrowding and illnesses associated with insalubrious living conditions. At least 80% of the families work in the informal sector and receive only subsistence-level wages. Given the lack of decent jobs many residents have migrated to the United States, and the majority of homes are now single-parent households. Perhaps the most acute problem is the persistence of high crime levels. As the map below indicates, the community is interspersed with crime “hot spots” (marked in red) where homicides, robberies, extortions, drug trafficking, and street gang activity are particularly critical.

Figure 6.1 Map of the Comunidad Iberia and the Polígono (map: EDYTRA/PIDB)

9 Interview with Miguel Azucena, President, Committee of Community Leaders, PIDB, San Salvador, 30 May 2006.
10 Ibid.
11 Departamento de Organización del Espacio/UCA, Documentos del Laboratorio del Hábitat Popular, 9.
12 Intercomunal Nor-Oriente and Fundación EDYTRA, Diagnóstico de las Comunidades Iberías y otras aledañas (San Salvador: mimeo, April 2006), 18.
13 Interview with Miguel Azucena, President, Committee of Community Leaders, PIDB, San Salvador, 30 May 2006.
The gangs have carved up the area such that the Dieciocho dominates one part while the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) controls the sector hosting the Polígono. Given the NGO’s location in MS territory staff and students have been the targets of harassment and extortions by gang members.\textsuperscript{14} Father Moratalla and his team have been able to carry out their work despite the difficulties and security risks it entails. Yet, although the Polígono is situated in a gang-affected community and claims to have developed an innovative gang programme, these efforts have occurred exclusively within the agency’s residential setting. The failure to address the gang situation outside its doors raises doubts about the NGO’s capacity for gang work and weakens its attempts to influence the government’s policy by showcasing a model initiative. The following portrait of the Polígono highlights organisational characteristics that shaped this advocacy of alternative gang control.

**The Polígono today**

Shielded by high walls the Polígono is an oasis of tranquillity in a grey urban landscape. An extensive car park divides the school and boarding houses from the co-operatives, offices, a verdant open-air canteen, and a large athletic field, and a health clinic offers treatment to the local population for a charge of US$3.\textsuperscript{15} On weekdays the site is alive with the faint sound of machines and the voices of youths walking to their classes. Despite its status as a gang rehabilitation centre, the Polígono has essentially remained a development organisation that aims to generate meaningful jobs and thus help avoid that the poor turn to gangs and crime. Some of the most recent projects entail the creation of *achiote* and *tempate* co-operatives across the country, and Father Moratalla is also hoping to install a water-treatment plant on the Polígono’s grounds.\textsuperscript{16}

The residential programme for at-risk youth and gang members is only part of the NGO’s overall commitment to helping the neediest members of society and had not been planned. In 1992 Father Moratalla and his staff had begun working with street children whom they befriended in bus terminals and public squares. When the US-sponsored deportations of gang members commenced, the gang problem in El Salvador acquired a different dimension and largely absorbed the street children. However, in 1995 UNICEF-El Salvador suggested to the Polígono to institute a scholarship-based

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\textsuperscript{14} Personal communication by Raúl Ramírez, Director of Education, PIDB, San Salvador.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Guadalupe Leiva Choriego, Director, EDYTRA, PIDB, San Salvador, 10 May 2006.

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 22 June 2006. The seeds of the *achiote* plant contain annatto, which can be used as a food colouring. The seeds of the *tempate* tree can be pressed to produce cooking oil and biofuel, and the seed cake can be turned into cattle and chicken feed.
alternative to the deficient rehabilitation process in youth detention centres. According to the proposal juvenile courts would identify appropriate candidates, and the CSJ would release UNICEF funds to the Polígono where the selected individuals would spend the remainder of their sentence. This agreement has been in place since 1996, and since 80% of juvenile offenders are gang members this was how the NGO came to work with gang members.

Over the years staff recognised that gang rehabilitation was difficult and decided to limit entry to applicants who had indicated their intention to cease their gang identification and change their life. I will return to this point and will here only make an observation on organisational capacity. NGOs often lack adequate technical skills, and a deficit in this area would pose a particular problem for an agency that seeks to propose a model programme. Polígono staff were trained as educators or similar professions, but have no gang expertise. Despite these limitations the agency has acquired a reputation as a successful gang rehabilitation centre. The mainstream media have repeatedly highlighted the Polígono’s experience, and the NGO’s status is such that Salvadoran and foreign officials alike have toured the installations. Antonio Saca and Rodrigo Ávila, ARENA’s candidates for the presidency in 2004 and 2009 respectively, both visited the NGO during their campaign and expressed their interest in reproducing the Polígono model. Colombian pop star and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Shakira, when visiting El Salvador to support a campaign against violence, even invited Father Moratalla onto the concert stage.

The respect and credibility the NGO has earned over the years afforded it positive media coverage and facilitated its access to policy-makers and funding. Later parts of this chapter will show that this was also possible, because the Polígono’s goals were

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18 Interview with Jaime Martínez, Director, UJJ/Supreme Court of Justice, San Salvador, 15 June 2006.
acceptable to a government that was itself unwilling to implement gang prevention/rehabilitation. First, however, the agency’s funding situation needs to be considered. Like many NGOs the Polígono experienced financial difficulties. For example, when in 1992 resources had been depleted and the salaries went unpaid for a four-month period, 25 out of 27 technical staff resigned, and a similar three-month crisis in 1998 prompted renewed staff flight. However, the Polígono was able to overcome these challenges and has developed a fairly strong donor base. Although the organisation accepts private donations in cash and kind, for much of its revenue it relies on contributions by UNICEF, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the Spanish and Salvadoran governments. At the time I conducted my research more than 60% of the Polígono’s income came from the Salvadoran authorities, including the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP), but had to be renewed on an annual basis.

Collaboration of this kind has benefits for both parties, since it helps the NGO to ensure the sustainability of the project and allows the government to share its responsibility for gang prevention/rehabilitation and the reinsertion of juvenile offenders. However, the receipt of public funding had two implications for the Polígono’s gang-related advocacy. First, it threatened the NGO’s independence and required criticism of Mano Dura to be expressed in a more cautious manner than might otherwise have been the case. Second, it meant that the government could support a small-scale effort and demonstrate its commitment to gang prevention/rehabilitation without having to carry out its own functions in this area. In other words, the Polígono not only pursued a strategy that was ineffective in persuading the government to reorient its gang policy, but with its cooperative attitude might actually have decreased this pressure. The following discussion focuses on the model initiative that constituted the basis of the NGO’s advocacy and explains why it attracted official backing but was unlikely to motivate changes to the gang policy.

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24 Interview with Raúl Ramírez, Director of Education, PIDB, San Salvador, 29 May 2006. In the Polígono the term “technical staff” refers to the educators, psychologists, and administrative personnel, not to the workers employed in the co-operatives.

25 Interview with Guadalupe Leiva Choriego, Director, EDYTRA, PIDB, San Salvador, 10 May 2006.

26 Figure obtained in interview with Guadalupe Leiva Choriego, Director, EDYTRA, PIDB, San Salvador, 10 May 2006.
1.2 The Polígono’s residential programme

The Polígono’s work with at-risk youth and gang members is structured around a residential education and job training project with gender-sensitive components. Entitled the Miguel Magone/Laura Vicuña Programme, the initiative is aimed at youths aged 14 to 18 years, although the upper limit is occasionally extended to allow individuals to complete their education. 27 Scholarship holders join the Polígono following a lengthy admissions process, which culminates in the signing of a letter of commitment. In this contractual document the NGO, the youths, and their parents or sponsors all pledge to honour their respective commitments. Recurring violations of the agreement on the part of the students can lead to their expulsion from the institution and in the case of juvenile offenders to their re-entry into the detention centre.

To provide participants with comprehensive education and prepare them for self-employment residents’ life in the Polígono is tightly organised and monitored. Participants receive free medical care and lodging in gender-separate boarding houses where periodic room inspections are carried out to verify compliance with internal rules. Designed to maintain order and morality, these guidelines ban sexual activities, alcohol and drug consumption; the use of mobile phones and TV/stereo equipment; and the possession of weapons, pornographic, satanic or gang-related material. The daily schedule is structured from breakfast at 6.30 a.m. until bedtime at 9.15 p.m. Interrupted only by regular mealtimes, activities require compulsory attendance and include prayers and spiritual guidance; recreational pursuits; individual and group counselling as well as the reflective “Good Night talk.” On weekdays the focus is on work (morning) and study (afternoon) while parts of one Saturday per month are dedicated to parent-teacher meetings. The objective both of these gatherings and a quarterly house call is to strengthen the parents’ moral and spiritual values and to help them improve their parenting skills. To facilitate their reinsertion youths are required to spend the weekend with their family. Developments in each area are monitored and recorded in the students’ file. The information thus compiled enables staff to produce a quarterly evaluation of each student and if necessary undertake corrective measures.

27 Information on the Miguel Magone/Laura Vicuña Programme was obtained in interviews with Raúl Ramírez, Director of Education, PIDB, San Salvador, 26 May 2006 and 29 May 2006.
Education for work

At the heart of the Polígono are the Instituto Técnico Obrero-Empresarial (Technical Institute for Entrepreneurial Workers, ITOE) and the largely industrial co-operatives, which provide employment and income to their workers and owners. The ITOE offers education from the pre-school level to the bachillerato (high school) and serves more than 300 students, including both boarders and day-participants. The curriculum emphasises technical training and business administration and requires those in secondary education to attend vocational workshops while the boarders studying for their bachillerato must join one of the co-operatives as unpaid apprentices. For Father Moratalla the key problem in gang rehabilitation/reinsertion is the lack of job opportunities in El Salvador. The educational activities in the Polígono are therefore aimed at preparing individuals for self-employment in the form of either a co-operative or a microenterprise. The agency’s approach can be summed up by the motto “education for work” and is based on the Polígono’s application of the preventive system of Don Bosco.

The Salesians aspire to provide education for life in both the personal and professional spheres. Centring on the spiritual encounter with the charity of God, the preventive system seeks to strengthen human beings’ faith and values to allow them to fully assume their responsibilities in life as well as to act according to the human and Christian ideal of service to others. In short, the purpose is to mould young persons into upright citizens and good Christians. The Polígono built on these ideas to craft both a new entrepreneurial paradigm and a novel technical-academic education paradigm. The aim was to create empresarios solidarios cristianos or individuals who have the tools to be the protagonists of their own social and economic development and exercise their trade in solidarity with others, rather than in pursuit of material gain. According to Father Moratalla, this would ultimately allow people to escape from poverty. Education in the Polígono thus seeks to prepare not qualified labour, but entrepreneurs who embrace discipline, solidarity, and a spirit of self-reliance.

The purpose of this discussion is not to question the merit or otherwise of the NGO’s approach to poverty alleviation and gang violence reduction. Rather, it aims to show that the Polígono’s philosophy, though based on Salesian principles and Father Moratalla’s pragmatism, coincides with the neoliberal values espoused by ARENA. I am
not arguing that the agency is interested in defending the status quo. However, its model programme does not propose to address the structural factors associated with the gang problem, but prepares youths to function within the existing social and economic system. Since the goals of the Polígono’s project overlapped with the neoliberal emphasis on individualism and self-reliance, they were uncontroversial in official circles and permitted the NGO access to the policy-process and public funding. Yet, the nature of the initiative, combined with the advocacy strategies that were adopted to promote it, made it unlikely that the government would implement a comprehensive gang policy.

1.3 The Polígono co-operatives: an antidote to gang violence?

The work component of the Polígono’s programme seeks to prepare youths for self-employment in the form of either a co-operative or a microenterprise. The organisation itself tries to demonstrate the viability of its model by means of its own co-operatives, which provide employment and income to members of the Comunidad Iberia. As discussed below, a number of problems raise doubts about the efficacy of the residential training programme in the current Salvadoran reality. However, the objective here is neither to evaluate the performance of the co-operatives nor to assess their contribution to gang control. Instead, I want to emphasise the uncontroversial nature of the self-employment option and to note that a lack of evaluations allowed the Polígono to promote its project as a gang policy option, notwithstanding its limitations.

Given its ambition to form socially responsible entrepreneurs the Polígono preferred the co-operative business model to create local jobs. A co-operative is a voluntarily organised firm which is owned, capitalised, and controlled by members-owners who share risks and benefits proportional to their participation. The primary purpose is to make a profit for the patrons of the co-op, not for investors. Within these principles there exist different types of associations such as the workers’ or industrial co-ops that the Polígono established. Co-operatives respond to both economic and social circumstances. While individually-owned businesses may be relatively easy and inexpensive to set up, their available capital is limited. Co-ops, by contrast, allow individuals to pool human and financial resources and keep input costs low.

Furthermore, they constitute a platform for job security and can contribute to the social development of local communities.\textsuperscript{33}

Despite the relative merits of a group enterprise, co-ops are difficult economic institutions to function. Their altruistic objectives notwithstanding, co-ops must compete successfully in the capitalist market if they are to survive. Like profit-type corporations they require adequate capital to operate effectively and grow. However, their particular structures and practices make co-ops less able than other firms to raise additional finances. Generally, the most critical problem they face is the need to remain adequately competitive and achieve the profitability that is essential for their continued existence.\textsuperscript{34}

The ten co-ops established by the Polígono in 1988 were primarily aimed at the fabrication of goods with easy commercialisation potential. With a focus on craft industries and traditional activities, the Grupo Empresarial Don Bosco (Business Group Don Bosco) comprised aluminium, furniture-making, shoe manufacture, die-stamping, plastics, bakery, mechanics, ceramics, metal production, and printing. All were integrated into a co-op federation led by a Federative Council that owns the firms’ physical infrastructure. Associations of this kind enable businesses to keep operation costs down and provide better products than they might individually do.\textsuperscript{35} Additionally, the Fundación Salvadoreña Educación y Trabajo (Salvadoran Foundation for Education and Work, EDYTRA) was tasked to provide the co-ops with the necessary support services. As the legal representative and fundraising department of the Polígono, EDYTRA administers donations for machinery, provides centralised marketing facilities, and locates external experts who provide co-op members with periodic training in business administration.\textsuperscript{36}

If the survival of the Polígono’s businesses is a sign of success, it is nonetheless a limited one. Of the ten co-ops listed above, the last two ceased their operations for competition-induced reasons, while the ceramics factory had to be closed due to staff flight.\textsuperscript{37} The seven remaining firms provide work to some 250 individuals, including members, workers, and the boarders who train as unpaid apprentices.\textsuperscript{38} In 2005 they had

\textsuperscript{35} On the advantages of co-op federations, see Roy, Cooperatives, 322-323.
\textsuperscript{36} Interview with Guadalupe Leiva Choriego, Director, EDYTRA, PIDB, San Salvador, 10 May 2006.
\textsuperscript{37} Personal communication by Raúl Ramírez, Director of Education, PIDB, San Salvador.
\textsuperscript{38} Interview with Víctor Rodríguez, Director, Consejo Federativo, PIDB, San Salvador, 31 May 2006.
a joint annual turnover of $724,600. However, each would have had to use a significant portion of the revenue for non-wage business expenses such as the acquisition of raw materials and the maintenance of factory and equipment. Given an average workforce of 28 individuals, it seems unlikely that each co-op could pay its employees much more than the minimum wage. Importantly, performance was moderate despite the incentives that the Polígono offered the co-ops, including leased land; donations for buildings and modern machinery; marketing and training; and the support of unpaid apprentices.

