



# Youth Peace and Security in the Northern Triangle of Central America

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## Introduction

In December 2015, the Security Council of the United Nations approved Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, acknowledging that involvement of young people in conflicts, violence and criminal dynamics is linked to structural conditions of inequality and exclusion, as well as political, economic, cultural and identity factors of a contextual nature.

These structural and contextual factors acquire different meanings in different regions of the world, reinforcing the fact that social, economic, and cultural contexts shape the way youth face challenges, as well as underlining that structural factors such as poverty, inequality, violence, and exclusion affect young people differently. This study reinforces the idea that youth is a contextually-based category only defined by age factors. The meaning of youth varies according to living conditions, making for a heterogeneous social subject. There are differences, depending on context, location of housing, socioeconomic position, and organizational involvement, as well as sex, ethnicity and/or sexual orientation, among others.

Most people consulted in this study were young according to conventional age ranges but most of them have responsibilities traditionally associated with adult life, for example, the need to provide for their children or relatives (mother, brothers, etc.). In this context, education and political action are secondary when survival considerations are paramount. The way youth conceive of their life is shaped by the weight of precarious living conditions under which the line between legal and illegal activities becomes blurred.

Youth were studied using a sectoral approach, which is a methodological strategy to group young people based on one among many different expressions of how their life is organized. The classification of the sector (indigenous, women, youth at risk, social movements, etc.) does not exclude other characteristics shared by the groups.

This study encompasses the Northern Central American Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) and addresses the situation of youth in situations of high vulnerability and violence, the contextual dynamics driving conflict and violence among youth, and the opportunities to identify and strengthen peacebuilding strategies and youth involvement.

The study brings together the voices of young people in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala and highlights the differences between those who speak from conditions of marginality and exclusion with heightened concerns about survival in contrast with those who belong to social organizations and educational institutions who perceive their surrounding reality in different terms.

In order to bring together these various perspectives, the study employed a sectoral approach as a strategy to analyze a diversity of young people. The name assigned to each sector is based on the dimensions of a given life experience held by young people that does not mean that they cannot be engaged with other experiences that intertwine with their own. The study discovered that among some sectors, such as indigenous groups, the LGBTI community, and youth organizations, there are explicit expressions and ownership of a sectoral identity, defined as a mechanism to assure cohesion in diversity. In other cases, such as football fans, youth at risk, and women, the identity of the sector is not explicit and has no political significance involving redress of grievances.

The same occurs with young people who belong to social organizations, civil society or social movements. The idea of belonging to an organization brings to mind a national-level political programme, for example, based on public policy demands, reforms to the political and judicial systems, and political action around criticism of the capitalist system in contrast to young people organized informally in sports clubs or in high-risk neighbourhoods where belonging to a group does not imply a commitment to achieving specific political goals. In the latter case, the organization serves to assure the survival of a group held together by bonds of a shared identity that only aims to assure group solidarity within a social context of aggression and exclusion.

In the case of groups of young women, the study sought out the perspective of university students and women at risk in neighbourhoods that suffered high levels of violence. This decision was taken because women's organizations, which are mostly feminist in orientation, place their discourse of feminist grievances before that of the perspective of young women. For this reason, the study avoided the feminist agenda to obtain instead the perspective of young women whose daily routine is characterized more by socioeconomic differences than by discursive concerns.

The study seeks to echo the voice of "youth at risk" by referring to young people whose life has been molded by areas highly affected by violence, where control is exerted in part by gangs or other criminal organizations. This refers not only to geographic locations. It also refers to environments that are poor where the relation between society and state and politics is weak and conflictive

given a social order that is defined not by the state's institutional presence but by violent groups that control territory.

This situation affects the way in which political action and change are perceived. In those communities of young people at risk (as will be seen in the case of Honduras) there exists a distinction between that which is inevitable and which is possible. Inevitable means trying to change the system, which implies changing the structural situation that includes both political and economic aspects. But when faced with reality, no possibilities to promote change are apparent and, therefore, the only way out is survival by any means available. That which is possible is staying alive by actions that are consistent with the environment, to become part of the environment and in some cases (such as migration and gangs) to take advantage of its opportunities even at high personal costs. Methodology

Twenty-three focus groups were organized by social sectors in the three countries of the Northern Triangle. These focus groups began with a collective and individual analysis of the problems that young people face in their daily routines and then proceeded to analyze how they see themselves transforming or contributing to change the problems that they face. From the start, it was agreed that the problems had to be related to issues of peace and security in the following terms:



# Methodology

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Sector	Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	Total	Characteristics
Indigenous	0	1	0	1	In Guatemala, a focus group was carried out specifically with indigenous populations, taking into account the country's population characteristics.
Young women	0	1	1	2	Focus groups with young women were specifically targeted at university students and young girls at risk in neighborhoods highly affected by violence and gang control.
Youth at risk	6	2	2	10	Youth at risk is defined by their place of residence in peripheral areas with a high level of threat of crime and violence. The Honduran case also includes two focus groups with the so-called "barras", informal youth organizations of football fans.
LGBT youth	1	1	0	2	Focus groups were conducted with LGBT community members who live in marginalized areas.
Organized youth	2	3	3	8	These focus groups include advocacy groups, student movements, and two groups with specific religious backgrounds.
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>23</b>	

The following table describes each of the focus groups and the number of participants in each:

#	Date	Place	Participants	Group characteristics
<b>Honduras</b>				
1	22.08.17	Centro Travesía INFOP/Projovent, Tegucigalpa	17	Youth at risk
2	23.08.17	Instituto San Juan Bosco de Formación Técnico-Profesional, Tegucigalpa	20	Youth at risk
3	23.08.17	Colonia Ramón Amaya Amador, proyecto Virgen de la Paz	12	Youth at risk
4	25.08.17	Hotel Florencia, Tegucigalpa	14	Youth at risk (barras)
5	25.08.17	Hotel Florencia, Tegucigalpa	16	Youth at risk (barras)
6	28.08.17	Fundación Kukulcán, Tegucigalpa	17	LGBT youth
7	30.08.17	Colonia Los Pinos, Tegucigalpa	14	Youth at risk
8	01.09.17	Programa Mejores Familias, National Government	10	Organized youth
9	02.09.17	Roundtable of youth organizations and social movements	11	Organized youth
		<b>Total Honduras:</b>	<b>131</b>	
<b>Guatemala</b>				
10	13.08.17	Jóvenes Misioneros de Jesús, Iglesia San José Catedral, km. 67.5 Carretera a Pastores, Finca Tegucigalpa, Sacatepéquez	12	Organized youth (religious background)
11	25.08.17	Asociación de Jóvenes Diversos en Acción, Guatemala City	10	LGBT youth
12	25.08.17	Alcaldía auxiliar of Belén, Mixco Municipality	12	Youth at risk
13	28.08.17	Coordinadora Municipal de Juventud, Colonia Enriqueta, Villa Nueva	12	Youth at risk
14	30.08.17	Escuela de Ciencia Política, Universidad de San Carlos, Guatemala City	12	Young women
15	30.08.17	Coordinadora Nacional de la Juventud, Ciudad de Guatemala	12	Organized youth
16	03.09.17	Asociación de Estudiantes de la Escuela de Ciencias Políticas, Universidad de San Carlos, Guatemala City	12	Organized youth
17	03.09.17	Instituto Indígena por Cooperativa, Chichicastenango, Quiché	15	Indigenous youth
		<b>Total Guatemala:</b>	<b>97</b>	
<b>El Salvador</b>				
18	24.08.17	Cantón Jocotal, Sonsonate	14	Youth at risk
19	24.08.17	Cantón Loma Verde, Sonsonate	19	Youth at risk
20	09.09.17	Universidad José Simeón Cañas (UCA), San Salvador	19	Young women
21	09.09.17	Student movement, Universidad de El Salvador, San Salvador	18	Organized youth
22	10.09.17	Fundación Salvador del Mundo (FUNSALMO), Soyapango, San Salvador	10	Organized youth
23	12.09.17	Archbishopric of San Salvador, San Salvador	12	Organized youth (religious background)
		<b>Total El Salvador:</b>	<b>92</b>	
		<b>Total participants in the three countries</b>	<b>320</b>	



A common question format was employed in all the focus groups as well as a grading system for the problem situations the participants face.

The questions were used to provoke debate, which was managed under criteria of flexibility given that the groups had very different levels of experience with this kind of exercise. For young people who belong to civil society organizations, focus groups are a recurrent experience. In the case of young people at risk or who belong to informal organizations, the focus groups for this study were their first experience.

The methodology for the study was flexible and adapted to each group and country context given that in environments controlled by gangs there is no liberty to address certain specific topics such as women's freedom or perpetrators of homicide. This was especially noteworthy in the case of El Salvador and Honduras where group participants clearly set down limits to opinions they could express, a situation that was somewhat compensated by informal conversations where the problems of exposure and risk were somewhat reduced.

The first questions posed in the focus groups were: What is the most meaningful problem for you in relation to peace and security? Why? The discussion that followed this question was guided by a grading system under which each participant in a focus group assigned a ranking to each of the problems they identified as affecting them individually. Thus, each sector and each country developed a different ranking for the problems which is reflected in the manner that the results are described. The analysis was based on a ranking of the frequency in descending order of the problems for each sector and country.

The problems identified were ranked from one to five, where one represents that which most affects the life of a young person and five the least. This dynamic was understood in different terms in each country. In the case of Guatemala and El Salvador, the ranking were closest to those expected. In Honduras, problems such as migration and gangs were not ranked because all the focus groups considered them to be situations that affected them negatively but at the same time were a way out of even greater problems or were perceived as problems of such magnitude as being inevitable.

These differences evidence the precarious conditions under which the selected groups of young people selected for this study live and the differences among preconceived characteristics that they hold about the meaning of being young.

The discussions included perspectives on peace and security and strategies for participation, protection, prevention, dialogue, partnership, and development. For example: What do you want for yourself and other young people? What would you expect from the population/ community/society? What would you expect from the authorities/the state?

By asking these questions, the young participants were able to identify the problems and then point out the actions that they might undertake to transform them according to their specific contexts. But again, the variations depended significantly with factors associated with their personal circumstances: those who live daily on the brink of survival and those who have all their basic needs covered.

In general terms, the methodology allowed for an analysis of how the living conditions of young people have an impact on their capacity to transform society. Some of the young people who participated had already surpassed the line of economic survival, one way or another, and had finished a university degree, who belong to social organizations and movements, or work for some state programme and who by receiving a steady income are not obliged to participate in illegal economic activities. These young individuals are still defined by their precarious situation and this has an impact on their political and transformational action because their first daily priority is to provide for their family and survive in a

violent environment. On the other hand, there are those young people who have no possibility of studying or working and whose only alternative lies in violence or the illegal economy. These youth must look to survive from day to day and, therefore, any thought of social transformations is out of the question. In general terms, their alternative is to join up with a gang or criminal group. Finally, there are those middle class young people who mostly lack for nothing and are therefore better placed to become involved in processes of social transformation, as is the case of groups of young people that have organized to fight corruption both in Honduras (Oposición Indignada - Movimiento de las Antorchas) as well as Guatemala (Batucada del Pueblo Guatemala, Protest Arte Guatemala, Justicia Ya Guatemala, Coordinadora Estudiantil Universitaria de Guatemala-CEUG).

## Regional context

The Central American Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) has experienced many years of civil war during the second half of the twentieth century. Formally, these armed conflicts ended in 1992 in El Salvador and 1996 in Guatemala, while the *sui generis conflict* in Honduras never led to a formal peace.<sup>1</sup> “The Central American peace processes of the last decades were one of the first laboratories for the liberal peace-building paradigm which assumes that the threefold transformation for peace, democracy and market economy is a self-strengthening process leading to sustainable development.” (Kurtenbach, 2007). Nowadays, the gap between expectations and achievements of *liberal peace* is evident in societies characterized by economic and political inequality, exclusion, conflict, and violence.

### Country characteristics: Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala

Country	Territorial extension	Total population (millions)			Young population (<29 years)	Population density (per km <sup>2</sup> )	Ethnic diversity	
		Women	Men	Total			Indige-nous	Non-indigenous
Honduras	112,492 km <sup>2</sup>	4.2	4.2	8.4	65%	74	8%	92%
El Salvador	21,041 km <sup>2</sup>	3.2	2.9	6.1	54%	289	0.02%	99.8%
Guatemala	108,889 km <sup>2</sup>	8.7	8.4	17.1	66%	157	40%	60%

The three countries of the Northern Triangle are well-known for high rates in three main areas: violence, migration, and inequality. From 2000 to 2010 homicide rates increased in the three countries from an average of 46 to 63 (Waxenecker, 2016). In 2016, the National Civil Police of El Salvador reported 5,278 murders, equivalent to a homicide rate of 81.2 per 100,000, down from the 104 per 100,000 recorded in 2015. In the case of Honduras, the Violence Observatory at the National Autonomous University of Honduras reported that the country ended 2016 with 5,154 homicides, nearly identical to the 5,148 registered the previous year. This is equivalent to 59 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016. Guatemala's National Civil Police reported 4,520 homicides in 2016, 258 fewer than in 2015; the country's murder rate fell from 29.5 per 100,000 to 27.3, continuing a trend seen in recent years following a high of 46.5 per 100,000 in 2009.

<sup>1</sup> In Honduras, an internal civil conflict has never been recognized, but the country suffered heavily from the presence of the Nicaraguan “Contra” forces in the 1980s.

