

Dialogue & Exchange Program

LATIN AMERICA

Urban Peace and Citizen Security

- **Site:** Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- **Dates:** March 18-27, 2010
- **Sponsor:** AFSC
- **Number of Participants:** 19
- **Total number of DEP-sponsored participants:** 13 (2 Mexico, 4 Guatemala, 1 Peru, 1 Chile, 5 Brazil)
- **Total number of AFSC staff participants:** 6

Background of the DEP

Latin American cities have become the place of increasing violence. The World Health Organization calculates that 140,000 homicides are committed yearly in Latin America. Most of these deaths take place in cities and are the result of interpersonal violence, not wars or armed conflicts. Most of the victims are poor members of the urban population, defined as those who earn less than US\$ 2.00 daily. Almost 80 % of the victims are male, younger than 25 years old and most probably the killer would be a neighbor of the same age and gender, involved in drug trafficking and extortion of poor people.

Due to the increasing cycles of violence, Latin American cities are no longer considered anymore as places of safety and civility. Fear (psychological reaction of distress resulting from anticipation of danger) has become a dominant feeling among large parts of the population turning routine acts into a source of insecurity and threat. Reduction of fear and insecurity demands rebuilding citizen's trust by resolving substantial conflicts in the urban space. AFSC's experience shows that the Conflict Transformation Paradigm provides a clear operational framework of trust restoring strategies.

Conflict Transformation is an approach to conflict and peace building developed by John Paul Lederach where conflict is viewed both as an opportunity and as a dynamic process. Such process is constantly changing within the dimensions of four basic relationships:

cultural, structural, collective/groupal and personal. Conflict is then a phenomenon that can transform the people and their environment and while, at the same time, transform relationships within those dimensions to be more positive and balanced.

Positive change of relationships in an urban setting means the conscious change of the quality of negative/violent relationships to positive/cooperative ones among individual and groups. A pre-condition for such a change is individual/group's reconciliation. Reconciliation of urban groups in conflict demands the accomplishment of four conditions: trust, justice, mercy and peace. Only when these four conditions are met is it then possible to rebuild Urban Peace.

Urban Peace can be defined as a process of substantive change of relationships, gearing towards a more balanced distribution of (symbolic) power among the different citizen groups that inhabit the city.

There are a number of initiatives dealing with different aspects of Urban Peace at the global level. A way of getting acquainted with these aspects was through participation at the 5th UN Habitat World Forum in Rio de Janeiro (March 22-26). The aim of this DEP was to provide participant with opportunities for direct contact and networking with practitioners and researchers on urban peace and/or citizen security from other continents like Africa, Asia, Europe and USA.

The key DEP objectives were (1) to share quality content information among participants on practical strategies to reduce violence; (2) to expand the membership of the AFSC Virtual Community of Practice on Urban Peace and Citizen Security, and (3) to inform an international audience on new Urban Peace practices inspired by the Conflict Transformation framework.

Description of the Activity

The two days DEP seminar (March 19-20) in Rio was preparatory for the five days Habitat Forum (March 22-26.) For the DEP meeting the participants (practitioners, scholars and policy designers) were asked to present a power point presentation related to key conceptual or practical issues. The presentations are available upon request.

The seminar helped to confirm a number of key issues arising in different countries of Latin America:

- Urban violent conflict is a relational dynamic between contending social groups. There is an association between violence and poverty but it is not a causal-univocal one as some governments point out. Reducing poverty helps to decline violence but it does not resolve it.
- Urban violence is a complex phenomena influenced by changing demographic structures in Latin America, as well as changes in the productive chain systems.

Globalization increases access to world markets while at the same time foments local informal markets, including the market of small arms.

- Latin American urban young poor males and an increasing number of females do not have any expectation of living a long life, their “trade” is here and now. Globalization is also changing the subject consciousness of these groups. The traditional post-fordism¹ social imagination focused on “Work, Metro and Home” is not a key element of the youth ethos. Poor young boys/girls see drug trafficking as a normal part of their life career.

- Legally western societies consider victim suffering as a part of the criminal act, but no Latin American State have legal and criminal legislations that define the victim as the main direct, concerned and interested party. “Surveiller et Punir le Criminel” is still the main doctrine which inspires western justice, their law enforcement and the popular imagination.

- Most current university research on Urban Violence and Citizen Security is descriptive, inspired in an epidemiological paradigm (World Health Organization) and is unable to advance and forecast solutions to violent issues that still to come. UN institutions follow the same trend.

After the two days seminar, the participants actively took part in the UN Habitat 5th World Forum as well in the parallel Urban Social Forum (March 22-26).

The UN Habitat Forum was the place for those interested in conveying ideas and developing networks. It provided many opportunities to meet and discuss with people from different continents, ranging from scholars and city mayors to radical urban activists.

The UN Habitat Forum provided the DEP participants with excellent networking possibilities and the many smaller meetings opened up possibilities for new relationships and contacts to be formed.

The Urban Social Forum was much richer on theoretical debates than the UN Habitat. It housed a number of civil society initiatives like the organizers of the World Assembly of Inhabitants (WAI), an initiative involving 350 urban organizations from 40 different countries that will meet in Dakar in 2011.

¹ Post-Fordism is the name given to the dominant system of economic production, consumption and associated socio-economic phenomena, in most industrialized countries since the late 20th century.

Conclusion

While the DEP seminar gave the participants a number of refined paradigmatic issues (Urban Peace, Victims Recognition), the UN Habitat Forum and the Urban Social Forum opened larger opportunities to network with new people and organizations.

The further conformation of the AFSC Latin America “Community of Practice” will ensure a larger impact among scholars and practitioners involved in urban issues on different continents.

This DEP seminar is part of a number of similar initiatives started early in 2008, under the single theme of Urban Citizen Insecurity in Latin America and Caribbean. One of the results of these activities is the creation of a *“Latin America Virtual Community of Practice on Citizen Insecurity”*, involving 43 Latin experts and practitioners. The main objective of the community of practice is to provide conceptual support to the development of new policies aimed at reducing urban violence inspired by the paradigms of Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice.

This seminar and subsequent participation in the UN Habitat and the Urban Social Fora clearly contributed to a better understanding of the situation about urban security and the development of a number of relevant links.

Many of the participants expressed their satisfaction with the DEP project:

*“This sort of gatherings combining theory and practice do not exist in Brazil, including the Universities “
(Brazilian participant)*

*“The Urban Peace concept ought help to deconstruct the traditional negative concept associated to power and build a positive one”
(Chilean participant)*

*“We should encourage the legitimacy of the conflict-mediation practices and ensure people understand and use this alternative to formal judicial power”
(Guatemalan participant).*