The difficulties these businesses experienced appear to be related both to their particular manufacturing sectors and to the economic environment of El Salvador. The Polígono’s industries are all characterised by relatively low skills and capital requirements which is what made them attractive in the first place. However, the risk of concentrating on activities with the lowest barriers to entry is one of market overcrowding and resulting low returns. Like other companies the Polígono’s co-ops can only achieve profitability and viability if they remain competitive and meet a well-defined need in the market. However, due to the restructuring of the Salvadoran economy in favour of the service sector, the manufacturing industry has lost the importance it previously had and the Polígono can only supply a small market. Furthermore, the co-ops face significant competition by the EPGs and TNCs, which can either easily scale-up their economies and thus manufacture at a lower cost or import and sell products more cheaply than small firms could do.

With this analysis I am not trying to suggest that the Polígono workers may not find such employment and income opportunities satisfying. Yet, the broader constraints facing the co-ops and their modest salaries raise questions about the efficacy of the NGO’s programme for gang rehabilitation. To what extent does it constitutes a feasible alternative for individuals who can potentially earn more money with drug sales than with licit activities? The point to note, however, is that the idea of self-employment afforded the Polígono official support for the initiative and that the agency could, based on anecdotal evidence, nonetheless promote it as a feasible gang policy choice. The following discussion of the microenterprise model invites similar observations, but includes an example that illustrates the possible limitations of the NGO’s programme. Evaluations would have documented these weaknesses, but in their absence the Polígono

39 Interview with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 22 June 2006.
40 The minimum wage for non-maquila industrial workers reached US$154.80 per month (US$170.28 since 1 September 2006). See FESPAD, Políticas Públicas y Derechos Económico, Sociales y Culturales en El Salvador. Observatorio de las Políticas Públicas y los DESC (San Salvador: FESPAD, 2006), 25. One Polígono worker I spoke to stated that the low salaries made it difficult to maintain a family.
was able to use anecdotal evidence of a success story for its advocacy of gang prevention/rehabilitation.

1.4 Microenterprise development: a gang rehabilitation option?

Microenterprises are small-scale units that produce and distribute goods and services with little or no capital and function mostly as survival strategies. The initial low level of capital investment that is characteristic of this form of business generally permits only limited labour productivity, low incomes, and small profits that might be reinvested in the firm.\(^{41}\) Most microenterprises start as one-person firms dedicated to activities with the lowest barriers to entry and are therefore the least efficient and remunerative of small businesses, their growth typically being constrained by a lack of markets and finance.\(^{42}\) The Polígono nonetheless supports this business model, because it can provide individuals with a minimum level of income where job opportunities are scarce. As an approach to employment creation and poverty alleviation that requires people to manage their own welfare through active participation in the market economy, microenterprise development is consistent with neoliberal values and permitted the NGO to gain governmental backing. The success with which the Polígono incorporated the microenterprise option into its model gang programme can be judged from the following example.

19-year-old Carlos (fictitious name) had been permitted to transfer to the NGO to complete a sentence for homicide. Having joined the gang at age 11, he had completed only four years of formal education prior to joining the Polígono. Carlos spent close to two years with the agency before security concerns prompted his relocation. Given his facial tattoos it was decided to convert his sentence into house arrest and encourage him to start his own microenterprise. By the time I met the youth he had already spent some six months working in his bakery, which had been installed in the home of a relative. Like every Polígono boarder Carlos had been required to open a savings account, administered by the institution and released upon completion of the programme as start capital for a microenterprise or university studies. The bakery, which I had the opportunity to visit with a probation officer, had been set up in a laminate shack with only a rudimentary infrastructure and under rather insanitary conditions. Together with

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one assistant Carlos prepared the products that another helper was expected to deliver to customers. Although this was ostensibly a functioning business, during a previous interview that I had conducted with him Carlos had acknowledged that his savings were insufficient to expand his bakery and did not know how to raise more funds.

This example raises a number of questions concerning both the extent to which the Polígono could adequately train the youth for self-employment and the environmental constraints mentioned earlier. However, this analysis will focus on the potential of this “education for work” initiative for gang rehabilitation. As indicated earlier, the NGO proposed a job training and development programme not only because these services constitute alternatives to gang life, but also because gang members stand little chance of being recruited for one of the few existing employment opportunities. In the case of Carlos it was too early to tell whether a modestly-performing business would enable him to desist from gang life. I am not suggesting that he may not be able to turn his microenterprise into a rewarding income-generating activity. However, it is unclear whether a small-scale programme of the kind the Polígono promotes can meet young people’s occupational expectations sufficiently enough to encourage gang desistance. To be sure, the NGO presented its programme as an option, rather than a panacea for gang control. In the absence of evaluations the organisation could nonetheless present the project as a successful initiative and make its case for gang prevention/rehabilitation. Concrete evidence of its work might have strengthened its advocacy, but was unavailable. Below I point to some of the reasons for this omission.

2. Showcasing the Polígono’s gang programme

2.1 Candidate screening

After its initial work with street children, the Polígono focused on three target groups: at-risk youth, gang members, and juvenile offenders. For the purposes of its programme the NGO defined these terms as follows. “At-risk youth” refers to adolescents who live in a marginal community, often with gang presence; come from low-income and/or dysfunctional families; and have siblings or relatives in a gang. “Gang members” are youths who wear tattoos and baggy clothes; paint territorial graffiti and communicate in signs and special argot; congregate with other gang members; live in destroyers (gang hangouts); listen to rap or hard rock, display postures of toughness, and use weapons.
“Juvenile offenders” are individuals who were under 18 when they committed the crime and were given permission to complete their sentence in the Polígono. The appropriateness of the first two definitions is debatable. However, this need not concern us here, because the NGO does not target individuals for its services, but receives only referrals (juvenile offenders/gang members) or self-referrals (at-risk youth).

Nevertheless, the agency developed a screening mechanism to filter candidates who seek admission to the residential programme. The selection process includes a guided tour of the campus; an interview with the applicant and the parents, and a psychometric evaluation designed to measure the candidate’s IQ, attitudes, and personality. The admission is followed by a one-month probation period that is designed to establish whether the youth can adapt to the rules and daily life in the institution. Of particular significance is the interview and test phase, which allows the Polígono to form an opinion about the applicants and their professed commitment to study and work. It is at this stage where the agency can filter future boarders and has done so essentially to the exclusion of gang members.

It appears that after the first intake of juvenile offenders and gang members the Polígono tightened its admissions criteria to exclude more difficult cases. The NGO now bars youths with a nuclear family; a drug addiction; a low IQ or special learning needs; homosexuality/lesbianism; and gang membership or identification with a gang. While these criteria bar those most in need of treatment, there also occurred instances of “net-widening” whereby services were extended to youths who might not require them. The following examples serve to illustrate this point. First, one MS member was not accepted for his failure to pronounce his age (18), whereas another gang youth was expelled when he was found to have written “MS” on his computer. Second, the NGO admitted individuals who were disadvantaged, but did not appear at risk of gang joining. For instance, one girl had experienced domestic violence and turned to prostitution, but is now funded by the Polígono to complete her university education. Another female came from a single-parent household and had to help her mother at work rather than attend school. She seemed to possess all the requisites of a model student and apprentice.

43 The Polígono’s definitions of the three target groups are contained in EDYTRA, Perfil del destinatario del Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (San Salvador: mimeo [n.d.]).
44 See the interviews in Cuerno, El Polígono Industrial Don Bosco, 69-77.
45 Information on the first case was received in a personal communication by Raúl Ramírez, Director of Education, PIDB, San Salvador. Information on the second case was received in interview with Aída Luz Santos de Escobar, Judge at the Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor, San Salvador, 8 May 2006.
and her request to be granted the opportunity for further study was readily granted.\textsuperscript{46}

This is not to deny the importance of the NGO’s work with needy youths, but to show that its programme does not target gang-prone youths and largely excludes gang members.

Up to 60\% of the Polígono’s boarders are at-risk youth, while 40\% of them are juvenile offenders, including gang members.\textsuperscript{47} According to the statistical information that was provided to me, of the more than 900 individuals who joined the programme over the years 155 were gang members.\textsuperscript{48} However, an earlier, incomplete data set I had been given combined the numbers of gang-prone youths and gang members under the total figure for the second group. These contradictions make it difficult to ascertain how many gang members entered the institution and graduated from it. Furthermore, given the lack of evaluations it is impossible to determine how many of them ultimately abandoned gang life. The boarders I interviewed could only confirm that the number of gang youths had declined over the years and claimed that at the time of my 2006 research visit only one gang member was enrolled in the programme.\textsuperscript{49} A CNSP rehabilitation officer, who called on the NGO to verify whether 40 scholarships earmarked for gang rehabilitation were spent accordingly, was reportedly denied access to all 40 target youths, supposedly for reasons of timetabling and illness.\textsuperscript{50}

From the available evidence it appears that the number of gang members in the project declined over the years. For some prospective applicants the gang presence in the Iberia may have reduced the Polígono’s appeal as a rehabilitation centre: local MS youths had previously sought to kill three participants and in 2005 followed one gang youth onto the agency’s premises and murdered him.\textsuperscript{51} However, the Polígono’s exclusive admissions criteria discriminate against gang members and served to shift the NGO’s focus to individuals who are more amenable to its services. It is debatable to what extent a gang programme that requires the said screening mechanism and candidates’ prior value transformation merits this label. If anything, this filtering process raises questions about the organisation’s technical preparation for gang rehabilitation (see below).

\textsuperscript{46} Information obtained through personal interviews and consultation of internal files.
\textsuperscript{47} Interview with Guadalupe Leiva Choriego, Director, EDYTRA, PIDB, San Salvador, 10 May 2006.
\textsuperscript{49} I interviewed a total of nine boarders who were selected for me following my request to speak with at least two individuals of each target group. Although the involvement of NGO staff in that stage of the interview process may have influenced the respondents’ answers, both their tightly structured schedule and the compulsory attendance made it difficult impossible for me to choose the interviewees independently.
\textsuperscript{50} Interview with Milton Vega, Rehabilitation Officer, CNSP, San Salvador, 11 April 2006.
\textsuperscript{51} Interview with Raúl Ramirez, Director of Education, PIDB, San Salvador, 26 May 2006.
The Polígono is well aware of this criticism, which has also been expressed by some of the judges who authorise the transfer of juvenile offenders to the institution. For example, Judge Aida Santos de Escobar argued that the agency prefers to work only with “good children” and rejects more difficult cases. Father Moratalla insisted that the Polígono had merely established a minimum of rules that helped maintain a violence-free environment and facilitated work in a residential setting. Gang members needed to have left behind all ideological baggage to be receptive to the NGO’s education and training activities. In addition, Father Moratalla asserted that disapproving judges were inappropriately interfering with pedagogical issues and trying to destabilise the Polígono.

Despite these limitations judges prefer to move juvenile offenders to the agency, because its residential programme is more comprehensive and rigorous than the rehabilitation process carried out in the youth detention centres. Although this part of the NGO’s work is partly financed by UNICEF, it is nonetheless a public function that the authorities have effectively delegated to a private institution. The Polígono is aware that it has assumed a responsibility of the state, but does not want to close the only alternative space for juvenile offenders and prefers to collaborate with the government in solving a problem that has overwhelmed the government. The agency’s response to this dilemma is a subjective one and not the concern of this discussion. I argue, however, that it had important implications for the Polígono’s attempts to advocate alternative gang control. Not only was the government not persuaded to implement a different gang policy, but the Polígono’s work with juvenile offenders (including gang members) allowed the administration to demonstrate its support for prevention/rehabilitation without having to make a long-term policy and resource commitment in this area. In other words, the Polígono’s strategy did not put greater political pressure on the government, but may have inadvertently decreased it.

Furthermore, the agency may have had a number of reasons for not evaluating its activities, such as Father Moratalla’s preference for practical work rather than research. However, I contend that the NGO did not produce and publicise formal assessments, because these would have revealed certain programme limitations and undermined the

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52 Interview with Aída Luz Santos de Escobar, Judge at the Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor, San Salvador, 8 May 2006.
53 Interview with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 22 June 2006.
54 Interview with Aída Luz Santos de Escobar, Judge at the Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor, San Salvador, 8 May 2006.
55 Interview with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 29 June 2006.
56 Personal communication by Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador.
positive reputation of both the organisation and its initiative. Had the project been more gang-specific than it appeared to be, documented examples of the agency’s contribution to gang prevention/rehabilitation could have bolstered its advocacy. Instead, the organisation relied on anecdotal evidence to propose a policy option and promote alternative gang control. External perceptions of staff competence were largely taken for granted and allowed the Polígono to become a prominent advocate of gang prevention/rehabilitation, but this status ultimately served the organisation more than its activism. This point is also the focus of the following section, which considers the NGO’s attempts at gang desistance within its residential setting.

### 2.2 Encouraging gang desistance

As indicated earlier, the Polígono’s admissions criteria essentially bar individuals who remain identified with their gang. However, the institution did admit some gang youths who had signalled their intention to change, but had yet to adopt conventional values. Two of these cases are considered here to highlight the agency’s difficulties with achieving gang members’ individuation and contrast the outcomes with the public presentations of the model. The aim is to re-emphasise that despite an apparent lack of gang expertise and documented evidence of successful gang programming, the Polígono was able to sustain its positive reputation and use it for its advocacy.

Pedro and Carlos (fictitious names) had both been members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* and had been moved to the Polígono from a detention centre where they had commenced a sentence for homicide. Pedro joined the gang aged 15 and had been affiliated with it for two years when he was admitted to the Polígono in mid-2003. In his application the youth had expressed his desire to adopt a different lifestyle, but his initial personality test identified a tendency to lie and manipulate as well as a limited commitment to withdrawing from the gang. The first report highlighted academic difficulties and persistent identification with the gang. Two years later intimidating behaviour and emotional attachment to the gang continued, and a psychologist conveyed his concern at the persistence of this conduct. In 2006 Polígono staff acknowledged that Pedro had been a difficult case, but was committed to leaving the gang, because he had improved his posture and language and no longer identified with the gang through hand

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57 Information about the two youths was obtained through the following sources: a personal interview and consultation of the internal file; attendance of one of Pedro’s quarterly court hearings; and a house call on Carlos with the probation officer in charge of his case.
signs or writings. When I met Pedro for an interview he made sure to shake hands and answered my questions eloquently. However, he maintained a defiant attitude, was opposed to having his tattoos removed, and had no regrets about his gang experience. The Polígono’s internal regulations, he affirmed, could be complied with and required only adaptation. In his next court hearing Pedro was attested good conduct which he seized on to request his discharge from the Polígono. To his apparent dismay, however, the judge ordered his continued participation in the programme.

Carlos, whose microenterprise was mentioned earlier, was initially rejected for his facial tattoos, but was admitted following the intervention of UNICEF. His psychometric test revealed insincerity, impulsiveness, egocentricity, and a lack of self-control as some of his key characteristics. During his time in the Polígono the youth often seemed to be listening to Christian messages, ostensibly to make a good impression. In his dealings with staff Carlos appeared serious and humble, yet towards fellow students he displayed intimidating behaviour and demanded respect for his gang experience. Prior to quarterly reports and court hearings he acted pleasantly in order to gain approval. Nonetheless, regular psychological assessments confirmed that Carlos continued to retain emotional ties to his gang. I met the former clica “leader” on two occasions and was able to observe the ambivalent behaviour that Polígono staff had noted. In the presence of authority figures Carlos assumed a quiet and docile stance, but when I interviewed him alone his attitude was one of indifference and disdain that could quickly descend into aggressiveness. Both youths seemed unapologetic about their gang experience and had remained attached to their gang. Attitude and value change is no fast and easy process, but I want to argue that the Polígono was unable to weaken their gang identity for reasons related to technical capacity and the residential setting.