Many of the homicide victims are youth between 15 and 30 years of age. In parallel, most Central American migrants try to reach the United States and are mostly undocumented. Although there is no reliable current information on the number of Central American migrants, remittances represent an important percentage of GDP in Guatemala (12%), El Salvador (17%), and Honduras (14%).<sup>2</sup> Violence and migration occur in contexts of poverty and inequality. In Guatemala, the population that lives in absolute poverty is 40.4% of the total, in El Salvador it is 32.7%, and in Honduras it is 60.9%. In Central America, the unemployment rate for young people is estimated at more than 24%.<sup>3</sup>

The situation described above constrains social and economic development of large segments of the population, especially young people. It is estimated that between 55% and 60% of the population in Central America are children and youth (Ice, 2011). This means that most victims and perpetrators of violence are young and young people are the sector with the highest levels of unemployment in each country.

## El Salvador

According to the 2016 National Household Survey (Encuesta de Hogares y Propósitos Múltiples de El Salvador), 54% of the population is under 30 years of age. During the last seven decades, the number of young people (18 to 29 years of age) has risen consistently and now one out of every five individuals of the total population is young (with slightly more living in rural areas than urban ones). El Salvador is one of the most densely populated countries in the world.<sup>4</sup> Currently, young people are living in conditions of high social and economic vulnerability as well as high risk of involvement in violence and illegal economic activities. A lack of education and employment opportunities, as well as social and economic inequality, are part of the structural factors pushing large groups of the population to emigrate, mostly to the United States.

According to the study *Urban Youth: Political Culture and Post-Conflict Democracy in Central America*, 80% of young people under 25 years of age are not interested in politics, as compared to 10% that accept participation in some political organization. Focus group discussions revealed that Salvadoran youth have strong political identities, most of them coming from family traditions, but this does not necessarily mean that they are politically active outside of electoral periods as is explained in depth in the country study.

El Salvador is considered to be one of the most violent countries in the world. For example, according to official data of the National Civil Police, 911 homicides were reported in August 2016, of which 156 were youth between 15 and 19 years of age and 184 were between 20 and 24 years of age. During 2016, the homicide rate was 70 per 100,000 population, the fourth highest reported in the country since 2000 according to official data provided by the National Civil Police while the Instituto de Medicina Legal (IML) reported that in 2013 the homicide rate for men was 77 per 100,000 inhabitants and 6.5 for women. Women are mostly victims of sexual aggression and rape. Just between January and April 2017, the National Civil Police reported 1,550 incidents of sexual abuse (which includes the following criminal offenses: rape, rape of an underage person, sexual aggression, sexual aggression against an underage person, statutory rape, and other forms of sexual aggression (Observatorio de Violencia, ORMUSA, 2017).

Youth gangs have been considered the main driver of violence in El Salvador. Structural exclusion and

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2 Remittances are similar to total agricultural production in these countries as a proportion of GDP: Guatemala (9%), El Salvador (19%), and Honduras (13%).

3 Central American Data (2016), *Contra el desempleo juvenil probemos con educación dual*, [online], [https://www.centralamericadata.com/es/article/home/Contra\\_el\\_desempleo\\_juvenil\\_probemos\\_con\\_educacin\\_dual](https://www.centralamericadata.com/es/article/home/Contra_el_desempleo_juvenil_probemos_con_educacin_dual)

4 Cia.gov. (2017). *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency. [online] Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/es.html> [Accessed 2 Mar. 2017].

inequality are the main causes of the emergence and expansion of gangs. Thousands of young people find in gangs a source of identity, belonging, and group protection. Due to the extremely vulnerable situation in which they live, illegal economic activities become an opportunity to generate income and violence plays a critical role in protecting the group and resources for survival. The most well-known aspect of the problem is the high level of violence committed by gangs. However, at the core of the problem there are social and economic causes unattended by decades of indifferent governments. Instead, the only governmental response has been repression through police and military forces.

Although a truce agreed to in 2012 between gangs demonstrated their commitment to reduce violence and find non-violent ways to address the problem, political parties opposed all efforts to transform gang dynamics because violence has been used during decades as an electoral strategy. Today, thousands of marginalized youth linked to gangs and youth at risk without direct links to gangs are considered and treated as terrorists. In addition, the existence of several groups engaged in social cleansing and extrajudicial execution is considered to be the main cause of the high homicide rates in the country.

According to the National Household Survey (EHPM, 2016), the working-age population of El Salvador is defined as those individuals over 16 years old. Of the country's total population, young people constitute 24.4%. Of that percentage, more than half (51%) of young people between 16 and 24 years of age are unemployed. The same source estimates that young people who neither work or study represent 26.5% of total population. This group is of particular concern because it is at risk of being an easy target for criminal groups. In addition, to the extent it is not enrolled in the educational system, its possibilities for future professional development are limited.

Although there is no reliable data about the extent of youth involvement in informal or illegal economic activities, the focus group discussions conducted by this study indicate that young people who are not able to migrate have mostly two options to generate income: informal or illegal economic activities, especially extortion via involvement in gangs. Education is no longer a viable alternative to overcome poverty and marginalization. Lack of educational expectations and high levels of violence drive increasing school desertion. In 2012, a total of 76,398 students abandoned school. This number increased to 91,711 in 2014.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Inter-american Development Bank, 141,000 young people between 15 and 24 years of age neither study nor look for employment. This number represents 32.08% of all young people, a proportion which is significantly above the Central American average (24%).<sup>6</sup>

The other alternative for young people is internal and external migration. Internal migration means moving from rural areas to cities in search of opportunities. With regards to external migration, more than half of Salvadoran youth have thought at some moment about moving out of the country and one in ten actually attempts it. The most obvious causes of internal and external migration are unemployment, poverty, and conditions of insecurity.

According to data of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), more than 20% of El Salvador's population lives abroad. The number of children and adolescents who return to the country do so expelled from other countries.

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5 AFP, (2017). El peligro de ser joven en El Salvador. Prensa Libre. Available at: <http://www.prensalibre.com/internacional/el-peligro-de-ser-joven-en-el-salvador> [Accessed 2 Mar. 2017].

6 Martínez Avelar, L. (2017). Laprensagrafica.com. Available at: <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/2015/07/14/un-tercio-de-jovenes-salvadoreos-no-estudia-ni-trabaja> [Accessed 2 Mar. 2017].

## Guatemala

In Guatemala approximately half of the population is under 19 years of age, which means that Guatemala has one of the youngest populations of the continent. Living conditions for young people are marked by absence of basic social services and education, especially for young girls under 19 years of age.<sup>7</sup> The country's youth index is 0.52 (52%) (INE, 2016).

According to projections of the National Youth Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Juventud, ENJU, for 2011), young people make up 39% of the electoral rolls. 31% of young people had access to elementary education and 23% to middle school; 78% are not covered by the state's health programme and 69% are employed in the informal sector. 44.94% live in conditions of poverty while 14.52% live in extreme poverty. Young people, especially women, are vulnerable to sexual violence and do not receive adequate sexual education (in 2012, 84,675 girls, adolescents, and women under 20 years of age gave birth).

During the five-year period of 2010-2105, there was a statistical probability that 9% of males and 6% of women would not live beyond 30 years of age (UNDP, 2012). The low life expectancy of young people is due to the risks they are exposed to as a result of structural violence. The principal causes of violence that affect them are a lack of education (19%), lack of employment opportunities (17%), domestic violence (16%), economic situation (14%, "maras" and gangs (10%), and lack of recreational activities (6) (INE, 2016).

According to data released by the National Civil Police, homicides are the fourth most important cause of death among people 10-29 years of age, and 8 out of every 10 victims of homicide are males (OPS, 2016). In 2017, men (1,927 homicides) continued to be the most vulnerable to die by homicide as compared to women (309 homicides). Young people are the main segment of the population that die as a result of violence; about a third of all homicides involve the age group of 21-30 years during 2016-2017.

Public institutions in general are not capable of developing policies oriented towards youth needs. This situation is also present even in institutions that specialize on youth issues. There is a national youth policy that has been on the books for many years but still lacks a budget to be implemented. Instead, during the last decade security policies have been geared towards massive incarceration of youth. In parallel, social cleansing and extrajudicial execution squads have multiplied and targeted poor and marginalized youth. The prison system and centers for youth detention are marked by extreme human rights violations and inhuman physical conditions. Most youth in such centers are victims of sexual abuse and sexual trafficking. An example of this situation is that in March 2017, the girl inmates of an underage detention center protested against inhuman living conditions in the center and the existence sexual abuse within and networks of sexual trafficking exploiting them outside. After several hours of protest, the building was locked down and burnt to the ground, causing the death of 41 girls. The situation in the center was denounced in November 2016 but ignored by all authorities. This case demonstrates the situation of all detention centers, a the situation which is prevalent in the prison system, in which most inmates are young people.

The main risks which affect young people include violence within institutions and installations that provide social services, as well as reformatories and the sex trade. The abuse takes on various forms, which include: a) stigmatization and harassment; b) psychological, physical, and sexual abuse; c) social isolation and excessive incarceration before trial; and d) coercion, torture, and extrajudicial executions (BM, 2010).

Another of the principal obstacles that youth in Guatemala have to face is exclusion from the educational

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<sup>7</sup> Dds.cepal.org. (2017). JUVESSTAT v 1.0. [online] Available at: [http://dds.cepal.org/juvelac/indicadores/ficha/query2.php?indicador\\_id=91](http://dds.cepal.org/juvelac/indicadores/ficha/query2.php?indicador_id=91) [Accessed 4 May 2017].

system. In Guatemala, at least a fourth (28.6%) of male children and adolescents are not in school, while the equivalent figure for girls and female adolescents is closer to one third (31.6%) (UNDP, 2012). The National Report on Human Development 2011-2012, “Guatemala: a country of opportunities for young people?” produced by the UNDP, states that the lack of public policies aimed at providing opportunities for the development of young people has left nearly one million young people under 18 years of age out of the school system in Guatemala. In addition, at least four million young people must face severe disadvantages as a result of conditions of social exclusion: 25% of young Guatemalans do not have access to formal education or worthwhile employment (UNDP, 2012).

With regards to education, the data provided by ENJU indicate that 33.6% of the population between 15 and 29 years of age has completed primary education, while 31.5% has some middle school experience and 23.4% have reached the high school level. Only 5.2% have some university training and approximately 6% have no school experience at all. The importance of these statistics is the educational gap that exists between women and men, since women have the lowest levels of educational attainment. Most young people abandon their studies once they have a middle school diploma. According to the National Report on Human Development (INDH, 2011/2012), 2.1 million young people between the ages of 13 and 24 are not enrolled in the educational system; the main reason given for school non-attendance among this age group is poverty and the overall economic situation (UNDP, 2012).

This situation creates opportunities for easy involvement of youths in illegal economic activities and violence especially driven by gangs and other forms of criminal organizations. According to data provided by the INE 2014, the average rate of unemployment among young people 15-25 years of age was 7.1%. In Guatemala, 55.4% of the population between 15 and 29 years of age has had some kind of involvement with the labour market. Still, the problem is not only one of young people finding spaces where they might receive an income and cover their living expenses but one of where they might be employed. Most of the working population is employed in the informal sector (SESC, 2011).

Finally, in Guatemala, the political system is volatile and clientelistic. Political parties are not effective mechanism for increasing political participation by young people. For this reason, most focus groups agreed that political parties are rejected by youth organizations. Youth participating in political parties are only used for propaganda activities during electoral processes but they are excluded from decision-making processes. Political parties in the country are dominated by corrupt networks in which youth are not important actors. This has been proved recently by the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, CICIG, that demonstrated that all political parties use illegal funding to gain votes instead of including youth or citizen mobilization. As the indigenous focal group will show, traditional systems in indigenous areas seems to be more effective for including youth in communitarian political decision-making. However, this is less the case among young indigenous woman.

## **Honduras**

High rates of social violence are symptomatic of the most important problems affecting Honduran society. According to the Observatory of Violence at the National Autonomous University of Honduras, 18,199 homicide deaths of youth and children were reported between 2010 and 2014, of which 936 were students. In 2016, two major cities in Honduras were ranked amongst the most violent places in the world: the Distrito Central of Tegucigalpa reported a homicide rate of 85.09 per 100,000 residents and the department of San Pedro Sula reported 112.09 homicides per 100,000 residents.

Among the main criminal and violent actors identified in the country are gangs (mainly MS-13 and Barrio 18), drug traffickers and local dealers, independent criminal gangs and vigilantes, and groups

engaged in extrajudicial executions. It is estimated that there are approximately 40 independent criminal organizations carrying out kidnappings, extortions, robberies, assassinations, small sales of illegal drugs, vigilantism, and extrajudicial executions. Dynamics of criminality and violence are embedded also in daily social interactions, which shape relationships within communities and public institutions and other social actors such as the private sector, the media and civil society.

This context, understood as a complex violent system, draws on other forms of social organization to involve, resist, or adapt to survive – both as individuals and as groups. This is the case of sport clubs (barras deportivas). Approximately 17,000 youths are members of the two main sport clubs in Honduras, the Ultra Fiel and the Revolucionarios. They are present in 12 departments of the country and the majority of their members are between 16 and 25 years of age, most of them poor and marginalized individuals. Unconditional support for their soccer teams is the cornerstone of their identity which generates social cohesion and cooperation among peers. However, the broader social context means this natural rivalry is manifested in violence, reinforced by cycles of hate and revenge. Confrontation between sport clubs then moves beyond the stadium and into communities.