First, I am not suggesting that Polígono staff lacked professional skills. However, the employees, though qualified to provide education and job training, had no gang expertise. Instead, the agency assumed that the Salesian principles of reason, religion, and loving kindness could be applied to a gang programme and youths would improve their conduct if educators maintained regular dialogue with them and helped fulfill their affective needs. Second, one Polígono psychologist argued that gang members initially find it difficult to adapt to life in the institution, but change completely after a few

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59 Personal communication by Roberto Ramírez Campos, Probation Officer, Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor, San Salvador.
60 I met Carlos twice, once for an interview arranged by the Polígono, and later when I accompanied the probation officer on his house call.
months. However, this adaptation may not reflect real transformations and merely respond to the behaviour modification that is pursued in the residential setting. Briefly stated, NGO staff regularly monitor the youths and, if required, summon them to a meeting to discuss any problems. Depending on the case, behaviour is rewarded or penalised with a favourable or disapproving quarterly report. Juvenile offenders in particular are interested in obtaining a positive assessment. Therefore, individuals quickly learn to self-censor their speech and actions to avoid criticism and, at worst, their expulsion from the institution. However, behaviour modification is a simplistic and ineffective approach to gang rehabilitation. As a form of reward-punishment social control, this technique tends to elicit short-term compliance but no long-term changes in personality or behaviour. In other words, however gang youths view the Polígono’s rules they will conform to them to make their life easier, but may not necessarily maintain a conventional lifestyle after their graduation.

Since no formal evaluations have been conducted of the NGO’s initiative its contribution to gang prevention/rehabilitation is unclear. According to the agency’s own estimates, 90% of participants changed while 10% re-offended or were killed. In addition, many grateful graduates have reportedly remained in contact with Father Moratalla and his team. Despite the paucity of evidence that the Polígono has been implementing a model gang project, the NGO had acquired the reputation of a successful gang programmer. This status allowed the organisation to become a credible voice for alternative gang control, but these advocacy efforts ultimately served to strengthen institutional visibility and sustainability rather than to influence the government’s gang policy. These limitations arose in large part from the methods that were employed to showcase the programme.

2.3 A “contagion” of reality?

By modelling a gang prevention/rehabilitation programme the Polígono sought to demonstrate to the government a more appropriate solution to the gang problem. As a form of indirect policy influence this kind of strategy can alter the policy context, especially if combined with lobbying or media work. The NGO’s advocacy approach was shaped by Father Moratalla’s belief that a collaborative attitude towards the state is

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61 Cited in Faux, Les maras, gangs d’enfants, 103-104.
preferable to an adversarial relationship. In his view democracy required civil society to engage political leaders through dialogue and consensus rather than opposition or protest. Therefore, it was right for the Polígono to cooperate with the authorities. Furthermore, since the government was elected by the Salvadoran people, in the long-term it could not rule as it wished but would have to implement the proposals that were being presented to it.  

The NGO’s primary objective was to consolidate its work and turn it into a model that can be replicated by others. Father Moratalla imagined the Polígono to be an experiment of Salvadoran society, because society itself needed to reflect on how to develop an effective response to gang violence. The priest and his team hoped that the initiative they had built might “contaminate” the reality around them and transform it. Therefore, the Polígono aimed not to merely express its disapproval of the existing gang policy, but to provide constructive criticism and share an alternative response with the authorities. By identifying a different approach to gang control the agency could then implicitly reject Mano Dura.

Father Moratalla acknowledged that his programme could be read in different ways. While a government that was committed to the poor would respect and support the initiative, one that adhered to other political or ideological criteria might well reject it. The Polígono has been able to cooperate with some ministries, for example on its provision of education and training services and the creation of *achiote* co-operatives, even though the government tended to claim credit for what were joint activities. However, in other cases the NGO has found it more difficult to influence the administration, because it does not share the agency’s commitment to society’s marginalised sectors. According to Father Moratalla, the Polígono has sometimes faced a lonely struggle. However, he considered it positive that the government not only permitted the agency to do its work, but also funded it and therefore demonstrated its approval of the initiative. In the long term, Father Moratalla believed, action would force action and the Polígono’s work would persuade the authorities to implement its own gang prevention/rehabilitation programme.

In practice the NGO pursued three methods to showcase its project and promote an alternative gang policy. First, it sought to create a professional and sustainable model such that its positive public reputation might speak for itself and persuade other actors of

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64 Interview with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 29 June 2006.
65 Interview with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 22 June 2006.
66 Interview with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 29 June 2006.
its benefits. Since emphasis was placed on this tactic the organisation made otherwise few pro-active attempts to advocate a different form of gang violence reduction. However, Father Moratalla also sought to enable the authorities in other ways to control the gang situation, for example by alerting them to suspected gang infiltration of the PNC.  

Second, given the respect and credibility the Polígono had gained over the years for its work with gang members Father Moratalla’s opinion was frequently solicited by the media. For example, following the launch of Mano Dura La Prensa Gráfica invited him to roundtable discussion on the gangs, the LAM, and the importance of prevention/rehabilitation. Father Moratalla expressed his concern that the anti-gang legislation might allow the police to commit human rights violations and insisted that everyone needed to contribute to the search for alternative solutions. Although his statements were important in highlighting the limitations of the government’s gang policy, they were weakened by his unfounded claim that the gangs had evolved into organised crime groups. As argued earlier, such a depiction of the street gangs favours law enforcement action (an inappropriate one at that) and delegitimises responses that would address the structural factors facilitating gang development. Father Moratalla may have had the best of intentions at the time, but uninformed or unconsidered comments such the above were likely to neutralise his arguments for prevention/rehabilitation. Furthermore, the message reflected his belief that society had to collaborate with the government in achieving more effective gang control. Yet, it was ineffectual precisely because it made only a generalised call for prevention/rehabilitation and failed to make explicit the government’s responsibility in implementing a comprehensive gang policy and improving public security.  

Third, the Polígono responded to invitations to present its programme in gang-related forums both in El Salvador and abroad. For example, NGO staff participated in information exchanges on street gangs in the United States and Spain where they stressed the need for a comprehensive gang policy. The Salvadoran government also invited the Polígono to the 2004 Anti-Gang Forum and the second of the annual gang conferences

67 Ibid.
where the rehabilitation programme was explained. One problem with these official events was their nature of invited policy space. This is not to say that the NGO would necessarily have achieved greater impact with its model initiative had it created access to policy-makers. However, as Chapter 2 indicated, these events privileged law enforcement cooperation and signalled no public interest in developing complementary strategies. However, by including a talk on gang prevention/rehabilitation the government could demonstrate its commitment to these options.

To illustrate the principal difficulties with the Polígono’s advocacy approach I summarise below a presentation made by one staff member at a domestic conference, which I was permitted to attend. Mr Ramírez, the Director of Education, began by explaining the nature of the gang problem, although this part incorporated a number of myths such as the purported link between street gangs and organised crime. Given the enormous economic cost of violence in El Salvador, he asked rhetorically whether this evidenced an effective response or pointed to the need for a different strategy. Mr Ramírez reminded the audience that it was challenging to address a problem of that magnitude with the small projects that existed in the country, but stated that the Polígono believed an education and job development programme to be an option. He introduced the NGO’s philosophy before ending with anecdotal evidence of two success stories, including Carlos’ bakery. In the subsequent Question-and-Answer session one person described the presentation as an optimistic one that had publicised only the Polígono’s achievements, but not the limitations of its work. Mr Ramírez acknowledged that shortcomings existed, but argued that the Polígono at least constituted an option, however modest.

The talk clearly exemplified the NGO’s preference for questioning the government’s gang policy indirectly through the showcasing of a model alternative. The Polígono’s reputation as a successful gang programmer permitted it to present its project to different audiences, including public officials. However, while the organisation was able to share ideas and highlight alternative policy choices, quiet pressure was unlikely to reorient the government’s existing approach to gang control. A more confrontational strategy, for example in combination with lobbying or media work, would have been more powerful. However, as a largely state-funded agency the Polígono was effectively inhibited from criticising the authorities in more explicit terms. The non-adversarial style provided the NGO with certain benefits and therefore an incentive to maintain it, despite its

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72 *El Diario de Hoy*, “FARC está detrás de maras,” 16 June 2004, 18; *El Diario de Hoy*, “Maras amenazan la
limitations for shaping the government’s gang policy. The showcasing of the Polígono model helped raise the institutional profile, but did not prove to be an effective advocacy strategy. Below I consider the organisation’s role in citizen mobilisation and alliance-building as a way of increasing its political strength.

2.4 Civil society coordination or confrontation?

The Polígono is located within a gang-affected community and was therefore ideally positioned to seek to develop a response to the gang situation outside its doors. However, it had been decided to design an in-house programme for individuals from other parts of the country. If the NGO had sought to target both the local gang members and the community factors that help spawn these groups, it might have achieved a greater impact than it could have hoped for in a residential setting. Attempts to effect change in the streets would even have been in the organisation’s own interests, because the continued gang presence constituted a security risk to staff and boarders alike. The fact that the Polígono did not or could reduce the gang problem in the Iberia was evidenced in a number of ways. For example, in November 2005 police discovered that members of the *clica* had created a “clandestine” cemetery near the agency’s athletic field to bury some of their victims. In addition, some of the youths had painted the wall surrounding the NGO with one of their characteristic *Salvatrucha* graffiti and when the symbol was erased simply “retook their territory” by re-inscribing the letters within the painted patch (see the photo below).

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Father Moratalla admitted that the Polígono had failed to help control the local gang problem and the challenge was one of attaining greater levels of organisation and resource capacity. More importantly, however, the NGO neglected to mobilise community residents and thus create greater pressure for policy change. No matter how strongly the agency advanced its position, its proposal for gang prevention/rehabilitation might have stood a greater chance of motivating government action had it been tied to expressions of popular support. For the Polígono this would have implied investing time and resources in activities aimed at involving people in the articulation of policy demands. Since the Iberia residents were exposed to the gang presence on a daily basis they had an interest in seeking a solution and therefore an incentive to back the NGO’s advocacy efforts. Although the Polígono has undertaken some community organising, the objective was to help improve the infrastructure and housing situation, not to reduce gang violence.

The NGO recognised, however, that its own project was of limited reach and more effective gang control required a national gang strategy that should be coordinated by the government. Father Moratalla participated in a number of civil society initiatives aimed at designing a comprehensive response to the gang problem. Successful alliances with other organisations could have made the Polígono a politically more powerful advocate of gang prevention/rehabilitation. However, these collaborative efforts did not come to fruition. I will briefly review Father Moratalla’s experiences, notably one that arose in reaction to
the launch of *Mano Dura*, as they offer a number of lessons for NGO promotion of an alternative gang policy.

For a while the priest participated in a network on childhood-related issues, but reportedly withdrew because he felt the mechanism was a talking shop that produced no concrete results. Following the introduction of *Mano Dura* civil society groups and government officials met for a few months in a roundtable forum on the gang problem. The discussions suggested the creation of a national body that would design and coordinate a comprehensive gang control strategy while government, the private sector, and civil society actors would provide resources and carry out gang enforcement, prevention, and rehabilitation activities. A UNICEF-sponsored consultant prepared a written proposal, which in late 2004 was submitted to the then Minister of Gobernación, René Figueroa. The official pledged to incorporate these ideas into the *Súper Mano Dura* plan, but the document was simply shelved, and the forum ceased to function thereafter.

In 2006 some of the individuals who had participated in the roundtables and were disappointed at the continued absence of a full-fledged gang policy, decided to make another attempt to work towards the formation of a coordinated gang control strategy. The group was meant to meet on a private basis until more concrete ideas had developed and included the directors of the Polígono, FESPAD, the IDHUCA, the IUDOP as well as the head of the PNC’s Division of Juvenile Services and members of UNICEF and the Archdiocese of San Salvador. However, this incipient coalition soon disintegrated. Father Moratalla had caused some discontent with his unauthorised decision to invite PNC chief Rodrigo Ávila to future meetings. Yet, according to some of the participants, the initiative failed essentially for the following reasons. First, although many individuals and organisations in El Salvador were committed to reducing gang

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74 Conversation with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 24 January 2006.
76 The initiative was entitled Mesa Interinstitucional Para la Prevención y Atención de la Violencia y Delincuencia Juvenil.
77 Interview with María Teresa de Mejía, Legislation and Public Policy Officer, UNICEF, former Director of the ISNA and Director of the OAJJ, San Salvador, 3 February 2006; interview with Tránsito Ruano, Director, Centro de Formación y Capacitación de la Vicaría Divino Salvador, Archdiocese of San Salvador, San Salvador, 14 February 2006.
78 For the proposal, see OAJJ, UNICEF, and La Mesa Interinstitucional, *Juventud en Desarrollo* (San Salvador: mimeo, 2004).
79 Interview with María Teresa de Mejía, Legislation and Public Policy Officer, UNICEF, former Director of the ISNA and Director of the OAJJ, San Salvador, 3 February 2006.
80 Interview with Tránsito Ruano, Director, Centro de Formación y Capacitación de la Vicaría Divino Salvador, Archdiocese of San Salvador, San Salvador, 14 February 2006.
violence, there was no clarity about the nature of the problem and possible solutions. Second, a lack of common objectives prevented NGOs and other actors from coordinating their activities. The desire for publicity and organisational profile had simply been a greater priority. Third, the alliance-building process had included individuals in their personal capacity, not institutions which needed to make the necessary policy and resource commitments.

Fourth, I would argue that different organisations had managed to rally around the need for alternative solutions to the gang problem, but lacked leadership figures able to unite them for advocacy purposes. Fifth, I would also add that the NGOs and their allies had not developed the strategies and skills required for the articulation of political demands. Gang control continued to be seen as a technical issue (to be resolved through proposal-making) rather than a political one (to be addressed through more creative and confrontational advocacy strategies). Overall, the Polígono and other actors (NGOs, church groups, research institutes etc.) had failed to set aside their differences and press collectively for the implementation of an alternative gang policy. The challenge for gang-related NGO advocacy remained one of better understanding the power dynamics in El Salvador and persuading the economic and political elite to make greater concessions in gang prevention/rehabilitation than they had previously agreed to.

Conclusion

By modelling a residential training programme the Polígono sought to demonstrate to the government a more effective way of tackling the gang problem and to persuade it to implement comprehensive gang control. Although this advocacy strategy largely sought indirect policy influence, it could serve to alter the policy context, particularly if combined with lobbying or media work. Contextual factors, notably elite influence over policy-making, the nature of ARENA as the guardian of conservative interests, and the absence of a pluralistic media system, constituted critical barriers to the promotion of gang prevention/rehabilitation. Since opposition to the NGO advocacy agenda could be expected, strategic choices were all the more important if advances were to be achieved.

82 Conversation with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 7 February 2006; interview with Tránsito Ruano, Director, Centro de Formación y Capacitación de la Vicaría Divino Salvador, Archdiocese of San Salvador, San Salvador, 14 February 2006.
83 Conversation with Fr. José Moratalla SDB, Director, PIDB, San Salvador, 7 February 2006.
The Polígono’s criticism of *Mano Dura* and the showcasing of an alternative approach to gang control helped encourage the Saca administration to adopt a different discourse and, ostensibly, a different policy. Part of these changes was the *granja-escuela*, which was fashioned after the Polígono’s project and aimed to afford ex-gang members job training and development. However, the government refrained from implementing a long-term, comprehensive, and adequately-resourced gang control strategy and continued to privilege suppression. The Polígono’s advocacy efforts were valuable in that they permitted the NGO to demonstrate the importance of providing at-risk and gang youth with education and employment opportunities. Yet, the strategy put insufficient pressure on the government to alter its approach to gang violence reduction and may even have served to decrease this pressure. After all, the government chose to financially support the organisation and implicitly devolved some of its responsibilities for rehabilitation, notably as regards juvenile offenders/gang members. The Polígono’s possibilities for policy influence were affected not only by exogenous factors, but also by its strategic choices, which in turn were shaped by the NGO’s identity and internal characteristics.

The organisation was founded and subsequently directed by Father Moratalla, a Spanish Salesian priest who wanted to design a solution to the education and employment needs of the youths in one of San Salvador’s marginal communities. The vision and creativity of this organisational entrepreneur permitted the Polígono both to consolidate itself institutionally and financially and to develop a widely respected gang prevention/rehabilitation initiative. Although the agency had originally not contemplated assisting ex-gang members, it turned to developing what it considered a suitable programme, because there existed a need for it and staff were committed to working with disadvantaged young people. This project combined the Salesians’ special concern for the neediest youth with the preventive system of Don Bosco which set out a pedagogical style based on the principles of reason, religion, and loving kindness. Inspired by these methods the residential education and training programme sought to make participants good Christians and to prepare them for self-employment. While the basic idea was to reduce the culture of dependency among poor people, an independent income-generating activity could also enable gang members to overcome the difficulties they faced in securing stable employment. Although the programme was based on both Salesian principles and sheer pragmatism, the individualism and self-reliance it championed coincided with the neoliberal values espoused by ARENA. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the government was prepared to fund much of the Polígono’s work which the
agency interpreted as a sign that the government recognised the importance of gang prevention/rehabilitation and supported it both financially and morally.

Staff members had no gang expertise, and there was little proof that they successfully encouraged gang desistance or worked with many gang members in the first place, given the agency’s exclusive admissions criteria. Yet, the Polígono was able to promote its programme on the basis of anecdotal evidence and to earn respect and credibility as a gang rehabilitation centre. This positive public status in turn permitted the NGO to showcase its initiative to policy-makers and to be consulted by the media on the gang problem and its alleviation. Subsequently, however, the Polígono was less effective in exercising policy influence, a limitation that was partly conditioned by the organisation’s ideology and strategic choices. Father Moratalla and his team believed that far from maintaining an adversarial relationship with the state, civil society should engage the government through dialogue and proposals. The NGO therefore sought to collaborate with the authorities in the search for a solution to the gang problem and to demonstrate that an alternative approach was feasible. This strategy allowed the agency to obtain public funding, but was ineffective with a government that allows dissenting opinions to be expressed, but resists taking them into account in its decision-making.

On the other hand, the Polígono’s strategic choices also limited the potential impact of its advocacy. Notwithstanding the limitations of the programme, its existence served to introduce fresh ideas in the Salvadoran policy context and to stimulate the identification of policy options. However, the ways in which the agency tried to demonstrate to the government a better way of reducing gang violence were too subtle to achieve the anticipated policy change. The Polígono’s favoured method required the organisation to professionally implement the project and let its reputation speak for itself. This had apparently some effect, because the NGO and its work are well-known in El Salvador. Yet, whether or not its model might be replicated in the official sphere depended very much on the government’s own values and ideological preferences. This method was unlikely to apply sufficient pressure on the authorities unless combined with other activities such as media work or lobbying. To be sure, the Polígono was accessible to the press, but it had not developed an explicit media strategy. The agency enjoyed sufficient public visibility to frequently share its position with a wider audience, but it made no pro-active attempts to influence public opinion and thus create more political support for alternative gang control.
The NGO also responded to invitations to showcase its programme, but as regards official events the outcomes regularly privileged gang suppression and did not signal a real interest in gang prevention/rehabilitation. Instead, it seemed that a Polígono talk was a desirable item on the agenda, because it permitted the government to demonstrate its support for alternative gang control strategies. The publicity that the organisation received raised the institutional profile and sustainability, but did not appear effective in carrying forward gang-related advocacy. Citizen mobilisation could have been a powerful tool to back up the Polígono’s advocacy efforts with popular support and push for an alternative gang policy, but was neglected. The NGO attempted to build alliances with other civil society actors, and, if successful, these activities could have strengthened its advocacy position. Yet, the initiatives in which the Polígono participated disintegrated, largely because potential allies lacked clarity about the gang problem and its solutions and had no common objectives that could have furthered their cooperation. Overall, the showcasing of a gang programme was important in that it allowed the Polígono to share its ideas and to alter the policy context. However, the agency relied essentially on quiet pressure, and this could not motivate policy change where the problem was less a lack of technical proposals than the government’s lack of political will to execute gang prevention/rehabilitation.
Conclusion

This thesis has examined how three Salvadoran NGOs sought to promote alternative gang control and why their advocacy efforts remained largely ineffective. The Mano Dura plan, introduced by the outgoing Flores government in 2003, proposed to lower the country’s homicide rate by “cracking down” on street gangs and foresaw the prosecution of suspected gang members on account of their physical appearance. The mass media legitimised the initiative by fanning a gang panic and depicting suppression as the most appropriate response, thus increasing public support for it. Widespread opposition to the measure prompted the Saca administration to incorporate prevention/rehabilitation into its Súper Mano Dura plan, but to resist the implementation of a full-fledged gang policy. Indeed, it was argued that Mano Dura constituted a populist penal policy introduced to enhance ARENA’s electoral appeal and was subsequently modified only to deflect criticism and to avoid addressing the structural factors associated with gang emergence.

Adopting an ethnographic approach, the study showed how both contextual and organisational characteristics shaped the advocacy strategies, and ultimately the policy influence, of a legal advocacy organisation, a peer rehabilitation group, and a Catholic development NGO. The research highlighted that contemporary El Salvador remains characterised by historical patterns of economic and political dominance which neutralised efforts to reorient gang control. Three specific contextual factors were found to have been critical barriers: elite influence over the state, ARENA’s elite-protective nature, and the absence of a pluralistic media system. NGO strategies -legal and policy advocacy, gang empowerment and rehabilitation, and modelling a gang programme- differed in their tactical style, but all failed to generate sufficient pressure to motivate policy change. This concluding chapter considers the main themes of the study and compares NGO strategies. It then reflects on the implications of this research before concluding with some observations on the ethnography of NGOs and its policy relevance.

The continuity of authoritarianism and elite influence

El Salvador has a long tradition of authoritarianism whereby the ruling classes relied on institutionalised violence to maintain order and defend elite privileges. During colonial times campesino protests against exclusive economic structures were already regularly
crushed, and the republican years merely saw the continued use of force to deal with social problems. Periodic indigenous uprisings in response to deep-seated social injustices were brutally repressed, notably during the 1932 *matanza*. Decades later the state waged a counterinsurgency war against the guerrillas who sought to create a fairer and more equal society. However, even prior to this chapter in Salvadoran history every actual or potential challenge to the status quo was portrayed as a communist-inspired subversion aimed at undermining the very institutions that had brought progress to the country. An important role in suppressing social and political conflict was played by the military, which itself held the reins of government for close to five decades. Yet, state-sponsored terror was also conducted by means of an extensive public security apparatus. Militarised police corps did not protect the citizens, but the rulers from the ruled. Embedded within these security forces were death squads, created by the founder of the right-wing ARENA party, which eliminated sources of dissent and sowed fear among the urban population. Equally insidious were the paramilitary groups that infiltrated rural communities and lastingly destroyed local social networks. Over time violence had become the principal tool to manage state/society relations, and this remained the case in the 2000s when the government preferred to suppress the gang problem instead of addressing the structural factors that had contributed to its emergence.

The Chapultepec Peace Accords ended the war and introduced democracy, but the authoritarian patterns of the past survived this transition. The modernising elements of the right had agreed to a regime change in return for a cessation of the armed conflict, but otherwise elite political culture had undergone little transformation. Many ordinary Salvadorans, too, continued to harbour authoritarian attitudes and favoured law and order over respect for human rights. This mindset could persist in large part, because the post-war period has been marked by a climate of insecurity, which conservative politicians did not seriously seek to improve, but instead exploited to foster nostalgia for authoritarian responses and to justify the adoption of tougher laws and militarised policing. *Mano Dura* enjoyed considerable popularity precisely because there existed a fertile ground for such a fundamentally suppressive initiative. At the same time, the plan helped deepen an established preference for punitive responses.

To be sure, *Mano Dura* constituted primarily a populist penal policy aimed at enhancing ARENA’s electoral image in the run-up to the 2004 presidential contest. Yet, the plan had two characteristics that had the effect of reinforcing El Salvador’s authoritarian legacy. First, it inflated the gang threat, thus creating a social demand for
gang suppression. Second, it entailed a discriminatory law as well as area sweeps, mass detentions, and militarised police patrols that the right-wing media helped legitimise. Admittedly, governments across the world can and do adopt populist measures of this kind, because citizens that live in constant fear of victimisation are likely to applaud a strong stance against crime. However, such policies are of greater concern in fragile democracies where authoritarianism may again creep into the social fabric. *Mano Dura* left an alarming mix of social profiling, greater insecurity, and nostalgia for authoritarianism and therefore constituted a greater threat to society than the gangs themselves. Ultimately, the plan embodied not just the ideological preference of its architects, but also had broader utility for those forces that had no interest in the construction of a democratic society.

Central to this project was the role of the *Policía Nacional Civil* (National Civilian Police, PNC). Designed to replace the old security forces, the PNC had been conceived as the civilian, apolitical, professional, and rights-respecting police that a democratic El Salvador required. The reform process suffered numerous distortions, because the right sought to gain control of a key instrument of state power and social order maintenance. Attempts to perpetuate authoritarian policing structures and to ensure the dominance of conservative elements within the PNC were all aimed at preserving the status quo. This manoeuvring was to some extent neutralised while international monitoring and donor assistance pressured the government to comply with the peace agreement. However, after the departure of foreign observers the new police force suffered further institutional deterioration. Its command structure remains dominated by ex-military personnel who have overseen the PNC’s transformation into a corrupt and abusive institution that lacks investigative capacities and respect for human rights, but has developed social cleansing groups and a commitment to suppression. Given its technical weaknesses the police has little possibility other than to respond to crime with force. However, the resistance mounted against the public security reforms suggested that this is also the favoured approach for the country’s conservative sectors. Considering official indifference to human rights and investigative policing, the NGOs would find it difficult to successfully advocate alternative gang control. More generally, the risk with the recurrent display of state violence is that the population comes to accept it as a normal and even desirable way of dealing with crime. Clearly, the persistence of such thinking would pose serious obstacles to democratic consolidation. Interestingly, this situation contrasts with Nicaragua where society has overcome the legacy of the Somoza dynasty and called for
gang prevention rather than suppression.\textsuperscript{1} Future research might explore why El Salvador has been unable to break with its authoritarian tradition.

**The power structure of Salvadoran society**

The Salvadoran government continued its suppressive gang programme even after *Súper Mano Dura* had become a political liability and was withdrawn. While the introduction of the original plan had been politically driven, its basic approach was subsequently maintained, because it allowed the Saca administration to demonstrate its commitment to gang control without addressing the structural factors associated with gang onset. The preference for suppression over other strategies, despite the evident need for a comprehensive policy, can be understood by considering the domestic power structure that centres on the elite and its influence over ARENA and the right-wing media.

El Salvador’s economic and political affairs have historically revolved around the country’s oligarchy, which began building its fortunes through coffee growing while most of the working population lived in poverty-stricken conditions. By virtue of its vast financial and social power the elite always enjoyed substantial influence over state institutions and public policy-making. In the early republican years the wealthiest families took turns in exercising direct political control, but in the early 1930s ceded the reins of government to the military, which defended conservative interests until the outbreak of the war. Over the decades the configuration of the elite altered with successive periods of economic diversification, the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, and a structural shift towards a new regional growth pattern that saw the emergence of globalised economic power groups. These transformations notwithstanding, the oligarchy never once lessened either its political influence or its rigid hostility to even the most moderate reform efforts. Although both civilian and military regimes had at various points sought to introduce democratic institutions and modest social improvements, such attempts had regularly met with opposition. Instead, the defence of elite privileges was the primary political objective. These traditional power structures survived El Salvador’s transition to democracy, though under a different guise, and constituted a key obstacle to NGO advocacy of alternative gang control.

The progressive army officers’ coup of October 1979 had effectively ended the longstanding military-oligarchy alliance. Its wealth and privileges at stake, the right sought to

\textsuperscript{1} Interview with Carlos Emilio López, Consultant on Juvenile Affairs for the National Police of Nicaragua, Managua, 4 August 2006.
reassert its dominance by creating its own political party. Founded in 1981 with a pro-capitalist/anti-communist ideology, the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance, ARENA) constituted a political project that the elite could rally around despite its divergent economic interests. For the conservative sectors electoral participation was the means to prevent the left from seizing power, and with ARENA’s victory in the 1989 presidential elections the right returned a position from which to perpetuate the status quo. Since the war had destroyed the economy and prevented the wealthy from restoring their way of life, the relatively moderate ARENA leadership entered peace negotiations and oversaw the arrival of democracy. However, despite increased tolerance of democratic norms, the right as a whole remained opposed both to structural reforms and the notion that a pluralistic regime might be used to redress the existing imbalance of social and economic power.

In the intervening years ARENA has been a key vehicle for elite political participation, and since the agenda of the two largely coincides, the policies of the last four administrations have tended to favour a small segment of Salvadoran society. In addition, this minority has come to rely on informal lobbying mechanisms to promote its interests. The most powerful family groups have acquired “latch rights” that permit them frequent and direct access to the highest authorities. Although their influence over officials does not always achieve the desired results, it is nonetheless so profound that it amounts to a “capture of the state.” Given the partisan nature of ARENA governments, NGOs advocating gang prevention/rehabilitation were unlikely to find a receptive ear. However, these constraints were exacerbated by the existence of a highly undemocratic and exclusive policy process, itself the product of the elite’s preparedness to circumvent formal channels. This scenario raises doubts not only about the current possibilities for policy advocacy of any kind, but also about the prospects for democratic consolidation and the creation of a fairer society.

The third element in the power structure of Salvadoran society is the country’s conservative media. In the decades prior to the Peace Accords independent media outlets faced state censorship or were driven out of existence by political violence, and the news organisations that survived those years inevitably maintained a pro-regime stance. The political openings of the early 1990s ushered in a more hospitable environment for journalistic work, permitted the emergence of alternative media and investigative reporting, and prompted the traditionally dominant media to show greater tolerance towards dissenting opinions. However, freedom of expression remains limited, and the
early post-war advances in the mainstream press have since suffered a reversal. Unsurprisingly, these developments are reflected in the available news products.