Structural issues, such as exclusion, inequality, poverty, and the widespread lack of education, employment, and basic social services, are further compounded by the weakness of security institutions which, among other problems, suffer from pervasive corruption and involvement in criminal activities.

According to the most recent statistics, in 2015 there were some 3,117,222 young people aged between 12 and 30, which represents about a third (38.8%) of the total population of 8.2 million in the country. The average age in the country is 22 years. A little under two-thirds (60%) of the Honduran population is less than 25 years of age, that is, 5.2 million people.

45.8% of young people work and study. However, most of the work young people are engaged in is in the informal sector and short-term. The rate of informal employment in Honduras is among the highest in the hemisphere: it stands at 74.9% of the economically active population. Urban unemployment dropped from 6.8% in 2011 to 5.6% in 2012, but rose again to 6.0% in 2013. The employment rate (i.e., the employed population as a percentage of the working-age population) is among the lowest in the region at 48.9% in 2012 and 51.6% in 2013 (only ahead of the Dominican Republic). In 2016, the gross unemployment rate was 32% for young people 15-24 years of age, which encompass about 60% of all unemployed people in the country. Just as critical is visible and invisible underemployment, that is, young people who work fewer hours than desired or who receive a very low wage. Young people between 15 and 18 years of age have an underemployment rate of 52%, while for those between 19 and 24 the rate is 67%. It is estimated that there are 828,000 young people in the country who neither work nor study, of which 80% are young women, which has grave social consequences. The population of Hondurans who neither work nor study is estimated at 10% of the country's total population.

Of all the young people in the country, 30.3% study only without any perspective of obtaining a job. In the rural areas, the proportion of young people who attend elementary school is greater (42.6%) than in urban areas (31.5%). It is estimated that one out of each three adolescents in the country makes it to middle school and few are able to reach technical or professional quality training. In Honduras, the ratio of females to male enrollment is almost equal at the elementary level (99.1%), while female enrollment at the secondary level (121.5%) and tertiary education (137.6%) is clearly in favor of girls and women. The average enrollment rate for young people 15-24 years of age is only 8.6 years. As a result, households where the head of the family is less than 25 years old will have an average monthly income of 2,697 lempiras (approximately US\$118) as compared with a national per capita income of 3,103 lempiras (approximately US\$135). 7% of Honduran households are headed up by young individuals under the age of 25.

In this context, it is estimated that 70% of all young people in the country live in absolute poverty. According to data provided by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in 2016 there were six Hondurans out of every ten who lived in absolute poverty, which places the country in first place of poverty indexes for all of Latin America, followed by Guatemala (54%), Mexico (52.3%), and Bolivia (45%). The percentage of households living in poverty, according to the UNDP, stands at around 64.5%. This situation is exacerbated in the case of the rural population, which accounts for about 54% of the total population. In general, the western departments of the country have higher levels of poverty. According to UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index, 20.7% of the population are multidimensionally poor, with an additional 28.6% considered near multidimensional poverty levels. Poverty reduction efforts run by the Honduran state, as well as those of non-governmental organizations and foreign donors, have not significantly reduced poverty or the exposure of large sections of the population to social risk. Without the periodic payments (remittances) from expatriate citizens, the social situation would be far worse. Remittances totaled \$2.9 billion in 2012, \$3.1 billion in 2013, and an estimated \$3.3 billion in 2014; this is equivalent to almost one-fifth of the country's GDP.

In the face of this situation, the Honduran government has devised policies aimed at youth. However, they have not been implemented to a significant degree. A national policy for youth was devised in 2010 and a National Youth Institute was created. Despite the limited results of these initiatives, in 2016 president Juan Orlando Hernández launched the "Honduras Jóven" programme that seeks to assist young people via entrepreneurship, scholarships, prevention programmes, vocational training, and other opportunities.



# Focus group discussions in El Salvador

## Youth at risk

Young people who are categorized “at risk” are those who live in neighbourhoods controlled by gangs, who go to schools under gang control, and who must cross areas which many times are being fought over by rival gangs, thus placing their freedom of movement in jeopardy. This increases the risk of victimization among young people since territorial control is the principal factor that provokes violence among these types of groups.

What is special about this segment of young people is that they are perceived by gang members as foreign to the spaces they control, thereby provoking two possible outcomes: they are constant victims of coercion and aggression by the very same gangs or they must fend for themselves in the face of the security forces that seek to exercise control.

According to the focus groups that were held in the hamlets (“cantones”) of Jocotal and Loma Verde, in the department of Sonsonate, the problems that most affect the lives of young people are violence, exclusion from educational and economic opportunities, gangs, and human rights violations. These young people expressed that their everyday activities were affected the lack of freedom to move about. They said that they could not even leave their communities because they are stopped either by the police or by gang members. For those young people who were consulted, violence in its various forms is part of their daily existence because they might find it in their own families, in schools, in the community, and finally among their young peers who belong to some gang.

For those youth in the hamlet of Jocotal, the existing levels of organization in the community have enabled the creation of support networks. However, exclusion from the educational system, the lack of economic opportunities, and the presence gangs are the main problems they must face. As they stated in their own words, “Sometimes we don’t even have food to eat at home, but we cannot get a job for the simple reason that we live in the zones where we are or because we don’t have sufficient studies”.

It should be noted that both groups strongly linked the problem of education with the lack of employment opportunities, not because there are no schools but because schools are magnets for violence due to the fact that gang members or sons of gang members go to the schools to recruit new members and for that reason many of them abandon the schools without finishing their education. On the other hand, poverty in the home is also a reason to stop studying or to seek employment in the informal sector in order to increase family income.

The young people of the Loma Verde hamlet underlined the issue of human rights violations. As a community with little internal organization, the constant patrolling by the police and the army makes young people “easy targets” for abuses of authority and mistreatment by the institutions charged with providing security. They said that “They nab us on the street and rough us up. They say we are gang members and here all of us are culprits”.

According to the young people of both groups, security practices and operations have gradually become exercises in human rights violations during which they are often mistreated.

## **Young women**

The groups of women consulted were students at the José Simeón Cañas University (UCA) in San Salvador. These young women belong to an economic segment that can cover the costs of a private university education and, therefore, are immune from the struggle for economic survival imposed by poverty. This does not mean that their place of residence is free from gang control. In El Salvador, to have the resources to pay for a private education does not mean necessarily that one can pay to live in an area free from gang control. The participants explained that they face stigmatization on two fronts: gender and age, to which they add issues that affect them in their daily lives such as violence (both domestic and sexual), exclusion from jobs, and gangs.

The participants coincided that violence towards women has many more expressions than that which affects men. On the one hand, the majority of the participants said that they had lived in environments of domestic violence and stated that they had experienced sexual violence against women, either personally or through some close acquaintance, and that they are constantly exposed to violence within the community or in wider society. This information coincides with the alarming numbers that are reflected in the statistics on violence in the country released by the National Civil Police.

The participants expressed that “Sometimes in our own community, our very own neighbours are the ones who harass us. It’s even worse when it’s the gang members, because they are really scary, they threaten us, they act.”

Young women who participated in the focus groups in areas at high risk said they lived in “permanent fear,” especially due to the activities of the gangs and the threat of sexual violence against young women in their communities.

It should be pointed out that the majority of participants had studied up to 10-12 years but, nonetheless, had not been able to find a permanent job or one that would allow them to continue with their studies, which turns into a vicious circle that cannot be easily interrupted because with fewer academic credentials it is more difficult to get a job in the formal sector of the economy. One of the participants stated that “I did finish high school but since I was unable to find a job I ended up selling tamales, to just get by, because it wasn’t even enough to buy frijoles.”

According to the participants, being a woman is another determining factor in establishing discrimination in job opportunities. The participation of women in the formal labor market is still low and the salaries received by women are lower than those for men.

Another consideration to take into account to explain exclusion is the place of residence. The majority of participants coincided that their home address influenced the selection of personnel, thereby creating a new form of exclusion based on place of residence. One of the participants in a focus group held in an area

of high risk and stigmatization expressed that “when I went to a work interview the first thing they asked was where I lived, which I told them and they never called me back.”

## **Young people involved with social organizations**

Young people from two social networks were consulted: Movimiento Estudiantil of the University of El Salvador and Fundación Salvador del Mundo (FUNSALMO) in Soyapango (both in San Salvador). The results of these focus groups provide a more structured expression of personal experiences but with an emphasis on the responsibility of the state through a more political analytical lense. The groups underlined the principal problems facing young people in the country in the absence of specific public policies, exclusion from political activities, and the vulnerability of human rights.

For these young people, in particular, certain problems they face are clearly linked to violence but these occur because the state has been unable to change this type of phenomena. Some institutions have been set up, such as the National Institute for Youth (INJUVE), but a comprehensive set of proposals is still lacking to tackle the multi-causal problems that affect young people in all their dimensions.

From the perspective of the young people consulted in these groups, “The problem here is that the government has had a public policy of doing nothing. That is also public policy. In other words, it’s not only a matter of taking decisions but when no decisions are taken to change our situation, that is a political message.”

Another principal problem mentioned by these focus groups was political exclusion. The participants undertook an exhaustive analysis of political party culture and how this policy excludes quality participation by young people, who are not viewed as individuals with political rights able to formulate proposals or criticisms but only good for election campaigning. This issue was addressed extensively together with the question of what it means to be young given that youth experience discrimination when they are used for political ends by a society dominated by older people. That is, power and a vision of a future world are held asymmetrically to the detriment of young people.

The young participants said that “We young people are only called up when it’s time to wave flags or put up posters because when we want to share proposals they don’t take us into account and when we voice criticism we are sidelined, they tell us we don’t have experience and that first one must do menial things.”

Another phenomenon that was highly resented by organized youth was the violation of human rights, reflected in other problems such as violence, exclusion from education and employment, and gangs, among others.

## **Youth in religious organizations**

This focus group was organized with young people associated with the archdiocese of San Salvador that are part of the various organizations set up by the Catholic Church in the country. The young participants in this focus group concerned themselves primarily with the issues of intolerance, violence, and migration, as seen from the perspective of an absence of values, the unravelling of the social and familial fabric, and the indifference of the state’s authorities that do not fulfill their mandate (of preventing human rights violations). An interesting point that stands out is that this is the only group that included migration as a priority that affects youth in the country. In general terms, their outlook on migration is that it produces a breakup of families, thereby sidelining a structural outlook on the problem.

The importance of a perspective centered on moral and familial values is evident in the opinions of this focus groups with regards to migration: “The problem is that many young people do not have a guide. Many parents have had to leave the country and leave them [the children] them under the care of the grandmother or the grandfather and then they become wayward, because there is no authority, they don’t go to church, and they receive no instruction in morals.”

For these young people, the phenomenon of intolerance is related to the lack of instruction in morals that society is experiencing now, because the educational system does not provide opportunities for the development of virtues such as “love and fear of God, respect, and solidarity.” In addition, these young people point out that violence is the reflection of a society that does not practice “love of thy neighbour” and in which everyone wants to get ahead of the rest.

The church represents an arena of inclusion for young people and fills in the spaces devoid of integration and inclusion of a secular society. In the case of youth in this group, they are able to participate in the churches and carry out a variety of activities, including reflections on how youth are discriminated in the educational system, in society and politics, and even in the very families they belong to. They said that “In the church we have our own space, we can organize our own activities and contribute to pastoral work, where we feel very useful as young people, but it isn’t like that everywhere. Society in general does not respect youth.”

On the other hand, just like the group of organized young people, this group underlined that the role of the state has been ineffective with respect to the protection of young people since it doesn’t guarantee the human rights of this segment of the population.

## **The perspective of young people on peace and security**

According to resolution 2250, the role that young people must play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts is that of becoming indispensable agents for the sustainability, inclusiveness, and success of those initiatives aimed at maintaining and consolidating peace. The resolution exhorts young people to empower themselves by becoming active participants in building a durable peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation. It adds that if inclusive policies are adopted, a young and numerous young population is fundamental because it is a singular and powerful demographic bonus that can contribute to a lasting peace and economic prosperity.

The young people consulted agreed to a demand that they be included, listened to, and taken into account. The young people in the focus groups from social organizations expressed themselves in the following terms: “What we want is to be listened to and to stop being perceived as a threat, as a bunch of bums that are only to be used by others. We believe there are many young people here who also want to participate in decision-making, we are living our own reality and there are many of us [young people] in the country. We don’t want others to decide for us any more, we want to participate and to decide.”

The following tables organize the proposals put forth by the young people who were consulted by sector and thematic priority.