A content analysis of gang-related coverage by the two leading dailies, *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy*, revealed a clear informational bias towards the government’s policy agenda. Although the papers displayed subtle ideological differences, both fanned a gang panic and amplified the official interpretation of the gang problem. Photographic imagery promoted negative stereotypes about gang members and reinforced the deviance label attached to them while metaphoric language dehumanised gang members and rendered their extermination permissible. Overall, media content promoted suppression and provided little space for critical viewpoints. Survey research consulted for this thesis suggested that this reporting swayed the Salvadoran public in perceiving the gang problem as more serious than it was and in supporting *Mano Dura* policies despite their demonstrated ineffectiveness. The distorted coverage was partly the outcome of news-gathering routines and an associated journalistic tendency to rely on official sources. However, the concentration of media ownership, the political use of advertising, and reportorial self-censorship also served to exclude some actors from the news agenda and produce uncritical news content. These processes made it difficult for opponents of *Mano Dura* to disseminate their ideas to a wider audience. At the same time, elite control of the media encourages homogenised reporting, thus preventing the formation of critical public opinion and debate that are so important to a flourishing democracy.

**NGO advocacy strategies in comparison**

The thesis has argued that a consideration of both exogenous and endogenous factors is required to explain why NGO advocacy strategies were relatively ineffective in promoting alternative gang control. To be sure, the withdrawal of special anti-gang legislation and President Saca’s public commitment to gang prevention/rehabilitation may be interpreted as advocacy successes. However, both the preference for suppression and the limited nature of the *Mano Amiga/Mano Extendida* plans suggested that the government remained unenthusiastic about gang violence reduction and had adopted these new initiatives only to deflect further criticism. Given the contextual constraints on NGO advocacy it might be argued that the possibilities of achieving the stated policy objective had always been slim. However, while it was unlikely that an ARENA administration would accede to NGO demands without the slightest resistance, the political environment was not so adverse as to render advocacy activities simply futile.
Indeed, the fact that the executive felt compelled to assume a different policy stance on the gang issue indicates that concerted oppositional efforts could produce meaningful advances. In this sense, one purpose of embedding the NGOs in their domestic context was to highlight the dynamic interaction between the two whereby social and political change can only develop through a persistent action-reaction cycle. However, as the analysis revealed, NGO advocacy strategies were shaped by organisational characteristics and tactical choices such that insufficient political pressure was created for the implementation of alternative gang control.

Organisational characteristics

NGO origins

The agencies’ capacity for activism, and the approach they pursued, depended on internal factors associated with NGO formation and maintenance. Analytical sensitivity to organisational origin and identity helps understand why certain strategies are adopted and why some agencies may be politically more influential than others. For FESPAD, established and directed by Salvadoran legal scholars to promote human rights and the rule of law, it was evident that *Mano Dura* would be contested through legal and policy advocacy. The Polígono arose as a Salesian development organisation that sought to respond to the education and employment needs of marginalised youth and subsequently applied its education-for-work paradigm to its model gang programme. The peer rehabilitation group Homies Unidos (HU) was founded by gang members to design solutions to their own problems and empower other gang youths to abandon drugs and violence. The impetus for this project came from an organisational entrepreneur who departed after the establishment phase and left a vacuum that the remaining staff seemed unable to fill. Nonetheless, gang empowerment and rehabilitation remained the tactical priority even when the agency began to promote alternative gang control.

The strategies that the NGOs adopted were also informed by their ideological position. The organisations differed, however, both in their view of the advocacy issue and in the degree of antagonism with which they approached the authorities. The stance they took on each of these aspects had consequences for the policy influence they pursued. The gang problem elicited divergent reactions not only between NGOs and the state, but also among the former themselves. While the agencies agreed on the need for gang prevention/rehabilitation, they differed on the issue of gang dissolution. FESPAD
and the Polígono endorsed the official view that gang offenders should be prosecuted and gang desistance be encouraged. Thus both organisations could at least gain access to policy-makers and convey to them the importance of rights-respecting gang enforcement and social intervention, even though these efforts produced only mixed results. By contrast, the *pandilleros calmados* of Homies Unidos still identified with gang values and argued that street gangs had positive functions and youths should therefore only be required to abandon drugs and violence, but not the group. Since this standpoint, and indeed HU identity, conflicted with the government’s perception of gang members as socially undesirable individuals, the NGO found it inevitably more difficult to even meet with the authorities.

In their relationship with the state each NGO had developed a preference for either confrontation or collaboration. Homies Unidos was the only organisation that maintained an explicitly antagonistic stance, although less for tactical reasons than for staff members’ attachment to the gang and its oppositional culture. FESPAD and the Polígono, on the other hand, both rejected a purely adversarial relationship and sought to assist the government in developing more effective gang control, the first through legal/policy proposals, the second by showcasing a gang programme. However, whereas Father Moratalla and his team were reluctant to openly criticise *Mano Dura*, Homies Unidos and FESPAD sought to protest HRVs in various ways, the latter particularly through *denuncia* (public condemnation). Compared to confrontation, collaboration constituted an opportunity to influence the government through policy alternatives rather than to merely expose the limitations of the existing approach. Importantly, however, neither confrontational nor collaborative efforts were combined with activities aimed at creating political pressure for the implementation of alternative gang control. Yet, since the government lacked the incentive either to counter police abuse or to pursue gang prevention/rehabilitation, it was unlikely to respond to NGO advocacy demands unless it was compelled to do so. The organisations that had embraced collaboration may well have believed it to be more viable than confrontation. However, perceptions of what constituted legitimate political behaviour weakened NGO strategies insofar as an adversarial style was discarded when the advocacy situation seemed to require it.
NGO maintenance

Agencies that possess a positive public reputation, often acquired through demonstrated competence, are more likely to be consulted by the media and to be able to participate in the policy process. However, they must also have the capacity both to ensure their sustainability and to conduct their operations. NGO maintenance requires a stable flow of income, which is conditioned by the limited availability of funding, but also by organisational grant-seeking abilities. At the same time, staff need to have the required professional skills and knowledge to advance their advocacy agenda. Deficits in any of these areas affect NGOs’ ability to create policy change and may even threaten organisational survival.

For those NGOs that enjoyed a positive public standing access to both the authorities and the media was comparatively easier. Both FESPAD and the Polígono, which were widely respected for their professional work, were repeatedly approached by journalists and invited to official events on the gang problem. By contrast, HU staff received little media attention, and their status as ex-gang members implied strained relations with both the government and the police. The NGO’s public reputation was further dented when one of the directors was arrested and convicted for homicide.

Funding was a common concern among the NGOs, which had all experienced severe financial crises at one point. Short-term donor contracts and the limited availability of grants were a general challenge, but FESPAD and Homies Unidos faced additional constraints, because the domestic funding environment was unfavourable both for a critically-minded NGO and for one run by ex-gang members (for many synonymous with “criminals”). However, some of the organisations dealt with fundraising concerns more successfully than others. While the Polígono was able to receive funding from the government and international donors to whom its microenterprise model appealed, FESPAD relied on a membership programme and a series of commercial activities such as legal services and publication sales. Homies Unidos, however, had neither developed appropriate grant-seeking skills nor managed to obtain its legal status such that staff were too preoccupied with organisational survival to devote much time to their advocacy work.

The promotion of alternative gang control made a variety of skills demands on the NGOs, notably writing and research abilities, subject expertise, media skills, and advocacy planning skills. The need for writing and research competence arose only in FESPAD, which placed emphasis on the production of human rights reports as well as
legal and policy proposals. The lawyers prepared objective legal analyses, documented HRVs, and revealed the policy gaps of *Súper Mano Dura*, but showed little capacity for researching the gang problem more comprehensively, for example by consulting the US gang literature. Whether for language barriers or resource constraints, this omission had implications for staff expertise in this field and their ability to offer policy alternatives.

The NGOs could draw on various kinds of expert knowledge to carry forward their advocacy. Since HU staff had themselves been gang members they could use their first-hand experience of gang life to warn publicly about its perils and insist on the need for alternative responses. However, the agency did not display the capacity or the interest either to conduct effective gang empowerment and rehabilitation or to tie this work into a broader advocacy strategy. The Polígono, for its part, was qualified to provide young people with education and job training, but lacked specialised gang intervention skills. However, since the NGO provided only anecdotal evidence of programme outcomes, it was nonetheless able to maintain its reputation as a successful gang rehabilitation centre and to use its standing to advocate alternative gang control. FESPAD, on the other hand, possessed extensive legal expertise that enabled staff to criticise the anti-gang law and to help draft appropriate legislation that did not infringe constitutional principles. However, the lawyers lacked gang expertise such that its proposal for gang violence prevention yielded only broad policy recommendations, which would not have substantially advanced alternative gang control even if the proposal had been implemented.

Media work could have served to educate the public and/or to shape public opinion on the gang issue to create political pressure for a comprehensive gang policy, but remained underdeveloped in each of the NGOs. Homies Unidos did not undertake any media work and cited unfavourable reporting as the reason. Father Moratalla, for his part, responded positively to interview requests, but otherwise preferred to focus on the creation of job training and development. FESPAD’s media strategy, involving paid ads and press conferences, was critical to its human rights work. However, the NGO proved unable to counter negative reporting, and the coverage that it did create served to raise the institutional profile, but did not turn the news about *Mano Dura* into ideologically contested terrain.

Finally, and most importantly, all NGOs needed advocacy planning skills to effectively promote their policy objectives. This required an analysis of the political environment, its power relations, and its possibilities and limits for advocacy as well as the subsequent mapping of a strategy that reflected these dynamics. Interestingly, staff in
all agencies had discerned the characteristics of the domestic context, particularly the persistence of established power structures. However, although the NGOs were reasonably clear about the outcome they hoped to achieve, none tailored its strategy to the intricacies of the advocacy issue. The Polígono was committed to showcasing its gang programme and applying “quiet pressure” on the government, but seemed unprepared to consider the adoption of a different tactical style, despite the inefficacy of its existing approach. Both Homies Unidos and FESPAD not only failed to anticipate some of the barriers to their advocacy, but also proved unable to deal with them. FESPAD’s experience demonstrated these strategic limitations perhaps most clearly, for example when the newly-elected ARENA mayor remained indifferent to its policy proposal or when its legal aid case did not proceed due to the arbitrariness of the criminal justice system. The second incident in particular provoked a feeling of powerlessness among the lawyers who acquiesced to this setback and seemed unsure as to how to reorient their strategy. In all NGOs weaknesses in advocacy planning were reflected in the choice of advocacy tools and targets.

Advocacy tools and targets

Efforts to contest Mano Dura differed considerably in terms of strategy and policy influence (direct or indirect). Notwithstanding the broader tactical style, advocacy success depended on a great extent on the methods that were adopted (and how they were used) and the actors that were targeted (and how they were approached). To promote alternative gang control the NGOs selected among four tools (testimonio/information politics, legal mechanisms, denuncia, and proposals) and four actors (government, the private sector, the media, and civil society).

Advocacy tools

Testimonio/information politics was a key element of the Homies Unidos prevention programme whereby staff talked publicly about their gang experience to raise awareness of the nature of the gang problem and the need for alternative responses. These speaking engagements could have helped to increase the pressure for comprehensive gang control, particularly if they had been combined with media work. However, organisational weaknesses precluded the NGO from making regular use of this advocacy tool.
Legal mechanisms were used exclusively by FESPAD, which sought -unsuccessfully- to obtain redress for an ex-gang member and victim of police harassment and subsequently to challenge *Mano Dura* with this emblematic case. Given the organisation’s mandate to promote the rule of law staff felt inclined to use formal legal channels in their own work. At the same time this decision was surprising, because institutional unresponsiveness is a well-known problem that FESPAD itself has repeatedly documented in its reports. The experience clearly demonstrated that legal mechanisms are not a viable advocacy tool in a country where the political class has thus far shown little interest in strengthening the rule of law and the institutions this requires. If anything, the NGO’s inability to recognise the limitations of this approach suggested some degree of political inexperience.

*Denuncia* (public condemnation) of HRVs associated with *Mano Dura* was important to the work of both Homies Unidos and FESPAD. While the former preferred to alert the PDDH to perceived abuses, the latter aimed to shame the government into adopting a rights-respecting gang policy by exposing violations in its reports. Important as these activities were, *denuncia* itself does not necessarily motivate a change in state behaviour. The effectiveness of this methodology depended to a large extent on the media’s willingness to reveal abuses and the authorities’ vulnerability to such publicity. Since the government was aware of the illegalities committed under *Mano Dura*, but felt no need to eradicate them, it was necessary to build more political pressure. This was a challenge, because the mass media created a climate supportive of suppression and gang members were widely seen as perpetrators rather than victims. However, the NGOs neither continued to activate the “boomerang pattern,” which had some effect in the early advocacy phase, nor did they explain to the sceptical public that human rights activism was no obstacle to gang control but helped improve it.

Proposals were favoured by the Polígono and FESPAD, which had both adopted a collaborative attitude towards the government and aimed to provide constructive criticism of *Mano Dura*, the former by modelling a gang programme, the latter through legal and policy documents. A proposal-making capacity can strengthen advocacy efforts, and in other Latin American contexts NGOs could in fact increase their influence by offering realistic policy options. However, proposals are unlikely to induce change in the absence of the necessary political will. Both organisations seemed to perceive gang control as a technical issue that could be resolved merely by presenting alternatives to
Mano Dura, thus underestimating the need for a more assertive advocacy style. Indeed, by not effectively balancing the tension between confrontation and collaboration the NGOs were co-opted into a partisan cause: FESPAD by participating in the Anti-Gang Forum and permitting the government to appear consultative even though it had no intention of abandoning gang suppression, the Polígono by accepting official funding and partially assuming the state’s responsibility for the rehabilitation of gang members and juvenile offenders.

Advocacy targets

In important ways NGO advocacy was informed by the organisations’ views of the political context and its power dynamics. As Chapter 4 emphasised, power operates on different levels all of which need to be addressed if an issue is to be advanced successfully. Briefly stated, there exist three dimensions of power (and hence actors) that the NGOs could have targeted: visible power (observable decision-making), hidden power (the influence of powerful individuals and groups), and invisible power (culture and ideology). NGO preference for some of these facets over others helps understand why the agencies could achieve only limited policy change.

Given the government’s responsibilities in areas as diverse as laws, policies, budgets, and institutional practices it was inevitable that the NGOs would approach successive administrations to promote constitutional anti-gang legislation, prevention/rehabilitation, and rights-respecting policing. Yet, notwithstanding the importance of policy engagement at this level, it was surprising that the agencies focused extensively on the government when decision-making occurred largely behind closed doors and the elite had remained the de facto power in El Salvador. Activities aimed at improving laws and policies could not, and did not, change the structures, values, and behaviour that subverted democratic institutions and conspired against the implementation of alternative gang control.

Conversely, it was startling that none of the NGOs targeted the private sector, especially the economic elite that exercised substantial influence over policy-making. Each of the organisations had recognised the importance of opportunities provision in gang prevention/rehabilitation, including employment creation and the elimination of discriminatory recruitment practices that generally bar gang members from obtaining

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jobs. However, the NGOs dealt with this situation in ways that disregarded, by omission or commission, the role of the business sector in this. Homies Unidos and the Polígono both chose to work within existing constraints and offered youths a self-employment option. These efforts, no matter how positively they may have affected individual lives, were inadequate given the magnitude of the problem, yet this awareness prompted no change in strategy. FESPAD, on the other hand, expected the government to take the necessary measures and did not challenge elite interests in maintaining the status quo. By not targeting those with the power to support or veto economic, fiscal, and redistributive policies, the NGOs neglected precisely those actors who could help improve the structural conditions facilitating gang development and create the resources required for prevention/rehabilitation programmes.

Given the media’s functions of providing information, fostering debate, and shaping public opinion NGOs that approached journalistic outlets could seek to publicise their policy position, alter popular perceptions of the gang problem, and create pressure for alternative gang control. FESPAD was the only agency that had developed a media strategy, involving standard activities such as paid advertisements and press conferences. With its periodic public pronouncements against *Mano Dura* the NGO did gain some visibility. However, given its concern to engage the political class FESPAD targeted largely the mainstream press. Although this allowed the organisation to reach a wide audience, including those who lacked access to alternative outlets, the right-wing media were controlled and operated in such a way as to promote the status quo, not challenges to it. The voice of FESPAD was therefore largely silenced by the abundant pro-*Mano Dura* coverage. Furthermore, the NGO considered the media as an advocacy site, but did not confront them in their own right, for example to improve reporting practices. Since journalistic work was shaped by the political and business interests of the media owners, only changes in the sector itself could have permitted a more responsible news treatment and a more pluralistic debate on gang control.

Given both the complexity of the advocacy issue and organisational resource constraints individual NGOs could hope to advance alternative gang control only to a limited extent. Civil society alliances, however, would have permitted them not only to share advocacy tasks, but also to amplify their political voice and influence. The NGOs all attempted some form of networking or alliance-building, but for different reasons and with different outcomes. HU staff did not seek out opportunities for collective action except to solicit help to resolve the immediate problems of their peers. However,
networking possibilities for Homies Unidos had also diminished over time, because the organisation’s staffing bias in favour of the Dieciocho had elicited scepticism among potential allies and its reputation was dented by the criminal conviction of one employee. Father Moratalla withdrew from a network when he felt the mechanism was a talking shop that produced no concrete results. Together with FESPAD and other organisations the Polígono also sought to launch a civil society-based initiative aimed at promoting a nationally-coordinated gang policy. However, the incipient coalition disintegrated, largely because participants disagreed on the nature of the gang problem and its solution and lacked common objectives. FESPAD, however, recognised the importance of strategic alliances and more recently helped form an activist coalition aimed at addressing human rights and social justice issues in El Salvador. The objective was also to induce a shift from protest behaviour to proposal-making, but at the time of writing this had yet to be achieved. Overall, NGO strategies differed in style, yet were similar insofar as they failed to create sufficient political pressure for the implementation of alternative gang control. Both the exogenous and endogenous factors that impacted NGO advocacy permit some broader conclusions about democracy and civil society in contemporary El Salvador.

**Democracy and civil society in El Salvador**

NGO strategies were aimed at specific legal and policy transformations rather than at the conditions in which the advocacy unfolded. However, attempts to contest Mano Dura encountered obstacles partly because of the characteristics of El Salvador’s democracy. Thus, one of the implications of this study is that the political system itself needs to become the object of change efforts. The Peace Accords permitted greater inclusion and freedom of expression, but the possibilities for promoting human rights and social justice issues have remained limited, because politics has reverted to previous exclusionary patterns. To be sure, a country with an established authoritarian tradition could not overnight develop into a full-fledged democracy. However, the elite, while indispensable to the regime transition, did not subsequently support its consolidation. This is not to deny the importance of society’s contribution to this process. Yet, the elite plays a key role in the deepening of El Salvador’s democracy, including in the creation of a new political culture, the formation of democratic institutions, and the exercise of power. Since the right had a stake in the old system, it would likely seek to re-establish previous patterns of control and domination.
Perhaps the most evident sign of the democratic subversion that has occurred in the post-war period is the politicisation of public institutions. The appointment of loyal individuals may be most conspicuous in the criminal justice system, but reflects a much wider trend aimed at maintaining partisan influence over the state. Thus, the institutional limitations that are often attributed to insufficient resources and training, though related, can also be interpreted as a deliberate outcome of this politicisation. In other words, what appears to be a weak state may in fact be one that is functioning, albeit for a different purpose, namely that of ensuring impunity for, and protecting the privileges of, the country’s economic and political class. While the right has understood how to use democracy to further its own interests, this scenario also implies that El Salvador’s democracy will not be consolidated unless the institutions are permitted to fulfil the mandate with which they were created. Every state must have the autonomy and capacity to implement policies and to allocate resources in a way that responds to the needs of the entire population, not to the demands of a minority. However, the persistence of these pockets of power effectively rules this out and would also impose considerable constraints on a leftist government if one were elected someday. While this study has highlighted the nexus between elite behaviour and democratic development, it has paid comparatively little attention to the role of other actors in this process. Future research could explore how it was possible for democracy-building to be thwarted without major resistance.

Since current leaders will not strengthen the political system unless compelled to do so, pressure for change needs to come from elsewhere. Two of these sources are the media and society itself. The media have a vital role to play in a democracy, for example in monitoring the state and facilitating accountability, providing information, and fostering critical public opinion and debate. However, the press can only perform these tasks adequately if it enjoys the necessary independence. Since the commercial interests and/or ideological preferences of certain Salvadoran media owners interfere unduly with reporting, the principal news organisations do not currently contribute to the construction of a democratic society in any meaningful way. Investigative journalism is practically non-existent such that important issues such as public corruption, organised crime, drug trafficking, and death squad activities remain shrouded in silence. Overall, media coverage furthers narrow economic and political interests and encourages acquiescence rather than participation. News treatment of the street gangs and other aspects of the national reality could only improve if the press took its social function
more seriously. Given the characteristics of the Salvadoran media sector this is unlikely to occur in the absence of calls for change. Ideally, the demand for critical and independent journalism should come from the citizens. However, there has been little such pressure, because education and democratic citizenship have been insufficiently promoted and many Salvadorans do not challenge the quality of reporting.

Under the current circumstances the following measures may be more feasible to enhance the conditions for journalistic work and ultimately the news products themselves. First, some kind of collegiate body could be established (or the existing one strengthened) that would protect the rights and interests of journalists and pose a counterweight to the power of media owners and editors. Second, the country could adopt advertising regulations to prevent media outlets from being punished for critical reporting with the withdrawal of advertising revenue. Third, efforts could be made to promote the further development of alternative media, which constitute sources of information that may be distorted or suppressed in the mainstream press. Existing examples include the electronic newspapers *El Faro*, *Raíces*, and (more recently) *ContraPunto* as well as numerous blogs that have emerged. The existence of these media is encouraging, but they will need to reach a larger audience than is currently the case if they are to stimulate greater debate in society.

In the long term democracy is more likely to be entrenched if ordinary Salvadorans participate in this process. This requires citizens who are socialised to democratic values, understand their rights and obligations, and participate in politics through activities as fundamental as voting, demonstrations, and lobbying; citizens who are able to articulate demands, propose concrete solutions, and claim as entitlements what have traditionally been privileges in the country. However, if this is to occur society will first need to overcome a series of dilemmas. First, in recent years declining job prospects have prompted a growing number of Salvadorans to abandon the national territory. As long as people believe that they lack the power to improve domestic conditions, they will prefer the risks of migration to political participation at home. Second, both the post-war consumer culture and the climate of insecurity have encouraged many Salvadorans to retreat into the private sphere. Individuals who are focused on improving their social status or, for fear and mistrust, shun co-operation with others are unlikely to actively seek social and political change.

Third, a generalised perception that successive governments have done little to lower crime rates and address economic problems has led to widespread democratic
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disenchantment and political apathy. However, unless current levels of indifference are reversed democracy will not deepen and popular needs and expectations will remain unfulfilled. Fourth, decades of authoritarianism instilled among the population a culture of submission and conformism that has survived to this day. These attitudinal characteristics help sustain an adversity to social and political protest rather than encouraging citizen organising in defence of their rights and interests. Fifth, the persistence of an authoritarian culture has meant that many Salvadorans not only favour the continuation of state suppression if not vigilante justice, but would also willingly discard their only recently-won political freedoms in exchange for greater security. These “uncivic” tendencies in society undermine the construction of democratic values and, together with citizen alienation and passivity, pose serious obstacles to democratic consolidation. Reversing these trends is a long and difficult process that organised civil society could facilitate, but not before it has addressed its own challenges.

Organised civil society: challenges and possibilities

In the final years of the authoritarian era the Salvadoran social movement had been at the forefront of calls for peace and democratisation. However, once these objectives had been achieved and the state ceased to be the enemy, the social movement lost its unity and sense of purpose. While freedom of expression increased and associational life flourished through the proliferation of NGOs, the social movement has since lacked leadership, analytical and strategic capacity, and a common agenda. The growth of the NGO sector, itself stimulated by the early post-war influx of international donor assistance, has led to the disintegration of civil society into small and competing organisations. While the sheer diversity of these actors and their concerns might be considered positive, this pluralism is now so extreme that it has produced a disempowering fragmentation. Organisational competition, and the dispersion of resources and activities that accompanies it, cannot but weaken the voice and impact of civil society.

If NGOs and other civil society actors are to remain relevant and effective, they will need to evolve institutionally and to adapt to an altered political environment. This requires both a review of organisational missions, priorities, and structures and a reconsideration of existing ways of engaging the state. Repressive rule has ended only fairly recently, and many NGOs have maintained their confrontational stance towards the state. While civil society can, and should, continue to monitor and criticise the state,
it can also seek to strengthen it through objective analyses and professional proposals. This in turn requires the organisations to ensure that their voice is not only heard, but also taken into account at the time of decision-making.

Once civil society groups are clearer about their own goals and strategies, strengths and weaknesses, they may support the Salvadoran population in building El Salvador’s democracy. For illustrative purposes I want to identify three areas that offer opportunities for NGO involvement in the country’s democratic project. First, access to information is vital if state transparency and accountability are to increase and abuse of power is to be reduced. The press is one means of facilitating public access to information about national problems and political leaders’ responses to them. However, given the media’s current limitations NGOs could conduct their own investigations and disseminate the findings publicly, including in collaboration with academic institutions. In addition to facilitating scrutiny and critical evaluation of governmental affairs, this could empower citizens in defending their rights and interests.

Second, NGOs could undertake civic education programmes to socialise both young people and adults to democratic values and practices and to promote a wider understanding of the obligations and rights of democratic citizenship. This requires sustained and systematic community-based efforts aimed at generating a demand for democratic consolidation. If successful, such activities can eventually create real cultural transformations and stimulate greater political participation. Third, rather than seeking specific policy and legal changes, NGOs could play a more explicit role in improving broader issues such as institutional reforms, the rule of law, respect for human rights, transparency and accountability. In particular, they could seek to mobilise much-needed public pressure, which is the best, if not the only, way of countering persistent patterns of inequality and exclusion and enhancing the quality of democracy.

**NGO ethnography and its policy relevance**

This thesis was inspired by a concern to develop a better understanding of NGO practices. The existing literature on the subject tends to study these organisations in isolation from the socio-political environment embedding them and as such does not capture the manner in which NGO action is shaped by exogenous factors. Furthermore, these enquiries generally leave aside the internal dimensions of these agencies, thus glossing over the extent to which human relations within these settings shape the organisations’ activities and impact. In short, to grasp why NGOs act the way they do it
appears necessary both to situate them more firmly within their environment and to examine their inner workings.

The dissertation has argued that the ethnographic method, which permits the student to observe individuals or groups in their own context over an extended period of time, allows us to gain a richer insight into organisational behaviour. Rather than merely analysing how and under what conditions some NGOs sought to promote an alternative gang policy, the research explored how staff constituted these agencies on a daily basis. The underlying idea was that both routine activities and strategic choices are performed not by institutions as such, but by the people that animate them. Thus, of special interest for the analysis were the social setting and NGO workers themselves, including their motivations and experiences, their interests and values, and the stories they tell. By demonstrating how the domestic context, organisational characteristics, and everyday life within three Salvadoran NGOs shaped their advocacy of comprehensive gang control, this thesis contributes to the NGO literature and the study of activism in post-war El Salvador.

Like other research methods the ethnographic approach is not without limitations. First, it is time-consuming and involves many hours of “hanging out,” sometimes with few tangible results. The ability to collect sufficient material in the available time is a preoccupation throughout, perhaps more so for PhD students who need to tailor their work to the requirements of the degree. The protracted nature of this method may also explain why it is rarely applied in International Politics and many other social science subjects, despite its evident benefits to academic knowledge.

Second, if conducted in a closed setting, the ethnographer is faced with the difficulty of securing access to the location and subsequently to people and information. My own research experience confirmed these to be important challenges. Entry to the NGOs was gained with relative ease, except for one case in which the initial permission was withdrawn, though subsequently re-granted. However, although my presence was tolerated in all NGOs, getting staff to open up and share information about the organisation and its work proved to be much harder and required a constant process of negotiation. On the one hand, the outcome depended on the degree to which I could manage my research relationships and balance the tensions between gaining the acceptance of staff members and dealing with feelings of ambivalence towards some of them. On the other hand, this process involved a certain amount of frustration, because NGO workers did not want to appear uncooperative and agreed to assist with the
research project, but later were often reluctant to honour their promises. An inability to reverse the unresponsive attitudes of some research participants can weaken data collection and ultimately the study that emerges from it.

Third, NGO ethnographies need to wrestle with the question to what extent the world of these agencies can indeed be captured. For one, the organisational site is only a fragment of a larger social reality, and what the student tries to make sense of through observation-in-context has necessarily been shaped by people’s ‘experiences in some other “there and then.”’ To provide a fuller picture of how endogenous factors impacted NGO advocacy this work therefore reconstructed organisational histories and individuals’ personal stories and wove them together with contemporary events. Nonetheless, the material that can be obtained in a closed setting will always be limited to what research participants allow us to see. Staff are concerned with maintaining the reputation or image of their NGO and will likely seek to keep prejudicial information away from the academic visitor. Particularly if revelations may expose an organisation’s success as a myth or reveal the darker, possibly criminal side of an institution it can be difficult to penetrate the façade. Thus, ethnographic research can only hope to provide limited, but nonetheless revealing snapshots of NGO life.

At the same time, ethnography has significant advantages over other approaches. First, the extended time that is spent in the field allows the researcher to explore a great variety of data sources and to follow-up events and information that arise unexpectedly. Second, the breadth of the ethnographic method produces rich empirical material that cannot be obtained otherwise. The observational element in particular enables the student to uncover facets of NGO life that would remain hidden if only interviews were conducted. For example, the stories that staff tell to the fleeting visitor may not reflect the organisational reality. The ethnographic experience, on the other hand, may detect discrepancies between the story and the reality of an NGO and thus ascertain why the organisation is not as effective as it might be. Third, the ethnographic approach allows the researcher to explore aspects such as ideas, values, and emotions. For example, it can trace how NGO workers’ personal experiences and ideological baggage impact their work and their relations with other actors. In that sense it is also possible to discern whether staff members’ social background affects their public acceptance and therefore their advocacy possibilities.

Conclusion

Overall, the thesis has suggested a fresh way of looking at NGOs and their inner workings. The ethnographic method is valuable for the study of NGOs in that it permits a richer understanding of these organisations and ultimately a more powerful account of their practices and impact. The analysis in turn may enable agency workers to reorient their strategies and, in this case, to develop more effective advocacy of street gang policies.