## Perspectives on the role of young people in peace and security

Groups/ criteria	Participation	Protection	Prevention	Alliances	Separation/ reintegration
Youth at risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undertake activities for organization of young people in the community (but we need support from the state and society to do this).</li> <li>Present proposals related to interests and problems facing youth at local and national levels.</li> <li>Participate in decision-making that places youth-related problems and interests on the agenda.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen respect for our human rights as young people.</li> <li>Create networks for the defence of rights for youth.</li> <li>Get to know existing mechanisms for demanding our rights.</li> <li>Call on the institutions of the state so that we are not abused by police operations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undertake organizing work in communities to prevent other young people becoming involved in criminal activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish alliances with other young people to learn from their community experiences in the prevention and control of violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assist families that have become separated to reunite or help them to communicate among themselves.</li> </ul>
Young women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Include problems faced by young women on the agenda.</li> <li>Participate in decision-making processes that have to do with young women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demand greater protection and guarantees for the rights of young women, especially with regards to sexual violence that affects girls and young women.</li> <li>Demand concrete steps be taken against different forms of discrimination in the workplace.</li> <li>Increased punishment for those involved in acts of sexual violence against any woman, especially against girls and young women. No impunity tolerated because otherwise they are let free.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sensitize society about the problems that young women face.</li> <li>Participate in forums on sexual and reproductive education and and personal defence.</li> <li>Organize support networks among women to promote prevention.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek out other groups of young people to sensitize them and seek their support for solutions to our problems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be part of programmes that assure improved economic conditions in order to prevent emigration and abandonment of children.</li> </ul>

Groups/ criteria	Participation	Protection	Prevention	Alliances	Separation/ reintegration
Organized youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support other young people so that they organize and participate in other efforts or join ours.</li> <li>Carry out surveys among young people, like this meeting we are in, to develop our own diagnoses and participate with reliable data.</li> <li>Demand participation by young people in decision-making processes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demand that the state comply with its obligation to guarantee our human rights.</li> <li>Demand that the state protect our right to participate and others, in the face of so much violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open up spaces for prevention activities (art workshops, sports etc.).</li> <li>Participation in training events for the prevention of violence.</li> <li>Undertake campaigns to prevent violence and promote a culture of peace.</li> <li>Participate in exchanges to learn about prevention.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Become involved in existing activities of organizations in order to coordinate with other sectors and highlight the problems that youth faces.</li> <li>Make alliances at specific moments to deal with key issues. Youth alone cannot do all the work required to change the situation.</li> <li>Coordinate with offices of the United Nations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Request larger programmes to bring together families under safe conditions.</li> <li>Request programmes that allows fathers or mothers to improve their economic conditions and allow them to stay.</li> <li>Request programmes that allow youth to stay in the country and think about their future here.</li> </ul>
Young people involved religiously	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain the participatory religious experience of young people to other organized youth.</li> <li>Participate in decision-making processes to underline the importance of values in the educational system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Churches can be important arenas for protection activities and youth who participate there can be of help.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Churches and their youth programmes can contribute a lot to the prevention of violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Churches and youth who participate in them should be part of other networks in order to contribute to their work and strengthen alliances under which the role of religion in pacification is demonstrated.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth involved in churches and with other institutions linked to churches can strengthen programmes that aim to assure conditions for other young people or families so that they do not emigrate.</li> </ul>

## Perspectives on the role of the state to achieve peace and security

Groups/Criteria	Participation	Protection	Prevention	Alliances	Separation/ reintegration
Youth at risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create more opportunities for participation in our communities at risk, come to our communities to hear about our problems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guarantee our rights. Advance towards the protection of youth under all existing national and international legislation because we are always exposed to violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish violence prevention programmes and give priority to communities at risk.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create more opportunities for involvement by a variety of state institutions (not only INJUVE) in order to address problems in a comprehensive manner.</li> <li>Open up opportunities for dialogue and constructive activities among the institutions of the state, civil society, and communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Devise and implement plans that will reduce emigration and convince young people to stay because their future is guaranteed.</li> <li>Guarantee programmes that will enable participation in the workforce on the basis of experience or vocation.</li> <li>Create opportunities for participation that will allow young people to reincorporate in their communities.</li> </ul>
Young women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open up opportunities for participation at the decision-making level for young women specifically.</li> <li>Create opportunities for participation by young women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should guarantee protection for young women via its institutions on the basis of national and international legislation.</li> <li>The state should strengthen if programmes for protection of women who face violence, with emphasis on protection against sexual violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should undertake campaigns to sensitize different levels of society: within the institutions of the state itself, in communities, among the population in general.</li> <li>Devise and implement programmes aimed at prevention of violence against women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should undertake comprehensive campaigns against violence to women, with emphasis on girls and young women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Programmes to incorporate young women into the workplace.</li> </ul>

Groups/criteria	Participation	Protection	Prevention	Alliances	Separation/ reintegration
Organized youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should open up opportunities for participation by young people during the entire cycle of public policies.</li> <li>The state should promote the organization of young people so that they be represented in decision-making processes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should design and implement plans, policies, programmes, and laws (in addition to those already in existence) that protect the rights of young people in accordance with the current situation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should undertake plans, programmes, laws, and other instruments that seek to prevent violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should develop an inclusive approach to governance with regards to addressing youth issues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should develop programmes designed to improve the quality of life of young people and/or their parents.</li> <li>Effective mechanisms for reincorporation should be devised.</li> </ul>
Young people involved religiously	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should guarantee participation in decision-making processes for young people from different religious backgrounds in order to hear their experiences and provide support for specific programmes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should protect youth at risk or those who wish to reincorporate and become part of some religious faith.</li> <li>The rights of young people should be guaranteed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should undertake prevention programmes and projects that take into account the experience of churches.</li> <li>Campaigns in support of values should be undertaken to sensitize Salvadoran society and families.</li> <li>Educational programmes should be implemented that underscore values and the importance of family and respect.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should create opportunities for participation with different social sectors, including the church.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The state should devise and implement programmes to reincorporate young people in society.</li> <li>The state should promote programmes to unite families on the basis of values.</li> <li>The state should support families so that they develop ties to the country.</li> </ul>



## Perspectives on the role of society for peace and security

Groups/criteria	Participation	Protection	Prevention	Alliances	Separation/ reintegration
Youth at risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should respect the organizations of young people without stigmatizing them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should assume its role in the protection of the rights of young people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should also give its support for programmes or campaigns to prevent violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society in all its diversity should become involved in those specialized activities of youth policies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should establish support networks with specific state programmes to process reincorporation of young people.</li> </ul>
Young women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should recognize the importance of participating in initiatives that underscore violence against women.</li> <li>Society should not stigmatize women who participate in activities in support of their rights.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should become sensitized to the problem of violence against women in order to become involved in networks to protect women from all kinds of violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sensitize society about the problem of violence against young women and especially sexual violence against girls and adolescents.</li> <li>Society should participate in the prevention of violence against young women.</li> <li>Society should participate in the processes of violence prevention and should not stigmatize those opportunities for participation by youth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society in all its diversity should become involved in those activities that confront violence against women, especially young women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should recognize the capacities and abilities of women and support involvement of young women in the labor force in their localities.</li> </ul>
Organized youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should respect the organizational processes of young people without stigmatizing them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should participate actively in the decisions and actions that the state undertakes in order to protect the rights of young people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should participate in those processes to prevent violence and not stigmatize those open opportunities for participation by youth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should become involved in those initiatives that defend the rights of young people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society (neighbourhoods, subdivisions etc.) should be open to those processes that seek to reincorporate young people who return (after migrating or otherwise) without discrimination.</li> </ul>
Young people involved religiously	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should support and recognize the efforts made by young people in churches when they participate in processes to prevent violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should be part of processes to provide protection that are undertaken by the state or other social or religious organizations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should become involved in those processes that seek to prevent violence.</li> <li>Society should replicate the importance of rescuing values that have gone by the wayside.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should join up with the alliances that different religious groups have established in order to promote values among society.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Society should no discriminate against young people.</li> </ul>

# Focus group discussions in Guatemala

In general terms, it can be inferred that the young participants in the focus groups expressed some caution with regards to their ideas because they consider that they can be manipulated as a consequence of their open and generous attitudes. They aspire to authentic relationships and are looking for truth. At the same time they are desirous of improving the conditions that surround them and express concern about others; that is, they are thinking in terms of the general interest and are willing to commit themselves to other greater causes than their own personal concerns.

Some of the young people in the focus groups are studying at the high school and university level and others are in middle school while still others find themselves in very precarious personal or professional situations (a lack of education and employment or existential problems, especially young people from the LGTBI community). The majority of the young participants continue to live with their parents while others, who live by themselves, are still dependent, that is, their parents continue to provide for them economically. Other young individuals, in turn, were rejected by their parents because of their sexual orientation, which forced them to seek alternatives in life that increased their social risk in the face of violence and discrimination. As mentioned by a member of the LGTBI community, “at the age of eight my parents kicked me out of the house because I was gay, and as a result I had to sell my body in order to survive.”

In general, the young people say that they want to be generous, supportive, and committed to causes that attract them, especially since 2015 as part of the citizen political mobilization against corruption. However, they recognize that they are individualists, they want their own elections and that these not be run by others. It was observed that young people acquire their points of view from social networks even though they do not always communicate good or truthful opinions. Young people recognize that they are partial to egalitarianism and tolerance, which means that they are not prone to reject others, at least in the majority of cases of individuals with special needs, sexual diversity, different political and religious opinions, or ethnicity. The participants in the focus groups for indigenous youth expressed that “in the city of Chichicastenango, in the department of Quiché, there are no differences between indigenous and non-indigenous people, we are all the same.” The participants in the focus group of young people affiliated to social organizations concluded that “we are not concerned about sexual preferences, only about friendship.”

According to the ranking system applied in the three countries for all focus groups, the young people expressed that the lack of opportunities, unemployment, and violence are the principal problems affecting peace and security. However, the problems identified in each of the sectors of young people, although they are the same, were assimilated in different manners and, therefore, each one of the sectors ranked them differently.

Focus group	Priority of problems associated with peace and security
Catholic youth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Violence</li> <li>2. Intolerance</li> <li>3. Maras and gangs</li> <li>4. Violation of human rights</li> <li>5. Educational exclusion</li> <li>6. Migration</li> <li>7. Public policies</li> <li>8. Political exclusion</li> </ol>
Youth who belong to the LGBTI community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Violence</li> <li>2. Violation of human rights</li> <li>3. Public policies</li> <li>4. Intolerance</li> <li>5. Educational exclusion</li> <li>6. Migración</li> <li>7. Maras and gangs</li> <li>8. Political exclusion</li> </ol>
Youth in municipalities at risk (Mixco)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Maras and gangs</li> <li>2. Violence</li> <li>3. Educational exclusion</li> <li>4. Migration</li> <li>5. Violation of human rights</li> <li>6. Public policies</li> <li>7. Political exclusion</li> <li>8. Intolerance</li> </ol>
Youth in municipalities at risk (Villa Nueva)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Maras and gangs</li> <li>2. Violence</li> <li>3. Migration</li> <li>4. Educational exclusion</li> <li>5. Violation of human rights</li> <li>6. Public policies</li> <li>7. Political exclusion</li> <li>8. Intolerance</li> </ol>
Young women	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Violation of human rights</li> </ol> <p>This case, the young women stated that all the other issues, such as migration, public policies, violence, intolerance, and political and educational exclusion are caused by the violation of human rights.</p>
Youth roundtable	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Violation of human rights</li> </ol> <p>As with the previous focus group, the young people stated that the violation of human rights is the fundamental cause of the other problems identified.</p>
Young people who belong to an organization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Violation of human rights</li> <li>2. Political exclusion</li> <li>3. Educational exclusion</li> </ol> <p>As with the previous cases, the violation of human rights is considered the fundamental cause of the problem identified.</p>
Indigenous youth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Migration</li> <li>2. Educational exclusion</li> <li>3. Public policies</li> <li>4. Violence</li> <li>5. Political exclusion</li> </ol> <p>Intolerance in the municipality was not mentioned nor were human right violations. With regards to maras and gangs, one of the groups was identified with the Barrio 18 gang, so in this case the issue of gangs was not perceived as a problem.</p>

## The perspective of young people towards violence

Even though the group most affected by violence is youth, as evidenced in the statistics on homicide released by the public security forces, the focus groups suggest that violence affects young people in different ways. The young participants said that violence does not only affect them as victims but also as perpetrators because they are approached by maras and gangs who seek to recruit them.

In the case of catholic youth and those who belong to the LGTBI community, violence is the first problem they must deal with every day. For those who live in municipalities at risk (Villa Nueva and Mixco), the issue of maras and gangs is closely linked to the violence they have to endure.

In the specific case of the LGTBI community, the young people point out that the issue of violence is a priority because when they are rejected by their families they end up living on the streets and must “sell their bodies” in order to survive. This situation increases their vulnerability and exposes them to verbal and physical abuse, both by passersby as well as clients who seek out their services. Even though LGBTI communities throughout the country are organized against violence by the Ministry of Government, the young people from the department of Sacatepéquez said that violence is the issue that most affects them, although they explained that individuals who act violently are from other communities and that this happens mostly after a sporting event, when the final score is not to their liking.

According to the participants of the LGTBI focus group, “Violence is everywhere, either physical or verbal, we are accosted all the time, we venture out into the streets with fear.”

The issue of violence must be linked to maras and gangs because young people say that much of the violence is their doing, they are the ones who are armed and are the ones who commit crimes such as robberies and physical aggression. The young people of the LGBTI community expressed that maras and gangs attack them when they are in a group, but on an individual basis they demand their sexual services.

The young people from the interior of the republic in the departments of Sacatepéquez and Quiché said that in their communities there are no maras or gangs and, thus, are not affected by them. For indigenous youth, the problem is nonexistent; some participants explained that since their communities are organized they do not allow young people to become involved with gangs. Other participants pointed out that the nonexistence of gangs is due to the fact that the indigenous authorities do not allow them because when a young person is involved in some crime they are punished and that is a warning for anyone who is thinking about joining such an organization.

Some participants in the focus group of young indigenous individuals expressed that in Guatemala the death penalty should be instituted because only then would violence be ended. However, others said that violence cannot be countered with more violence and that applying the death penalty would be the same as homicide. The problem is that violence affects daily life to such an extent that many times there is no alternative to be found to live safely than recourse to extreme solutions or taking justice into one’s own hands. In this sense, all young people who participated in the focus group coincided that indigenous common law should be applied to all those who commit acts of violence and that communities should be allowed to exercise justice on their own.

Young people in municipalities at risk said that many of the violent acts committed in their communities were caused by maras and gangs and that these groups pressure them to join up. The participants in this group stated that gangs are responsible for extorsions; however, there are also situations of violence which are not related to maras and gangs but to groups that sell drugs in places that are known by the entire

community and that is better to stay away from them so as to not get hurt. These problems were also associated by the focus group with the high levels of overcrowding in which people live in the communities. “There is a house which rents out sixty rooms and we estimate that five people live in each room and like that one there are many others.”

Overcrowding does not allow for adequate living conditions for young people because, as expressed, they are exposed to situations of sexual abuse and promiscuity among the residents. The young people also related this situation with domestic violence because, according to participants, it is very frequent to hear about actions that produce physical and sexual damage within the family groups. According to the participants in focus groups from communities at risk, very few families report these situations and, in consequence, have to suffer in silence. In addition to this situation, homes have only limited access to basic services (water and electricity) that only make for worse conditions.

Some of the comments heard in the focus groups from young people with regards to violence were the following:

“[Violence] is any action that reviles the human dignity of any person, in physical, psychological, emotional or verbal terms; thus, these are actions of aggression” (young women from a community in Mixco).

“Any action that attacks the physical, mental, emotional, social or economic condition of a person and that leaves some kind of visible scar or trauma or fear, or that can directly or indirectly affect their development as an individual in society” (member of a roundtable of youth organizations).

“Violence is a social problem in our country; it occurs because there is a lack of security and control by the state; our governments have not been capable of exercising control nor have they been capable of handling problems and now it is like a culture; we perceive violence as something normal, we live with it from day to day” (member of a roundtable of youth organizations).

“It is like walking on the streets and looking constantly around you, being afraid of any motorcycle, car or person that approaches suspiciously. It is riding the bus and having the certainty that one can be assaulted at any moment. It is also being fearful when taking a taxi or any other form of public or private transportation, it is leaving your house and not knowing if you will return safe and sound” (young woman from a community at risk in Villa Nueva).

“Violence originates in intolerance towards diversity of thought, opinions, and personalities and in taking action to impose one’s opinions or personality on another person without their consent, by intimidation or threats or by physically hurting someone” (young member of the LGBTI community).

“Violence is expressed in bad actions that others inflict on us with the aim of hurting or wounding us or simply to steal something from us” (young indigenous person from Chichicastenango, Quiché).

The young participants expressed that they have suffered violence in some degree; however, of all sectors consulted, those youth of the LGBTI community are the ones who feel that violence is the problem that affects them the most. This perspective was shared also by young Catholics and those from municipalities at risk probably because their municipality was also considered to be at high risk and, therefore, the perception of violence for these three groups of young people is similar given the vulnerable conditions they live in.

## **The perspective of young people towards migration, shelters, and internal displacement**

The increase in poverty and social inequality and the lack of opportunities in the place of birth of young people causes and intensifies migration and internal displacements of population, primarily to the capital city or the United States. Young people are not an exception to this situation because they leave their communities in search of new opportunities. In addition, violence causes a constant movement of people to more secure locations, especially in the Guatemala City metropolitan area where many families have moved out of their homes. The participants in the focus groups gave an example of Zone 18 in Guatemala City that is controlled by the Calle 18 gang where people have left for other parts of the city in search of tranquility.

The participants in the focus groups agreed that this situation is widespread in urban areas. The young people from communities at risk who were consulted expressed that internal migration produced by violence alters the internal dynamics of the communities because “Many people arrive from the interior of the country seeking better opportunities and they settle down in our sector.” Young people from the LGBTI community said that “Many young people like ourselves must move from their communities because they are rejected by their families, friends, and the educational system.” The group of young indigenous people underlined that “In Quiché the people move to the capital city or the United States because they feel they don’t have opportunities here.”

Among the groups consulted, it is evident that the causes of migration are mainly poverty and the lack of possibilities for improving one’s living standards, as well as dysfunctional families, insufficient political will, a lack of public policies, discrimination, violence, and the criminalization of young people.

The young people who are members of youth organizations and young women pointed out that they have never contemplated leaving the country illegally; most of these young people are university students and did recognize that many of them have moved to the capital city to pursue their university studies. A majority of them say they are seeking opportunities for specialized studies or work abroad because they find it difficult to find work within the country.

For the youth who belong to social organizations, “migration is the trip that adults, young people, and children undertake in order to improve their job prospects and incomes, especially in countries like Canada and the United States.” They also point out that “migration is the result of a lack of opportunities. It all begins with education because from the moment it is not available for everybody, young people and even children are forced to start working instead of studying, but that lack of education doesn’t allow for better income and then people decide that they want to migrate.”

One participant in the focus group of young women affirmed that migration “is the consequence of a state that does not have good public policies for the development of its inhabitants, in addition to creating social problems that the authorities do not address properly, which results in many people moving to other states.”

For indigenous youth, “one leaves the country because there are not sufficient resources, there are low incomes, a lack of jobs, a low educational level, and that reason people search for improvement in another country.”

The young people who belong to catholic organizations share this perspective when they state that migration “is the result of various social and economic problems that force people to move in order to improve their opportunities.”

For a participant in the group of young women, migration means “abandoning one’s roots, abandoning the family in search of a better future or in many cases fleeing from crime.”

From the perspective of the young people from the municipality of Villa Nueva, “[migration] means moving from one place to another, leave one’s birthplace, on a route that can be insecure and many times people leave their kin in search of a better life.

## **The perspective of young people on exclusion from education and the lack of economic opportunities**

The situation of exclusion from education and employment for young people, as well employment in low quality and low paying jobs, is one of the factors that prevent the country from improving its productivity and economic growth. The participants in the focus groups coincided that young people do not remain in the education system because they must start to work at very young ages or because they are excluded from employment opportunities, especially in the case of the LGTBI community.

It is important to point out that the young people who participated in the focus groups (with the exception of the LGTBI group) are students, either in middle school, high school or university. Nonetheless, the majority of participants expressed that they are not studying the careers they had liked because they don’t have the means to pay for it or the degree programme which they would like is not offered where they live, as is the case of medicine.

On the other hand, the young people say that they feel excluded from economic opportunities because they lack the knowledge or the experience and for just being young. One young participant in the women’s group said that “They do not take our interests into account when offering new careers.” This comment has to do with the decision of the authorities of eliminate a teacher training programme for high school without taking into account the interests of young people. In the opinion of the young people of the indigenous groups, the objective of the authorities was that future teachers receive a better academic instruction and that this would be offered by universities. However, this produced ill feeling among adolescents in rural areas.

As a complement, a young person of the LGBTI community argued that “the lack of opportunities in education or exclusion from the educational system, means that we cannot find a good job and that is frustrating.”

The young people who participated in the focus groups produced a different ranking on this issue. For the indigenous population, education is a priority issue because they feel excluded from the educational system and of economic opportunities as a result of being indigenous. In their opinions, society stereotypes them as salespeople or as domestic help. Nonetheless, the situation has changed somewhat in recent times as there are now more indigenous people with university degrees, but they are still very few as a percentage of the population they represent.

Some of the comments expressed are:

“People do not study because they don’t have the necessary resources to do so and many times the children have to work to provide for the family.” “It occurs often that a girl or young woman can no longer go to school because she must stay at home and do chores.” “There is educational exclusion when there are no schools nearby for people who want to study.” (Focus group of indigenous youth)

“Many times people are denied an education because of gender, ethnicity, social class or income.” “They exclude you for living in some out of the way place, for being a woman, for being indigenous, or for a variety of social paradigms.” (Focus group for young women)

“The state is not able to guarantee mandatory and free education.” (Young member of the LGBTBI community)

“The system is not able to adapt to the requirements of people with special needs.” (Young person of the focus group for religious organizations)

“The government does not provide the necessary resources for the improvement of public schools and, therefore, they end up closing, the teachers do not teach because of low salaries, and the children don’t receive instruction.” (Young person of the municipality at risk of Villa Nueva)

“The educational system is clientelistic, where only those who have money can afford a good education; the rest of us have access to a mediocre education. In Guatemala, indigenous children, even though they are a majority, have the least access to education and, thus, will have a future of underdevelopment and without opportunities.” “When the state omits or does not guarantee education (which is obligatory) to someone because of race, ideology, sex, religion, social or economic status, character, or simply assigns priority to another sector.” (Young people from social organizations)

Exclusion from education results in a lack of opportunities. However, many young people recognize that, even when one is in university, obtaining a degree is no guarantee to get a good job in Guatemala and, therefore, people are on the lookout for opportunities to study or work abroad.

## **Perspectives of young people on political exclusion (decision-making)**

In recent years, political parties and civil society organizations have perceived young people as a “fad”. In this respect, political parties and NGOs take young people into account in a variety of ways but do not involve them in decision-making and, therefore, young people say they feel like “objects” and “subjects” in politics. The example that young people in social organizations gave was the failure to pass a Law on Youth as a mechanism to strengthen institutions that support youth.

Participants of the focus group for university students stated that “In the electoral rolls most people are young, but that is not reflected in the candidates to office.”

The issue of political exclusion for young people who participated in the focus groups is the last obstacle they face. Four of the eight groups placed it in the two lowest positions of the ranking of priorities, even though they stressed that their demands and needs are ignored. For this reason, they say that they are interested in participating in decision-making. The youth in social organizations say that they need to participate in politics because it is they who are supporting the approval of a Law of Youth in the national congress.

With regards to this issue, the following comments were made:

“Since we are not an important part in the decision-making, the needs of young people are not reflected in public policies.” “Decisions are taken in polarized form, which is harmful for the great majority of the population because their needs are not taken into account 100%.” (Participants in women’s focus group)



“We are denied the opportunity to participate in political life.” (Young person from the community at risk of Villa Nueva) “The elites and those individuals with greater economic potential are the ones who make decision.” (Young person from the community at risk of Mixco)

“Decisions are made by a small group.” (Young person from the focus group for indigenous people)

The young people from the focus groups for social organizations explained that: “Youth are excluded from political activities because of a lack of experience and also because positions are already occupied by politicians who do not open up to participation by youth.”

“A monopoly on power and political posts, a lack of legitimacy and democracy, these parameters that exist at present do not allow for participation by youth in politics.”

“They don’t take people into account, they don’t regard student and civilian opinion, they don’t exercise democracy, they leave the population aside, without the people being able to decide and contribute to decision-making that is important for the future of the country.”

Over time, young people have been equated with a lack of experience or knowledge or a lack of commitment and for that reason we are excluded. The people who are in charge of the country act on the basis of their interests and, thus, don’t open up spaces for new talent. On the other hand, as young people we don’t become sufficiently involved to propose and, therefore, to decide.”

“Even though there are some spaces for participating in politics, these are not promoted and we have not been duly called on to participate in politics; for that reason we are atypical with regards to political problems, but if we want to make ourselves heard it will be necessary to claim those spaces and take up leadership because otherwise adult people won’t give them up.”

“The government has been taken over by corrupt individuals and private enterprises that are only concerned about their own good and for that reason people who have opinions about how to improve the country are not taken into account by those who have got a hold on the government.”

## **Perspectives of youth about intolerance**

For participants in the focus groups, intolerance is the result of many factors such as material and emotional shortcomings, a lack of affection, attention and orientation, adverse environmental conditions, pressures and external influences that promote individualism, a lack of empathy to others, and indifference. The only young people who said they had suffered intolerance or discrimination aimed at their group or individually because they think, act or simply are different were the members of the LGBTI community. One of the members of this focus group explained that “My own family has rejected me because I am gay.”

Among the focus groups, intolerance was addressed by only four of them as an issue that affects them: youth belonging to the Catholic Church, the LGBTI community, and the two municipalities at risk. The young people who belong to the Catholic Church ranked intolerance highly because their religious beliefs are very conservative and many topics are still not easily tolerated. In this respect, the young people pointed out that intolerance to that which is different is for them a priority because they are not allowed to talk about and much less defend issues such as sex education and LGBTI rights, among others.

On the other hand, the young people of the LGBTBI community rank intolerance as a priority because the wider population does not even mention this issue and therefore rejects those individuals who are diverse. The young people from the municipalities at risk do not consider intolerance as a priority, not because it is not important but because they have more pressing priorities.

Some of the commentaries expressed by young people about intolerance are:

“Intolerance is the use of beliefs from the past that consist in the rejection/harassment of a person who is physically or emotionally different, which has serious consequences and evidences a lack of education and a degree of conservatism that produce individuals who are retrograde and stuck in the past.” (Young people from social organizations)

“Differences are not respected between one person and another, or between one group and another, generally due to differing opinions, physical characteristics, culture, and ethnicity, among others.” “It evidences contempt and a lack of respect towards individuals, ideas or groups, where one feels superior to others.” “To not respect the opinions or actions of others with regards to their lifestyle or other considerations. It appears in societies which are not open or are backward and full of prejudices.” (Young members of the LGBTBI community.)