Towards comprehensive gang control in El Salvador

Although this dissertation is an NGO ethnography rather than a gang study, it made nonetheless a number of policy-relevant observations concerning street gangs. Most importantly, it showed that gang development is associated with both individual, community, and structural factors and that Mano Dura, despite its political utility, was an ineffective approach to the gang problem. While this project focused on the Mano Dura policies (2003-2006), it highlighted subsequent gang control trends, which suggested that the Salvadoran government continued with isolated suppressive activities, largely with US federal support and from an organised crime perspective. Thus, the adoption and implementation of an alternative and rights-respecting gang policy remains an outstanding challenge. The purpose of this final section is to point out avenues for comprehensive gang control in El Salvador.

Gang control is complex, and this study can do no more than suggest the basic steps towards this goal. Two broad areas can be identified for this purpose: gang research and gang programmes. Further research of El Salvador’s street gangs is required mainly for two reasons. First, academic investigations into the evolution of the gangs could serve to dispel some of the current myths about them, notably concerning their transnationalisation and their transformation into organised crime groups. Such studies might also examine how these discourses are used politically to justify law enforcement responses. Second, gang programmes can only be developed if they are combined with comprehensive gang research, for example about their prevalence, structures, organisational levels, crime patterns, and the affected community contexts. The gang literature has grown substantially, particularly in North America, and many of the works in this field can also help understand gang patterns in the El Salvador.

4 Nonetheless, there is a need for more local research, particularly studies that mix methods and incorporate

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observation in gang-affected communities. In this context one might also explore more fully the factors preventing individuals from gang joining and enabling communities to prevent gang emergence.

In the area of gang control there is currently little evidence of successful gang programmes, but the available policy choices are clear. Five points can be made in this respect. First, there exist three gang control strategies (prevention, law enforcement, rehabilitation), and these can be applied to each of the following levels: individual, community, and society. The individual level (the gang-prone youth or gang member) is most often attempted, in prevention/rehabilitation with activities such as counselling, educational services, and job training/placement. These efforts can positively affect the lives of some youths, but given the magnitude of the problem they can make no impact on the overall reduction of gang crime and violence. The societal level concerns issues such as social exclusion, defective educational services, and unemployment/underemployment. All of these conditions help spawn street gangs, but they are difficult to alleviate as long as some individuals and groups in Salvadoran society remain protective of the status quo. In view of these obstacles gang scholars suggest focusing efforts on the community level which is where the gangs emerge. The objective here is not only to implement the aforementioned strategies, but also to empower residents to contain the gang problem. The challenge is how to achieve this where social capital is weak and the structural factors remain unaddressed. These are necessarily very broad recommendations, and existing gang programme research can provide additional guidance. However, El Salvador would need to develop a gang policy that is sensitive to local requirements.

Second, a comprehensive gang policy is needed. So far the Salvadoran authorities have privileged suppression and considered prevention/rehabilitation essentially as secondary elements. However, these three strategies need to be combined and given equal weight. Prevention/rehabilitation programmes require the administration to commit resources. This may sound costly, but in the long term the country will pay a higher price if it continues to incarcerate its youth and fails to invest in its people. To be sure, the Salvadoran government faces financial constraints and therefore has to adopt spending priorities. However, its resource base can be expanded, if not through taxation, then by not using existing funds for unlimited publicity, non-transparent expenditure (permitted by partida secreta), or institutions that serve no real purpose (like the Secretaría de
Conclusion

This research adopted an ethnographic method to examine the gang-related advocacy experiences of three Salvadoran NGOs. The existing literature tends to study the practices of these organisations with little analytical attention to both their socio-political

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environment and their internal setting, thus failing to appreciate how exogenous and endogenous factors shape NGO action. By exploring how the domestic political context and organisational characteristics impacted NGO promotion of alternative gang control in El Salvador, the thesis suggested this to be a powerful way of understanding NGO behaviour. The analysis of the historical and contemporary country background confirmed that post-war El Salvador exhibits strong continuities with past patterns of dominance and exclusion. However, despite key factors such as extensive elite influence over the state, ARENA’s status quo-protective nature, and the absence of a pluralistic media system, some policy change was possible, notably in the early advocacy phase. These developments suggest that broader social and political transformations could be achieved if the NGO sector became more united and NGO strategies more assertive.

The street gangs have developed into a growing and serious social problem in El Salvador, partly because gang violence was long ignored by the authorities. Despite the human and economic cost, not only for gang youth themselves but also for the gang-affected communities and society at large, no government has displayed the necessary political will to seriously address the gang situation. Indeed, it was the NGOs’ failure to recognise the politics of gang control that partly prevented them from promoting an alternative policy with greater effectiveness. Thus, although the street gangs are not a recent problem, a long-term, comprehensive control strategy remains to be implemented. Improvements of El Salvador’s deep-seated social and political exclusion may go some way towards containing gang development, but professional and adequately-resourced gang programmes are nonetheless required. Unless these are created in the near future, gang violence will continue to impact Salvadoran society for a long time to come.


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Newspapers

Articles are listed chronologically and, bar some exceptions, do not include the news items collected for the content analysis.

**Diario Co-Latino**


**El Diario de Hoy**


The Economist


El Faro


El Mundo


La Opinión (US)


El Periódico (Guatemala)


La Prensa Gráfica


*La Prensa Gráfica.* “Juristas buscan debatir ley antimaras.” 1 August 2003, p. 10.


Raíces

Appendix 1: List of interviews

Interviews were conducted in person unless otherwise noted. Job titles were at the time of the interview, but former posts are included were relevant. At-risk youth, ex-gang members, and respondents who wished to remain anonymous are not included in this list.

El Salvador

Civil society

Abraham Abrego, Director, Centro de Estudios Constitucionales y Derechos Humanos (CECDH), Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), San Salvador, 10 May 2006

Jesús Aguilar, Director, Centro de Recursos Centroamericanos (CARECEN), San Salvador, 28 March 2006


Rina Aldana, Director, Centro de Desarrollo y Fortalecimiento Institucional (CEDFI), Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), San Salvador, 23 May 2006

Luis Alfaro, Therapist, Rehabilitation Programme for Severely Addicted Individuals, Fundación Salvadoreña Antidrogas (FUNDASALVA), San Salvador, 29 May 2006

Marvin Amaya, Executive Director, Cofraternidad Carcelaria, San Salvador, 9 May 2006

Marlon Anzora, Youth Programme Coordinator, Cristianos por la Paz (CRISPAZ), San Salvador, 8 August 2005

Idalia Argueta, High-risk Youth Programme Coordinator, Cristianos por la Paz (CRISPAZ), San Salvador, 9 May 2006

Miguel Azucena, President, Committee of Community Leaders, Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (PIDB), San Salvador, 30 May 2006

Dean Brackley SJ, Professor of Theology and Director of the Centro Monseñor Romero, Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA), San Salvador, 19 April 2006
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Roberto Burgos, Lawyer, Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (IDHUCA), San Salvador, 15 February 2006

Freddy Bustamante, Director of the Programme “Prevention and Reinsertion of At-Risk-Youths,” Fundación San Andrés, Colón, La Libertad, 2 June 2006

Mónica Calvo Ortiz, Communications Director, Asociación de Mujeres Flor de Piedra, San Salvador, 14 February 2006

Benjamín Cuellar, Director, Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (IDHUCA), San Salvador, 15 February 2006

Marlon Carranza, Researcher, Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), San Salvador, 16 January 2006

Jon de Cortina SJ, Director, Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (Pro-Búsqueda), San Salvador, 21 July 2005

Emperatriz Crespin, Coordinator of the Health and Prevention of Violence Programme, Médicos Salvadoreños para la Responsabilidad Social (MESARES), San Salvador, 28 June 2005

Miguel Cruz, Director, Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), San Salvador, 8 July 2005

Pedro Cruz, Lawyer, Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (IDHUCA), San Salvador, 28 June 2005

Mauricio Figueroa, Director, Fundación Quetzalcoatl, San Salvador, 25 May 2006

Nelson Flores, Director, Centro de Estudios Penales de El Salvador (CEPES), Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), San Salvador, 9 May 2006

Emilia Gallegos, Juvenile Justice Programme Assistant, Centro de Estudios Penales de El Salvador (CEPES), Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), San Salvador, 9 June 2006

Ryna Garay, Executive Director, Fundación Salvadoreña para la Promoción Social y el Desarrollo Económico (FUNSALPRODESE), San Salvador, 24 May 2006

Alicia de García, President, Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados Políticos de El Salvador “Óscar Arnulfo Romero” (COMADRES),
Appendix 1: List of interviews


Carlos García, Educational Programme Coordinator, Equipo Maíz,
San Salvador, 19 January 2006

Guillermo García, President, Asociación de Ex Internos Penitenciarios de El Salvador
(AEIPES),
San Salvador, 5 May 2006

Luís Armando González, Director, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la
Investigación (CIDAI),
San Salvador, 25 July 2005, 8 August 2005

María Silvia Guillén, Executive Director, Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del
Derecho (FESPAD),
San Salvador, 11 July 2006

Alba América Guirola, Director, Centro de Estudios de la Mujer “Norma Virginia
Guirola de Herrera” (CEMUJER),
San Salvador, 15 February 2006

Salvador Hernández, Director, Movimiento de Jóvenes Encuentristas (MOJE),
Ilobasco, 3 August 2005, 11 July 2006

Violeta Hernández, Coordinator of the Health and Non-Violence Programme,
Asociación Movimiento de Mujeres Mélida Anaya Montes (Las Mélidas),
San Salvador, 25 January 2006

William Hernández, Director, Entre Amigos,
San Salvador, 28 March 2006

Antonio Herrera, President, Asociación de Periodistas de El Salvador (APES),
San Salvador, 1 July 2005

Fr. Heriberto Herrera SDB, Director, Colegio Salesiano,
Santa Tecla, 10 May 2006

Guadalupe Leiva Choriego, Director, Fundación Salvadoreña Educación y Trabajo
(EDYTRA), Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (PIDB),
San Salvador, 10 May 2006

Jaime López, Director, Probidad,
San Salvador, 19 June 2006

Christian Martínez, Psychologist, Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (PIDB),
San Salvador, 10 February 2006

Jaime Martínez, Director, Unidad de Justicia Juvenil (UJJ), Supreme Court of Justice;
former Director of the Centro de Estudios Penales de El Salvador (CEPES),
Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD),
San Salvador, 15 June 2006
Moisés Martínez, Educational Programme Coordinator, Nueva Generación XXI, Mejicanos, 2 May 2006

Marlon Montoya, Programme Director, Proyecto Nehemias, Asociación Amigos para Latinoamérica (AMILAT), San Salvador, 5 July 2006

Ricardo Montoya, Juvenile Justice Programme Coordinator, Centro de Estudios Penales de El Salvador (CEPES), Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), San Salvador, 8 July 2005

David Morales, Lawyer, Tutela Legal, San Salvador, 15 June 2006


Raúl Moreno, Lecturer in Economics, University of El Salvador, San Salvador, 26 April 2006

Eliseo Ortiz, President, Instituto de Estudios Jurídicos de El Salvador (IEJES), San Salvador, 29 May 2006

Ignacio Paniagua Castro, President, Médicos Salvadoreños para la Responsabilidad Social (MESARES), San Salvador, 28 June 2005

Carolina Paz Narváez, Lecturer in Public Health, Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA), San Salvador, 25 April 2006

Armando Pérez Salazar, Executive Director, Comité de Familiares de Victimas de Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos “Marianella García Villas” (CODEFAM), San Salvador, 29 June 2005

Gilma Pérez, Coordinator of the Migrant Programme, Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (IDHUCA), San Salvador, 1 June 2006

Azucena Quinteros, Educational Programme Coordinator, Asociación Movimiento de Mujeres Mélida Anaya Montes (Las Mélidas), San Salvador, 25 January 2006


Carlos Ramos, Academic Coordinator, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO)-El Salvador, San Salvador, 18 July 2005
Appendix 1: List of interviews


Jeanne Rikkers, El Salvador Coordinator, Cristianos por la Paz (CRISPAZ), San Salvador, 8 August 2005

Carlos Rivas, Pastor General, Tabernáculo Bautista de Avivamiento, San Bartolo, Ilopango, 6 June 2006

Felipe Rivas, Director, Asociación Intersectorial para el Desarrollo Económico y el Progreso Social (CIDEP), San Salvador, 20 April 2006

Víctor Rodríguez, Director, Consejo Federativo, Polígono Industrial Don Bosco (PIDB), San Salvador, 31 May 2006

Luis Ernesto Romero Gavidia, Director, Homies Unidos, San Salvador, 22 July 2005, 3 July 2006

Monseñor Gregorio Rosa Chávez, Assistant Bishop of San Salvador, San Salvador, 8 August 2005


Santiago Ruiz, Lecturer in Economics, University of El Salvador, San Salvador, 8 May 2006

Juan Carlos Sánchez, Head of the Project Planning Unit, Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), San Salvador, 4 May 2006

Jorge Torres, Lawyer, Unidad de Recepción de Casos, Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (IDHUCA), San Salvador, 23 June 2006

Antonio Martínez Uribe, Lecturer in Political Science, University of El Salvador, San Salvador, 7 April 2006

Lilian Vega, Lecturer in Economics, Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA), San Salvador, 2 May 2006

Media

Carlos Dada, Journalist, El Faro, San Salvador, 24 May 2006
Appendix 1: List of interviews

Juan José Dalton, Freelance Journalist, 
San Salvador, 6 February 2006

Mauricio Funes, TV Journalist, 
San Salvador, 20 June 2006

Wilfredo Hernández, Journalist, *El Diario de Hoy*, 
San Salvador, 16 June 2006

Nelson López, Editor-in-Chief, *Diario Co-Latino*, 
San Salvador, 28 April 2006

Paolo Luers, Journalist, *El Faro*, 
San Salvador, 27 May 2006

David Marroquín, Journalist, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 
San Salvador, 30 May 2006

José Luis Sanz, Deputy Director of Information, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 
San Salvador, 27 May 2006

Héctor Vides, Executive Director, Asociación de Radios y Programas Participativos (ARPAS), 
San Salvador, 14 July 2005

State

Sub-Inspector Orlando Aguilar, División de Servicios Juveniles y Familia, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), 
San Salvador, 20 February 2006

Beatrice Alamanni de Carrillo, Procuradora para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (PDDH), 
San Salvador, 19 July 2005

Gerardo Alegría, Adjunct Procurator for Civil and Political Rights, Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (PDDH), 
San Salvador, 18 April 2006

José Miguel Arévalo, Manager, Management and Cooperation Unit, Division of Social Affairs, Office of the Mayor of Soyapango, 
Soyapango, 20 February 2006

Celia de Ávila, Probation Officer, Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor, 
San Salvador, 3 June 2006

Juan Carlos Barahona, Youth Welfare Coordinator, Secretaría de la Juventud, 
San Salvador, 30 January 2006
Arnoldo Bernal, Congressman for the Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR) and President of the congressional Comisión de Justice and Human Rights Humanos,
San Salvador, 21 March 2006

Blanca Flor Bonilla, Congresswoman for the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and member of the congressional Commission for the Family, Women, and Childhood,
San Salvador, 30 January 2006

Óscar Bonilla, President, Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP),
San Salvador, 31 March 2006

Sub-Commissioner Vladimir Cáceres, Executive Secretary, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC),
San Salvador, 17 February 2006

José Rafael Castillo, Police Chaplain, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC),
San Salvador, 20 February 2006