## **Perspectives of young people towards violations of human rights**

According to the young people consulted, the rights which are most violated are education, employment, health, equality, and non-discrimination, as well as political participation. The members of social organizations argued that to overcome these shortcomings, the Congress must approve the Law on Youth and then young people will have the tools to defend and promote their human rights. A young student who lives in a high-risk neighbourhood argued that “Access to education is one of the most indispensable human rights because it influences our development as individuals.”

The young people who belong to social organizations argue that to reduce violations to human rights it is fundamental that young people know and be aware of their rights, because these are concrete tools that young people can employ to work for a better life, to denounce all violations of human rights, and demand accountability from the government. However, among the focus groups, only two, one involving young women and the other a student association, knew about human rights.

With regards to violations of human rights, both those contained in the constitution of the republic of Guatemala as well as those in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and with the exception of young indigenous people who do not perceive human rights violations because they ignore what their rights are, the other young people in the focus groups said that human rights are an important issue that affects them directly. Those young people who are organized, including those of the LGBTBI community and those in social organizations, student associations, and young women, ranked human rights as a high priority. This is due to the fact that their struggles, organization, and academic endeavours has made them well acquainted with human rights. In this respect, some of them consider that all the other problems (maras, gangs, violence, educational exclusion, lack of opportunities, migration, weak public policies, political exclusion and intolerance) are a result of or are caused by systematic violations of human rights.

Some of the comments made by the young people in social organizations about human rights violations are:

“The violations are the product of the incapacity of the state to guarantee the physical, mental, and emotional integrity of each person.”

“It is the abuse of the basic guarantees of men, women, and citizens.”

“To abuse, exclude, repudiate the rights that belong to a human being from the moment of birth.”

“The abuse of power over a person or a group that results in the abrogation of their basic rights.”

“The manner in which human beings are deprived, especially young people in their own development.”

“As young people, we do not know our human rights, we do not when they are being violated, we do not know that the state is the only one that can assume responsibility for our rights.”

“The violation of human rights is something that happens every day, as a result of the abuse of power that deprives us of a proper development.”

“The violations of human rights does not allow young people to continue studying and have access to health in accordance with the special needs of young people.”

## **Perspectives by youth on the absence/weakness of public policy**

The focus groups agreed that public policies are notable for excluding young people from society and have not contributed to easing young people’s transition to adult life and a full insertion into society. From their perspective, in absence of public policies young people have a lot of free time, which is also increased by scarce opportunities for employment, education, and alternatives for creative and enriching recreational activities. This excess of free time pushes them into marginality and exclusion. Young people point out that a perspective of a lifetime of work and sacrifice does not call their attention because they believe that they won’t get a good job anyway.

As a result, young people in social organizations stated that “we could support the implementation of public policies, especially those aimed at youth if we were allowed to negotiate, to reach agreements on those policies and control their implementation; to that end, there are a number of young people who have demonstrated their leadership capabilities and should be supported.”

For catholic youth and those in high-risk municipalities, the issue of public policies is not a priority because they do not see a direct relationship to their youth-related problems. But young people in the LGBTI community as well as indigenous youth do see this issue as a priority because they consider themselves to be victims of multiple forms of discrimination that the state should address.

Some of the opinions put forth by young people in this respect are the following:

“The lack of solid institutions and a strong, lawful state, plus the incapacity of politicians, make for an inefficient system.” “Improper state administration and a lack of a functional plan to address collective interests that is assured of continuity regardless of changes of government.” (Young people from social organizations)

“A lack of commitment from governments to establish mechanisms to mitigate and/or resolve certain problems that prevent development.” (Young members of university associations)

“The state does not assign priority to its activities and society does not demand compliance with its rights.”  
“A government without knowledge of the social reality of the country.” (Young indigenous people)

“Not having defined the priorities and the needs of the country, but first responding to the interests of a given group.” “Expression of a weak state that is unable to establish public order that will help or benefit the population.” “Political incompetence and an incapacity to develop alternatives by the three branches of government to benefit the population.” (Young university students)

“A lack of plans, projects, and programmes to confront the country’s weaknesses which limit its development and, therefore, impede better opportunities for its population.” “The state looks after the interests of those in power and does not set up mechanisms that will resolve the problems that affect the country.” (Young people in social organizations)

## **Proposals by young people in general on their situation in the country**

The analysis of the results of the focus groups in Guatemala suggests that young people share similar proposals to address problems that the country experiences.

- Actions for change should be directed at the context and/or environment in which young people find themselves. The strategies should be differentiated if real solutions to problems faced by youth are to be achieved.
- Support efforts by young people to become agents for change and to strengthen youth organizations. Young people should have resources and capacities to implement actions that benefit them and that reflect their own needs and the contexts in which they live. This requires the development of capacities to achieve better coordination.
- Participation by youth should depend on the availability of their time so as to not neglect their academic, job, religious, and cultural activities, among others.
- Build awareness in the international community so that proposed activities are requested by young people and not imposed by donors.

# Focus group discussions in Honduras

Focus groups produced information from different social groups on the basis of their economic situation, affiliation to organizations, educational level, and group and sexual identities. Even though this does not represent the diversity of form of youth groupings nor the different perspectives that young people have, it is a sample that underlines the importance of recognizing the existence of diversity even though the problems that most young people identify are the same.

The focus groups show that in the face of a problem that has been identified, its impact is different on a given social group and, therefore, so are the strategies that young people develop to understand the problem and live with it.

Within the focus groups, young people were selected mostly from situations that are highly vulnerable in economic terms and where they are exposed to a high risk of violence. In some of the cases, the young participants have been directly involved in violent acts. On the other hand, the young participants from social organizations met in a single focus group that revealed the links between the organizations and youth movements with other political actors that have specific political programmes that appeal to young people and which influence their discourse and perspectives on a variety of problems. In this case, an effort was made during the focus groups to go beyond an easy answer provided by political discourses and attempt an answer that was the most representative of reality.

In those focus groups which reflect an explicit belonging to a specific identity (sports clubs, LGBTI community) but which share a situation of economic vulnerability with the other groups, there was no significant difference in the way in which the country's problems were understood nor in the strategies that are needed to endure them. However, and especially in the LGBTI community, there was a greater emphasis on the level of risk of violence and discrimination given their identity based on sexual diversity in addition to their activism associated with a search for acceptance and social respect for their identity.

Finally, one of the groups was made up of individuals who work in government programmes aimed at young people to prevent violence. Thereby, three dimensions of discourse were revealed about the problems faced. The first, their discourse as public officials. This perspective starts out with a defence of the success of the government's programmes. However, in quick order it becomes apparent the officials' own vulnerability on the job weakens their defence of the government's programmes. The second perspective that public officials face is due to their direct contact with youth at risk and especially with gangs as part of their work in government prevention programmes. This perspective demonstrates the difficulties of working in those contexts and, at the same time, the limitations and the precarious nature of government programmes. This led to a discussion of the extreme politicization of those programmes that affects their effectiveness in the extreme conditions that government workers face in neighbourhoods and communities. The third perspective is personal, existential. Although the participants in the focus group are young people who have obtained a job, they are not exempt of the vulnerability in which they live. In other words, having a job is only a minimal improvement in comparison to young people who live in

vulnerable neighbourhoods where unemployment is rampant. This small difference, with all the associated problems of employment and civil rights, at least allows these young people to take a small discursive step back from the reality which they face in daily work. In other words, while it is true that they live in the same reality and experience the same precarious conditions, they consider themselves “saved” at least for the moment because they have a job.

The focus groups followed the same structure, in general. The main differences were a result of time allocated. Only in one case, in the neighbourhood of Los Pinos, was the discussion constrained by fear and control that the gangs exercised over the group; this was a group of unemployed women from the neighbourhood, most of them sentimentally attached to gang members. For this reason, the topic of gangs was not addressed directly, although violence in general was discussed but always in terms of violence that occurred “outside of the neighbourhood.”

The question with which the discussion was opened in all cases had to do with what it meant to be young in Honduras. This question about “being young in Honduras” sought to provide context for the young people in their immediate reality and to try to make sense to the term “youth” which has been standardized in its definition at the international level. The question also allowed easy identification of the immediate threats that young people face in the country.

In the majority of groups, the topics of gangs and migration generated a debate about the type of impact it has because from the perspective of young people it is not possible to determine if the impact is negative or positive for young people, if it is a disadvantage or an opportunity, a cause or an effect. Instead, both topics were considered to be part of a repertoire of options for young people in the face of unemployment and marginality. No specific predetermined order was followed to address the problems but it was left to the dynamic of the discussion to structure the content of the focus group. However, the recurrent issues that emerged, which will be discussed at length here, were the following:

#### Violence

6. Gangs
7. Unemployment
8. Migration
9. Exclusion/stigmatization
10. Violation of rights
11. Discrimination/Intolerance
12. State policies/politics in general

The analysis of each of the above points will be undertaken in accordance with the result obtained with the technique suggested by the focus groups in order to identify the impact each has on the peace and the security of the country.

The exercise produced different rankings that, in general, coincide among themselves but also opened up a debate on whether to analyze the impact of each on young people or the reason or cause of the problem that, in turn, detonates that which produces an impact. Thus, in these exercises it is not possible to limit the interpretation to that produced by the group and for that reason the interpretation includes both the impact of the problem as well as its cause which, in the end, was identified as “the greatest impact”.

#### **Ranking, impact, and most important cause of the problems that threaten peace and security**

During the focus groups, it became evident that the issue of the impact or effect that a problem identified

as such has on young people is not something which is far from two fundamental aspects: a) the sense of little relevance when a distinction is made between the situation that affects young people and that which affects all citizens independent of age; and b) the relative strength of the impact as something that is one directional, that is, something which is considered to be an impact or an effect but can also be perceived as a cause, motivation or trigger mechanism in order to be endured.

The external vision assumes that a social problem affects the situation and the conduct of individuals. Although this is true, the impact or effect is only an introduction to the question about the type of reaction it produces because it is here where the social impact is evident and, in addition, the problems are relativized as negative impacts exclusively and the debate opens up to include a social dynamic that creates opportunities from what are considered externally to be adversities.

In sum, the topics addressed are not only a vertical expression in the sense of their ranking but also a horizontal issues in the sense of the opportunity they represent and the larger problem they reflect.

Ranking according to the quality of the main problem, which determines the others and, therefore, has an impact on all (not just young people).	Ranking according to its direct impact	Ranking according to duality of impact/opportunity
1. Unemployment	1. Violence	1. Gangs
2. State policies/politics in general	2. Exclusion/stigmatization	2. Migration
	3. Violation of rights	
	4. Discrimination/Intolerance	

These three angles for analysis of the results were a product of the exercise undertaken by the participants in the focus groups who evidenced that their perspective on reality cannot be based on a unidirectional vision.

Two fundamental reflections are derived from the above. The first is that the perspective of young people is not perceived as an exceptional situation in comparison to that of the rest of society. Reality does not distinguish its effects on the basis of youth. It does affect some of the expectations that young people have about life or, instead, what they expect to be doing at this moment in their lives such as recreation and free time. However, this is not significant in the face of the impact of economic responsibilities that they must assume.

The two principal aspects that identify the situation of young people are stigmatization and the impact of unemployment. Stigmatization occurs for a variety of reason: place or residence, ethnicity, gender identity, education, and age; these are perceived by young people as something exceptional they have to bear in comparison to the rest of society. This is directly linked to the impact of unemployment. While it is true that unemployment affects the majority of the population, young people believe that due to the current moment of their lives, unemployment is a determining factor in their future options (migration, informal or illegal economic activities), and for this reason has a bigger impact on their immediate situation.

The second reflection has to do with the relative appreciation of that which is externally perceived as having a negative impact (migration and gangs). In contexts of greater vulnerability and risk, the notion of impact is directly related to the notion of opportunity. This translates into a large social problem that is the acceptance and functional reappraisal of the deficiencies of the state and society. In this respect, young people define themselves as at a juncture that leads, in one direction, to a “bad road” because they have no other option or, in another, to some activity to “make ends meet” so as to avoid the first in time.

The size of the big problems that face young people reflects the certainty that being young does not exclude being immersed in the social whole. On the contrary, it is the recognition that regardless of their age or conception of the world, there is a concrete reality which affects them inevitably. This dimension includes an ambiguous relation with the state and, particularly, with political parties which are recognized as the main cause of all problems but are also perceived as an inevitable option to confront the problem of unemployment. The participants in the groups recognized that patronage is not the only way to get a job but it is certainly the most effective and the best way to keep it.

## **The greater of evils, which determines others and, therefore, has an impact on all people (not only the young)**

According to the groups consulted, youth in Honduras define themselves in relation to challenges, obstacles and risks and not with regards to a specific, different and positive quality.

Unemployment and the inefficiency and indifference of government policies are the two challenges that young people identify as the most determinant in the present and for the future.

## **Unemployment**

Unemployment is considered to be the principal factor that affects society in general and which determines the way in which young people live. Within this situation, two dimensions stand out: first, unemployment due to a lack of job options that is directly linked to the economic situation of the country and to the fact that the main economic activities (cattle-raising and offshore production) are either far away in the countryside or are unable to absorb the rising demand for jobs or provide them under working conditions of extreme exploitation. Second, unemployment produced by obstacles placed in the way for young people to enter the labour market by means fundamentally of discrimination, stigmatization, and excessive systems of social and labour control.

The majority of young people consulted argued that they are discriminated because of age: the prevalent age limit to enter the labour market is 28, after which opportunities diminish rapidly. To that must be added that employers demand experience of at least two years and then only hire young people who are of age.

Other forms of discrimination worsen the situation. For example, young people of the the LGBTI community underline that, in addition to the above, their sexual identity becomes a factor of exclusion due to the prejudices and moral conservatism of the society. This obliges young people to engage in prostitution in order to generate income. At the same time, the risk level of violence associated with gender and sexual diversity increases.

The systems of labour control are the mechanisms employed to expel people from the job market. As mentioned by those consulted, people who have debts are not hired, which opens up a vicious circle in



which people approach banks to get a loan and then find themselves unable to get a job to pay back the loan, as a result of which they end up in the illegal or informal sector of the economy.

This systems of control also discriminate as a result of stigmatized identities. This is especially true in the case of young people who belong to soccer fan clubs, not to mention a gang, or any other form of group identity from the LGBTI community all the way to rockers and skaters, for example.

Other systems, as will be explained below, operate as means of patronage control and are the mechanism which excludes a majority of young people from the labor market. For many young people, one of the prerequisites for requesting a job in a private firm is to have a letter of recommendation from some political party.

This limits opportunities for social mobility. In this respect, economic mobility is sought via institutions like the army or the police, especially in rural areas where the farming economy has collapsed. Other forms of mobility are associated with groups like gangs where young people receive money for services rendered to the gang and which represent an income for the domestic economy. In similar terms, migration and the expectation of receiving remittances have built up an imaginary idea of social mobility that many young people aspire to.

In this respect, education is not seen as a factor conducive to social mobility. One of the principal complaints is that there is no possibility of working in the field for which one has studied; instead, studies involve an expenditure that is difficult to recover and which will not produce significant economic returns. On the contrary, education promotes internal migration due to the precarious condition of educational facilities in rural areas. As mentioned in focus groups, there is lack of expectations after studies are completed.

The lack of productive and employment options and the indifference of the state in protecting labor rights means that the road is open for worker abuse and excessive exploitation. For many young people, the option is “migrate or accept any job offer”, that is, accept any denigrating conditions at work because there will be no other options. This situation is taken advantage of by businesses and the state itself to impose conditions akin to exploitation.

In the face of this situation, the young people in the focus groups said that they must live like alcoholics: “from one day to the next.” The survival strategies that young people implement in response to a lack of job opportunities are linked to acceptance of working conditions of exploitation and of political patronage to obtain short-term employment. On the other hand, there are the alternatives that are used mostly: migration and involvement in the illegal economy. The informal economy has limits because it involves established exchange circuits that are not easily broken into. In similar terms, the participants in the focus groups said that individual entrepreneurship was very much affected by institutional obstacles, extortion, and the fragility of investments which are not sustainable.

## **Patronage and corruption**

For the participants in the focus groups, government policies and the political system in general are the principal cause of the problems that were highlighted. This is due to the fundamental fact that no political system is able to respond to the immediate needs of young people. In general, state policies and politics itself persuade young people to identify a dual situation in which, on the one hand, one must become involved in the mechanisms for participation of a system of political patronage and, on the other, the main forms of subsistence demand that one transgress or deny, to one extent or another, the existing political

order.

Honduras is a highly politicized society, where many daily activities of young people are directly or indirectly related to politics. This is due fundamentally to the nature of its political system, which is traditional and dominated by patronage and a wide social base. There exists no way for young people to have access to jobs at any level that lie outside of the patronage networks of the principal political parties in the country.

Regardless, the young people consulted said that state policies do not respond to the needs of the population because they are built upon an electoral hoax. For them, the state's policies promote no positive change in their living conditions and, to the contrary, are the cause of the context of exploitation in which they live. As an example, they discussed the employment regulation by the hour that up to now is perceived by youth as a trick.

The lack of resources for policies and their short-term nature were called out as elements of a corrupt system that aims to trick the citizenry. Out of the groups consulted, some young people have more knowledge of the operations of the political system that allows them to identify it as the main cause over other problems which are more expressions or effects. These young people were not able to provide one single example of a properly functioning policy. They underlined, for example, the failure of the policies for prevention of violence among youth which have only served to expand the electoral base of the party in government but not to resolve in real terms the problem of violence.

The young people who are members of organizations and movements doubted that more young people in government would mean a better government. The examples they give refer to the fact that money changes the attitudes of young people when they start to work in an institution, that is, being young does not necessarily imply a better attitude towards the traditional vices of politics. As young people, they say that the examples of young people in public administration or in politics show that the need to work or exercise power within the public administration makes young people adapt easily to the dynamics of political parties and public institutions. In short time, they argue, young people who join a political party or enter into positions of public employment forget or ignore the needs of young people. According to the opinion of young members of social organizations, "when young people enter government they forget that they represent other young people."

In other cases, young people in public administration and political parties find themselves face a crossroads of either "keeping your job or helping the community." That is, politics and public administration function for the benefit of the politicians themselves and in that sense young people can have no influence either because of their dependency and need to keep their jobs or simply because they adapt to the political system and its vices.

For the young participants in the focus groups, one of the main obstacles for the personal and job development is the system of control that the political parties have set up in conjunction with private enterprise. This system, according to the majority of participants, provides affidavits to individuals who vote for the first time in the primary elections of the political parties, which is then requested when applying for a job. In similar terms, social networks of employees and their relatives are controlled to see if they make some disparaging comment about the party in government and, if so, proceed to fire that person.

The other mechanism through which the political system prevents the personal and political development of young people in the country is the repression of social movements and expressions of discontent. Youth

movements that protest against the government have been repressed by the the security forces. In other cases, the mechanism that is employed to neutralize social protest is the cooptation of the leaders of the movements, who are given jobs in the public administration and, thereby, inhibited from criticizing the government's policies.

The state's policies and politics in general are, therefore, perceived as the principal problems that young people face in two respects: on the one hand, because they are incapable or indifferent to attend to the problems that the population faces and, on the other, because they have put in place a system of control of the political will of young people.

In the face of this situation, the young people interviewed expressed different attitudes. Those who find themselves actively involved in different youth organizations and movements seek to take advantage of any opportunity for political education and training. These opportunities are used positively by some organizations but they are also used by groups that are linked to political parties to build up their electoral base.

The young people who are not formally organized and live in conditions of direct vulnerability - for example, the "barras" (soccer fan clubs) - are indifferent to the possibility of changing the patronage system of politics. On the contrary, these young people seek out any opportunity to obtain some form of employment in the system, even though it be short term and under precarious conditions.

For the majority of these young people, it is firmly believed that to become involved in the patronage system is counterproductive because the benefits are short term and the consequences are graver. In their words, "He who climbs the palm will fall like a coconut", which means that to become involved in patronage will, sooner or later, bring some negative consequence.

There are few examples of young people from the more vulnerable groups who, notwithstanding the precariousness of the public sector, still retain the illusion of transforming the country and, above all else, of not having to use the option that the majority of young people still prefer, migration. In words of one of the participants, "the politicians still have not robbed me of my illusion to live in Honduras."

# Factors that have a direct impact on young people

Even though many structural deficits of the country still affect directly the living conditions of young people, from their perspective the structural problems are not the fundamental ones but the consequences of these that place peace and security at risk to the detriment of all the inhabitants.

In order to explain this difference, it is fundamental to understand how local actors comprehend the problems they face. For that reason, violence, exclusion and stigmatization, violations of rights and discrimination and intolerance are challenges that must compete with the realization that there even deeper causes that cannot be overcome with the limited capacities young people and the citizenry in general possess.

Even though the following description divides these factors in order to express graphically the life experiences of young people in the country, it is necessary to take into account that they are all interrelated and are mutually conditioning. To the extent that it is a system that feeds on itself, the way it is perceived only depends on which of its aspects is considered first. For example, violence is considered to be the result of dynamics of exclusion where the absence of norms necessary for nonviolent coexistence open the door to violent dynamics of social control. In this context, identity is crucial for young people (especially in the case of the soccer fan clubs), which is externalized and rapidly stigmatized by society. This increases the levels of violations of rights (especially labour rights) and discrimination that intensifies the exclusion of young people from the labour market.

Another example of the interconnection and sequential occurrence of these problems was illustrated by the focus group of the LGBTI community when it observed that from a stigma against sexual diversity, society has begun to discriminate in all aspects of life, especially in the workplace, which places youth at risk of aggression and violence.

## **Violence: to be young, to live life however possible**

Violence in Honduras is the problem that most defines a situation of fear, mistrust, and uncertainty in the population. Violence directly affects everyday life of young people because it spreads an existential fear among them that inhibits a freedom which is characteristic of youth. At the same time, violence breeds violent reactions for survival and strengthens behavioural patterns which have a negative and counterproductive impact on young people.

The participants explain that the principal impact of violence is the destruction of their life project, both with regards to its immediate direct effects or of any expectations they might have for the future. In addition, the destruction of their life project is the result of the economic costs of violence, either through a variety of “war taxes” (extortions carried out by different groups) or the loss of capital or minimal infrastructure. For young people, it is frustrating to think about investing in some type of productive endeavour because they know they will be unable to avoid paying some kind of extortion.

For a group of women of the Los Pinos neighbourhood, participation in courses to learn a trade, such as beautician or cosmetics, is an attempt to escape unemployment and undertake simple activities that can be done at home or within territories with gang presence.

For the participants in the focus groups, violence is something that has structured their lives from an earliest age. The life experience of the young people consulted has been marked, without exception, by violence that begins in the home environment, continues in school, and finally extends to social relations they establish with other young people.

As shall be seen in the section on gangs, a recurring opinion is that young people join gangs and soccer fan clubs as a means of escaping the dynamics of violence at home or in the school. This explanation carries more weight when it refers to the impact of violence on the life of women because they seek to join gangs or soccer fan clubs to avoid violence, especially that of a sexual nature, and also to seek revenge. The problem, also identified by the participants, is that the price to be paid for this “escape” is too great because it implies a lifelong commitment to these groups.

For young people that are members of groups linked to violence, this onslaught is seen as inevitable, that is, something which could not be avoided. The justification is based on identity, the defence of territory, the revenge of those killed, or simply self-defence, as the saying goes, “if they do something to me, I attack in return.”

For the participants, the inevitability of violence has to do also with the fact that it is the only work they know, a means of livelihood. This, when added to the multiple dynamics of expulsion from the labor force, convince these young people that the means to be free from violence, either as victims or perpetrators, are extremely difficult to achieve. Even migration, notwithstanding its economic benefits, is a road filled with violence.

The circle of effects produced by violence includes the loss of physical mobility. The inability for young people to move through territory controlled by gangs is a serious obstacle to achieve their personal and job expectations. In the first place, the threat of dying when moving through the wrong territory has an impact on all aspects of a citizen’s rights and becomes even worse because the security forces contribute to its existence. Numerous cases have been reported of police arresting young people and releasing them in territory controlled by another gang so that they might be murdered.

The loss of mobility is something which becomes internalized during the school years. The enrollment of children in most schools is conditioned by the territorial dynamics of the gangs, in addition to the fact that gangs control the internal activities of students and teachers.

The transition from childhood to youth in Honduras is marked by the fact that economic responsibilities are expected from children in order to help support the family. In other words, adolescence means adult responsibilities. This means that any perspective of employment in the future is based on the acceptance of multiple territorial boundaries imposed by the gangs. Phrases such as “to find something near my home,”

“work at home,” or “find something far away” are suggestive of the need to respect the territorial norms within which young people move.

The breakup of families is an ambiguous issue when discussing its links to violence. On the one hand, a lack of proper guidance and support by the family for young people is a factor that contributes to the reproduction of violent patterns of behaviour. At the same time, most participants in the focus groups recognize that violence is mostly prevalent in the home, that parents and close relatives are the ones that act most violently. This situation was underlined especially by the focus group of the LGBTI community who consider that in addition to direct expressions of violence, the family also practices the highest levels of discrimination against young people because of their sexual diversity.

Despite the overwhelming presence of the issue of violence in the life of Honduran youth, various ways to survive in such difficult environments were mentioned by the participants. One of the first strategies is that of “not standing out”, that is, to suppress any expression of difference with respect to the symbolic norm accepted by the gang or group that controls the neighbourhood. This has direct implications in the development of identities during youth and, instead of reducing the temptation to become involved with gangs or soccer fan clubs, only promotes their involvement so that they can exercise their identity in relative safety.

This is complemented by an “adaptation to reality”, which is the basis for the belief among young people that violence is inevitable. While this can be counterproductive in that it means acceptance of reality and not a commitment to change it, it also should be understood in a context in which survival is the objective. Thus, if the problem cannot be resolved, one must live with it.

As mentioned previously, joining a group that is present in the neighbourhood is a survival strategy in the midst of inevitable violence. The groups (gangs or soccer fan clubs) provide mechanisms of protection that reduce, but do not avoid, violence. This is a learning process that young people experience from an early age and teaches that in Honduras one cannot be naive in the face of violence. To deal with naivete implies accepting that “anything can happen any day” so that one must be constantly on the alert. These types of expressions reflect the inevitability of violence, but also the need to assume a proactive attitude to escape from it.

At the same time, young people are conscious that social relations in the neighbourhood context are designed to provide self-protection, which in turn requires knowledge of dynamics and persons. Thus, a strategy employed by youth is to make oneself known in the neighbourhood because that translates into some degree of protection.

In addition to the above, young people express the need to “keep one’s mind busy”, in other words, sports, cultural activities, social assistance, etc. This is necessary to avoid negative thoughts; they underline that if such activities - formal and institutional - are not available, then it is to be expected that a gang or any other group will be sought out because, in their own way, these groupings provide activities for young people, entertainment, and other things which young people crave.