Maricruz Castro, National Director for Youth, Ministry of Education,
San Salvador, 6 June 2006

Commissioner Óscar Chávez Valiente, Secretary-General, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC),
San Salvador, 3 July 2006

Mauricio Cosme Merino, Secretary-General, Academia Nacional de Seguridad Pública (ANSP),
Santa Tecla, 4 July 2006

Porfirio Chica, Ministerial Adviser, Ministerio de Gobernación,
San Salvador, 31 May 2006

Gerardo Cisneros, Criminal Law Coordinator, Consejo Nacional de la Judicatura (CNJ),
San Salvador, 25 May 2006

Héctor Dada Hirezi, Congressman for the Cambio Democrático (CD) and Member of the congressional Commission of Public Security,
San Salvador, 23 January 2006

Marcelino Díaz Menjívar, Forensic Psychologist, Instituto de Medicina Legal (IML),
San Salvador, 7 July 2006

Nídia Díaz, Member of the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN) for the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN); former FMLN commander and FMLN peace negotiator,
San Salvador, 29 March 2006

Sub-Inspector José Eduardo Dubón Calderón, Sub-Division of Public Security, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC),
San Salvador, 27 January 2006
Appendix 1: List of interviews

Armando Echeverría, Director of Rehabilitation, Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP),

César Funes, Youth Secretary, Secretaría de la Juventud,
San Salvador, 30 January 2006

Arthur Guth, Mano Amiga Coordinator, Secretaría de la Juventud,
San Salvador, 30 January 2006

Leonardo Hidalgo, Mayor of Ilopango,
Ilopango, 14 February 2006

Verónica Hill, Youth Programme Coordinator, Office of the Mayor of San Salvador,
San Salvador, 14 June 2006

Armando Jiménez, Executive Director, Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP),

Jaime Juárez, Head of the Management and Cooperation Unit, Division of Social Affairs,
Office of the Mayor of Soyapango,
Soyapango, 13 February 2006

Jaime Landaverde, Head of the Division of Juvenile Criminal Justice, Delegation of the
Fiscalía General de la República in Soyapango,
Soyapango, 3 May 2006

Eduardo Linares, councillor and municipal director, Office of the Mayor of San Salvador;
former Head of the Cuerpo de Agentes Metropolitanos (CAM),
San Salvador, 4 July 2005

Víctor Manuel López, Director, Juvenile Detention Centre,
Tonacatepeque, 1 May 2006

Xochitl Marchelli, Human Rights Instructor, Academia Nacional de Seguridad Pública (ANSP),
San Salvador, 4 May 2006, 19 June 2006

Ana Guadalupe Martínez, Member of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC); former
FMLN commander and FMLN peace negotiator,
San Salvador, 29 March 2006, 30 March 2006

Morena Melgar, Director, Department of Juvenile Detention Centres, Instituto
Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (ISNA),
San Salvador, 24 May 2006

Manuel Melgar, Congressman for the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación
Nacional (FMLN) and Member of the congressional Commission of Defence and
Commission of Public Security,
San Salvador, 20 January 2006
Appendix 1: List of interviews


Mirna Perla, Supreme Court Judge, San Salvador, 6 June 2006

Sub-Commissioner Hugo Ramírez, Head of the División de Servicios Juveniles y Familia, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), San Salvador, 1 February 2006

Doris Luz Rivas Galindo, Juez Primero de Menores de San Salvador, Cámara de Menores, and Member of the Red de Infancia y Adolescencia (RIA), San Salvador, 4 February 2006

Carlos Rosales, Secretario Particular de la Presidencia de la República, San Salvador, 23 January 2006

Luis Enrique Salazar, Adjunct Procurator for the Rights of the Child, Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (PDDH), San Salvador, 18 April 2006

Sub-Commissioner Julio César Santana Vela, Director of the División Policía Técnica Científica, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), San Salvador, 27 January 2006

Aída Luz Santos de Escobar, Judge at the Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor, San Salvador, 8 May 2006

Milton Vega, Rehabilitation Officer, Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP), San Salvador, 7 April 2006, 11 April 2006

Jaime Vigil, Director, Sub Dirección de Repatriados, Ministerio de Gobernación, San Salvador, 5 June 2006

Jaime Roberto Villanova, Director-General of the Salvadoran Prison System, San Salvador, 24 April 2006

**International actors**

Brian Duggan, Director, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), United States embassy, San Salvador, 28 April 2006

Patricia Galdamez, Project Management Assistant, Democracy and Governance Office, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), San Salvador, 3 March 2006
Appendix 1: List of interviews

Eduardo Guerrero, National Representative, Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO),
San Salvador, 19 July 2005

Karla Hananía de Varela, Legislation and Public Policy Officer, United Nation’s Children’s Fund (UNICEF),
San Salvador, 22 July 2005

Jorge Hevia Sierra, Ambassador of Spain to El Salvador,
San Salvador, 6 February 2006

Richard Jones, Director, Catholic Relief Services (CRS),
San Salvador, 25 July 2005, 8 August 2005

Anja Kramer, Consultant for Local Economic Development and Employment,
Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ),
San Salvador, 27 February 2006

Carmen Medina, El Salvador Country Representative, International Cooperation for Development (ICD), Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR),
San Salvador, 12 July 2005

María Teresa de Mejía, Legislation and Public Policy Officer, United Nation’s Children’s Fund (UNICEF), former Director of the ISNA and Director of the Supreme Court’s Oficina de Apoyo a la Justicia Juvenil (OAJJ),

Alan Quinn, Director, Centro Canadiense de Estudios y Cooperación Internacional (CECI),
San Salvador, 31 January 2006

Wouter Wilton, Chargé d’affaires, Delegation of the European Union in El Salvador,
San Salvador, 3 May 2006

Guatemala

Marco Castillo, Director, Grupo Ceiba,
Guatemala City, 18 July 2006

Leonel Dubón Bendfeldt, Programme Director, Casa Alianza-Guatemala,
Mixco, 27 July 2005

Emilio Goubaud, Director, Asociación para la Prevención del Delito (APREDE),
Guatemala City, 18 July 2006

Abner Paredes, Youth Programme Coordinator, Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH),
Guatemala City, 17 July 2006
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**Honduras**

Amado Mancia, Human Rights Programme Coordinator, Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación Compañía de Jesús (ERIC), El Progreso, Yoro, 26 June 2006

Andrés Pavón, Director, Comité para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras (CODEH), Tegucigalpa, 27 June 2006

Marta Savillón, Programme Director, Casa Alianza-Honduras, Tegucigalpa, 27 June 2006

Nery Roberto Velásquez, Lawyer, Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CONADEH), Tegucigalpa, 26 June 2006

**Nicaragua**

Carlos Emilio López, Consultant on Juvenile Affairs for the National Police of Nicaragua, Managua, 4 August 2006

Grethel López, Director, Casa Alianza-Nicaragua, Managua, 31 July 2006

José Luís Rocha, Coordinator of the Research Group for Economic and Social Policies, Instituto de Investigación y Desarrollo NITLAPÁN, Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), Managua, 31 July 2006

Nohelia Zamora, Social Programme Coordinator, Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (CEPREV), Managua, 31 July 2006

**United States**

Erik Alda, Consultant, Sustainable Development Department, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Washington, DC, 26 October 2005

Ximena Anwandter, Consultant to the Finance, Private Sector, and Infrastructure Programme, Latin America and the Caribbean, World Bank, Washington, DC, 26 October 2005

Marisol Blanchard, Human Rights Specialist, Special Assistant to the Executive Secretary, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Washington, DC, 24 October 2005
Alberto Concha-Eastman, Regional Advisor on Violence and Health, Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO)/World Health Organisation (WHO), Washington, DC, 28 October 2005


David LeValley, Supervisory Special Agent, MS-13 National Gang Task Force, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Washington, DC, 21 October 2005

Eduardo Mendoza, Director, Office of International Threats, Department of Multidimensional Security, Organisation of American States (OAS), Washington, DC, 21 October 2005

Manuel Orozco, Senior Associate, Executive Director of the Remittances and Rural Development Project, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC, 25 October 2005

Laura Park, Operations and Outreach Director, Due Process of Law Foundation, Washington, DC, 26 October 2005

Melanie Pearson, Intelligence Analyst, MS-13 National Gang Task Force, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Washington, DC, 21 October 2005

Anu Rajaraman, Democracy Officer, Office of Regional Sustainable Development, Latin America and Caribbean Bureau, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Washington, DC, 26 October 2005


Magdaleno Rose-Ávila, founder of Homies Unidos, 20 March 2007 (telephone interview)

Lynn Sheldon, Senior Associate, Communities in Transition Division, Creative Associates International, Inc., Washington, DC, 24 October 2005

Geoff Thale, Programme Director and Senior Associate for Cuba and Central America, Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), Washington, DC, 24 October 2005
Appendix 2: Glossary

Bachillerato. High school diploma.

Barrio. Neighbourhood.

Brincar(se). Gang argot; refers to the initiation rite that a youth undergoes to join a gang. Usually involves a beating or jumping-in that the aspiring gang member must endure for 13 or 18 seconds, depending on the gang.

Calle Dieciocho. 18th Street Gang; was formed in Los Angeles in the 1960s and is today one of the main street gangs in El Salvador.

Calmarse. Gang argot; refers to the process of withdrawing from the gang and abandoning violence and drugs.

Campesino. Peasant or person who lives off the land in the countryside.

Champa. Low-quality and unsafe house, usually built from scrap materials (e.g., cardboard, laminate, and plastic) and located in a marginal community.

Clica. Sub-group of a gang based in a neighbourhood or community. Each clica tends to have a specific name that identifies the group both with the area and the umbrella group.

Denuncia. Public condemnation of an act, e.g. of a human rights violation.

Departamento. Department; a geographic area and administrative unit of a country. El Salvador is divided into 14 such departments.

Destroyer. Gang hangout; a (usually derelict) building that gang members occupy to hold meetings, hang out, party etc.

Empresarios solidarios cristianos. Refers to the entrepreneurial/educational paradigm guiding the work of the Polígono Industrial Don Bosco. The idea behind this concept is the creation of entrepreneurs who exercise their trade in solidarity with others rather than in pursuit of material gain.

Focalización. Concept that guides the prevention and rehabilitation work of the Secretaría de la Juventud and the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública; implies a focus on the most crime-ridden communities and the most vulnerable youths in these areas.

Los grandotes. Term used to describe a type of “big boys’ club” that comprises El Salvador’s most powerful family groups.

Granja-escuela. A gang rehabilitation centre in western El Salvador that is led by the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública.

Homeboy. Gang argot; refers to a male gang member.

Homegirl. Gang argot; describes a female gang member.
**Homies.** Gang argot; affectionate term used by gang members to address each other.

**Hiper garantismo.** Hyper-guaranteeism; term used by some sectors in El Salvador to criticise the country’s laws as being too soft on criminals while leaving victims unprotected.

**Ley Antimaras.** Temporary Anti-Gang Act that constituted the legal pillar of President Flores’ *Mano Dura* gang policy and permitted the arrest of suspected gang members on account of their physical appearance. The legislation was declared unconstitutional and was replaced by a reform of Article 345 of the Salvadoran penal code which sanctions membership of an “illicit association.”

**Luz verde.** Green light; gang argot that refers to an order to kill.

**Mano Amiga.** Gang prevention programme that formed officially part of President Saca’s *Súper Mano Dura* gang policy.

**Mano Dura.** Literally “hard hand” or iron first; implies a suppressive approach to crime, but refers also to the gang policy that was instituted by President Francisco Flores in 2003 and aimed to “crack down” on street gangs. The plan was replaced in 2004 by President Saca’s *Súper Mano Dura* initiative.

**Mano Extendida.** Gang rehabilitation programme that was officially part of President Saca’s *Súper Mano Dura* plan.

**Maquila.** Also *maquiladora*, a factory or assembly plant, operated by a foreign company, that imports materials for assembly or manufacturing before exporting the finished products, usually to the originating country. Maquilas are notorious for their weak labour protection norms, low wages, and abysmal working conditions.

**Mara.** Short for *marabunta*, a species of migratory ants that devour anything in their path. Following a 1970s movie of that name, “mara” entered popular usage in Northern Central America to designate a group of friends, but is now employed as a generic label for street gang.

**Mara Salvatrucha (MS).** Street gang that was formed by Salvadoran immigrant youths in Los Angeles and is today one of the main street gangs in El Salvador. The name of *Mara Salvatrucha* is derived from *mara*, a Salvadoran term for a group of friends; *salva*, short for Salvadoran; and *trucha*, slang for “watch out” and also the Spanish word for “trout,” a fish that swims upstream and symbolises the fight for survival.

**Marchas blancas.** Literally “white marches;” refers to the mass demonstrations against the privatisation of El Salvador’s public health system between 1999 and 2003. The events are known as the “white marches,” because the protesters dressed in white to demonstrate their solidarity with the medical workers.

**Marero.** Term employed by officials, the media, and the public at large to refer to a gang member. Gang youths themselves do not use this word and even tend to consider it offensive.
**La Matanza.** Literally “the massacre;” refers to the indiscriminate killing of an estimated 10,000-30,000 *campesinos* in 1932 that was precipitated by a popular uprising.

**Ministerio de Gobernación.** Ministry created in December 2001 following the merger of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Public Security and Justice, officially for the purpose of developing a comprehensive crime-fighting strategy. The Ministerio de Gobernación was itself replaced in December 2006 by Ministry of Public Security and Justice. At the same time, the then Minister of Gobernación, René Figueroa, was appointed Minister of Public Security and Justice.

**Oreja.** Literally “ear;” refers to a government informant.

**Palomilla.** “Boy gangs,” a tradition that Mexican immigrants brought with them to the United States; the groups later metamorphosed into street gangs.

**Pandilla.** Gang.

**Pandilla callejera.** Street gang.

**Pandilla juvenil.** Youth gang; alternative term for street gang.

**Pandillero.** Gang member.

**Pandillero calmando.** A gang member who has withdrawn from active gang life, but remains identified with, or emotionally attached to, the gang. For gang members, adopting the status of *pandillero calmando* can also be a way of leaving the gang without disrespecting their peers.

**Pandillero pasivo.** Ex-gang member who has severed all ties to the gang and may also have his/her tattoos removed.

**Partida secreta.** A discretionary spending account of the President of El Salvador.

**Propuesta.** Proposal or proposal-making.

**Sicariato.** The use of contract killers.

**Sicario.** Contract killer.

**Súper Mano Dura.** President Saca’s gang policy that officially combined suppression with prevention/rehabilitation. The plan was in force between 2004 and 2006 and was subsequently replaced by a suppressive approach based on investigating the gangs as organised criminal structures.

**Testimonio.** Testimonial discourse or a first-person narrative told by the person who has witnessed the event or experience that is being recounted. The situation of narration tends to involve a problem of repression, poverty, struggle for survival etc.

**Testimonialista.** Person delivering a *testimonio.*
**Los torogozones.** Term used to describe a type of “big boys’ club” that comprises El Salvador’s most powerful family groups.

**Trencito.** Initiation rite for female gang members that involves sexual relations with one or more males of the group; for the girls the *trencito* can be the alternative to jumping-in, but will afford them less respect.

**El vacil.** Gang argot; refers to the range of activities that gang members engage in, such as hanging out, partying, having sex, taking drugs, and law-breaking.

**La vida loca.** The crazy life; term that sums up the gang experience or everything that happens to a gang member, good and bad.