Young people emphasize that their neighbourhoods, with their own dynamics and social relations, have a potential that is not taken advantage of and which can be the basis for peaceful coexistence if there are sufficient resources and necessary support. The fact that “the neighbourhood defends the neighbourhood” is today a negative asset given the levels of violence by gangs and drug traffickers, although it is a positive asset that exists in all its members but overshadowed by the control exercised by gangs and drug traffickers. The wish to transform that dynamic in support of positive initiatives is a wish that was clearly expressed by the participants.

## Exclusion and stigmatization

Exclusion and stigmatization are two categories which were directly related during the discussions in the focus groups. Both problems are deemed mutually dependent and at the same time are linked as the principal causes of phenomena such as violence and unemployment.

In general terms, exclusion is associated with a lack of spaces for healthy recreation; thus, alcohol and drugs are some of the few recreational options open to young people.

For the LGTBI community, stigmas are the innate ideas that are held since childhood and which are based on ignorance. This translates into dynamics of rejection and exclusion that increase the vulnerability of young people who experience them. To this must be added, for example, that in the case of transexual women a greater visibility of sexual identity increases the levels of stigmatization and closes the door on job opportunities and citizen participation.

Of all the different expression of exclusion and stigmatization, those associated with expulsion from the labor market are the ones that affect young people most negatively. For example, for young people from stigmatized neighbourhoods, such as Los Pinos, employment opportunities are closed for the simple reason of living in that neighbourhood.

Exclusion is especially evident in the LGTBI community in school and the workplace, where the machista code of intolerance is at the root of the problem. For young people of the LGTBI community, exclusion at the workplace is one of the determining factors for prostitution as a livelihood. In the case of women from vulnerable neighbourhoods, the situation worsens when in addition to being excluded from the labour market they are held prisoners within the territorial boundaries imposed by the gangs, which makes their job options practically nonexistent.

At a political level, exclusion is expressed by obstacles to a real participation and, in opposite terms, the electoral use of young people. In some cases, this situation is taken the extreme of using young people to carry out actions of political correction. In the case of the LGTBI community, their political participation is blocked by parties that consider that they do not represent large numbers of young people. However, they are used by political parties and civil society organizations in demagogic ways to claim falsely that minorities are taken into account, especially when campaigning for elections or when reporting to donor countries and international organisms.

Exclusion is also expressed in the lack of access to justice. The level of impunity in cases involving homicidal violence in the country is high but is even more so in hate crimes, as in the case of transexual women. In this case, the media exacerbates the stigma and even justify killing members of the LGTBI community.

The situation is different in the groups of young people who belong to organizations and movements. The possibility of studying at the university or be part of an organization allows these young people to receive some small income that keeps them above the poverty line. This group of young people is mostly from a generation of parents that has overcome minimally economic vulnerability and have the means to provide their children with the opportunity to study in the public school system. The young people who have this type of opportunity can project their lives beyond simple survival and they possess a more comprehensive understanding of the reality of the country, they are able to express themselves in abstract terms, and therefore can become involved in political activities linked to wider party concerns and processes.

At a political level, parties are seen as the principal factors of exclusion because, as the only means of participation, they exclude young people from decision making, leaving them only to mobilize the electorate. At the same time, political parties exacerbate exclusion by filtering job applications. In similar terms, parties establish patterns of stigmatization that link identity of young people with political parties to the extent that the stigma is double: with regards to the identity of the young people and to the party they belong to.

In addition, religion is also perceived as playing a double role. On the one hand, religious values are thought to help young people find the right way in life. However, religions is also considered to be a factor of exclusion and stigmatization, especially in the LGBTI community and in groups which are highly vulnerable to violence such as soccer fan clubs. At other levels, where there are better possibilities of engaging in abstract thinking about reality, young people differ about the importance of religious values and the role of churches. Young people who belong to social organizations and movements consider that the values and morals set down by religion are necessary to differentiate right actions from wrong ones. However, they are critical of the internal corruption in the Catholic Church and the excessive demagoguery and manipulation in the evangelical churches.

To confront this situation, the focus groups agreed that overcoming it depends on changes in society that go beyond the possibilities of their respective sectors. In spite of this, the LGBTI community states that it is necessary to support the writing of specific laws to address discrimination and stigmatization, for example, by means of a law of gender identity. As an organization, the LGBTI community seeks to identify support mechanisms among its members to implement actions to counter existing taboos about sexual diversity. Nonetheless, one of the survival strategies that they implement is to adopt a lifestyle where their sexual identity is hidden in the knowledge that otherwise their physical well-being might be endangered.

Along similar lines, the soccer fan clubs have involved themselves in processes in support of transforming violence within their own groups. Likewise, they seek to strengthen communication and mutual understanding with other sectors involved in the conflicts they have through dialogue and mediation. The soccer fan clubs also seek to improve their capacity to inform and manage relations with the media to bring about a change of mentality in the media with regards to the negative perception and stigmatization that they currently hold about their organizations.

Youth organizations and movements have already started to engage in political processes to confront this problem. The frequent events for political training and engagement with other sectors is a mechanism that allows them to widen their struggle to overcome exclusion and stigmatization of young people.

The participants in the focus groups that find themselves at the mercy of higher levels of vulnerability and risk are unable to find ways - neither individual or collective - to confront the problems of exclusion and stigmatization.

## **Violations of rights, discrimination, and intolerance**

Violations of rights, discrimination, and intolerance are dimensions which are related and which, from the perspective of the participants in the focus groups, act directly on the conduct and attitudes of young people about their perspectives for the future and the strategies for life they implement in order to survive.

These dimensions were especially evident in the LGBTI community, the soccer fan clubs, and youth organizations and movements. Their perspective on the problem underlines the fact the Honduran state not



only does not guarantee the respect of citizen rights of young people but is a factor of constant violations of same.

In the case of the LGBTI community, violations of rights occupy a wide spectrum that goes from the loss of life to the right to express an individual identity in freedom. For the soccer fan clubs, violation of rights is evident fundamentally in excessive police repression and constant discrimination for belonging to a specific group.

In all the groups, but especially in those made up young people in situations of vulnerability and risk, the main expression of discrimination and violation of rights occurs in the job market. Even though the state does not have the capacity to guarantee respect for the rights of people, it is with regards to excessive labour exploitation and discrimination where the precarious nature of the state's institutions is most evident.

Intolerance is considered a factor that promotes violent conducts in the country. This ranges from intolerance of differing political positions and sexual orientation to the inability to accept different preferences of sports teams. The inability of society to accept differences means that it ends up being handled through violence and constant aggression and discrimination. In a context in which violence is used as a medium to regular social tensions, vengeance and hatred become determining factors of the cycles of violence that plague society. The soccer fan clubs recognize that they are victims of the social reproduction of violent dynamics which are fed by hatred and vengeance. In similar terms, the LGBTI community underlines that social hatred has become concentrated on a group of young people who given their sexual diversity have become targets for the violent outbursts of society. Even the groups of young people who participate in state-sponsored prevention programmes express that they face situations of pressure and reprisals in the workplace as a result of differing political or religious preferences.

These situations affect directly the life of young people. The violation of basic citizen rights and discrimination and intolerance become incentives for aggressive attitudes for survival. In words of one of the participants of the focus groups, the possibility of breaking these cycles is remote because "human beings have trouble pardoning, someone kills a person close to me, I kill him or someone close to him." From the point of view of young people in organizations or movements, one of the principal demands made to the state is the creation of mechanisms that will interrupt the repetition of these patterns of behaviour.

In the case of women, the situation worsens in light of the predominance of patriarchal patterns of behaviour in society that not only discriminate but also deny the rights of women from the home all the way to public institutions. The same situation is found in the LGBTI community, whose members begin to feel discrimination from the very intimacy of the home which then worsens when they enter into a society which is aggressively intolerant of sexual differences.

In the face of this situation, the participants in the focus groups expressed that they are incapable of changing something which is structurally embedded in society. However, the young members of organizations and movements have devised a political agenda centered on the denunciation of violations of basic citizen rights. The challenge they face is to make the political parties and the state assume the demands placed on them with responsibility and commitment and not give in to the powerful dynamics of cooptation and repression that the political system exercises. Given that these groups already have demonstrated a capacity to devise a coherent discourse in demand of the respect of rights, the solution has been elevated to an abstract plane that is expressed in proposals to "found the state anew," to promote "capitalist responsibility," and the "creation of a new political system."

Even though these proposals are valid, their supporters have not developed concrete strategies for change. On the contrary, organized groupings and political movements whose social base is still vulnerable and at

risk talk about direct action, either through violence or control of their patronage networks, to assure their permanence and preeminence in a context of aggressive social relations.

**Ambiguous factors of impact and opportunity. “We young people have three opportunities: to die assassinated, to migrate, or to join a gang”**

The participants of the focus groups agreed that there are two issues that cannot be evaluated exclusively on the basis of their impact but given the Honduran context, must both be considered as opportunities that appeared inevitably and that, compared to other phenomena, offer advantages together with risks.

The focus groups were referring specifically to gangs and migration. Both are social problems that affect them but which equally present opportunities to escape from bigger problems such as unemployment, exclusion, intolerance, and discrimination. Along similar lines, more than causes, gangs and migration are consequences of structural problems that originate fundamentally in a political system that is indifferent, inept, and corrupt.

Regarding these issues, there is a significant difference among the participants from vulnerable and marginal groups and those who belong to social organizations and movements. The difference in perspective between these two groups of young people is determined by their experience with regards to the problems of gangs and migration. In this respect, a group of young people from social organizations and movements were consulted and asked: Why didn't you join a gang or emigrate? This was done to identify the factors that inhibit joining a gang or migrating within a context that fosters both.

Inhibits joining a gang	Inhibits migration
Origin and place of residence in rural contexts	Sense of belonging: “this is my land”
Broken but functional family, parental control	Ibid.
Absence of gangs in place of residence	Expectation of educational development
Capacity to decide personally	Sense of contributing to change in the municipality, of not being a problem but a solution
Economic well being	Does not feel the need to migrate
Absence of a personal relation to gangs	Has a stable job
Education received	Has no money to do it
Fear	Ibid.
Type of upbringing	N/A
Activities during free time	N/A
Emotional maturity	N/A

Inhibits joining a gang	Inhibits migration
Access to other contexts for socialization (churches, for example)	N/A
Early incorporation into the youth organization that he/she belongs to and recognition of contribution as a young person	N/A

Next, gangs and migration are described and their main differences analyzed.

## **Gangs:** ***“the eleventh commandment is see, hear, remain silent”***

Gangs are an omnipresent issue in the daily of Honduran youth. This applies to both those who live every day in environments controlled by gangs and who, therefore, have a direct relationship with them, and those who do not have that type of relationship but who nonetheless confront the phenomenon as a potential threat to their livelihood.

Notwithstanding the above, the participants in the focus groups coincided that gangs are a phenomenon that cannot be understood as a problem that affects only young people. In their experience, gangs should also be analyzed as an option that thousands of young people must consider in the face of the enormous structural shortcomings that the country experiences, especially unemployment and marginality.

Above all else, the idea of inevitability has grown stronger in the sense that it is a problem that has no solution given its structural origins but which is also inevitable because it is a way out of even bigger problems, notwithstanding the risks involved.

All the participants in the more vulnerable groups that live close to gangs stated that they had some kind of relationship with gangs, either through friendship, family ties, or through daily contacts in a context where it is impossible to avoid them and which, on the contrary, are promoted as a form of survival.

These groups state that it is understandable that young people are no longer co-opted by the gangs and that young people are no longer forced to join them; instead, they join in order to obtain a minimum income. It is estimated that a 14 year old adolescent can make an average of 150 lempiras (approximately US\$6.50) to be a lookout for daily happenings in the neighbourhood. Other gang members can receive for other duties up to 3,500 lempiras (US\$150) a week.

In addition to economic benefits, gangs also provide an alternative to the aggressive contexts in which young people have to live in Honduras. Participants in the focus groups of young people at risk stated that many youth, especially women, seek out the gangs as a way out of the abuse and violence that they suffer at home. They find in these support from their peers and can even get revenge. The idea of the gang as a family creates solid ties of solidarity where a high price is paid in terms of risk and violence but not as high as the one they would pay if they remained in the family environment which they have escaped from. This situation is especially dramatic in the case of women, who testified that there is also a price to pay in terms of sexual abuse, with the difference that it is not a relative who is the perpetrator.

Some of the young participants in the focus groups stated that even life in a prison turns out to be less precarious and insecure than the one in the neighbourhoods, because in prisons one is in a context

protected by the gang itself. The young people recognize that the gangs provide protection for the community against other groups and even prevent electoral campaigns from invading the neighbourhoods as a way of punishing politicians for the tricks they play to win votes.

All of this happens under a social order based on fear and violence. In addition, it has a cost which communities find it difficult to pay: “rents” or “war taxes.” This situation is the cause of a massive displacement of population within the country fundamentally of people who are trying to escape the extortions. People seek out neighbourhoods controlled by a gang which is no longer extorting and escape from one which still extorts as its principal source of income.

For most of the young people consulted, the payment of extortions is one of the main disincentives for creating jobs because it is not possible to begin a business or a service when multiple extortions must be paid. This situation is characterized by the participants as something essentially urban. The young participants who come from rural areas stated that the traditional mechanisms of community control prevent the problem of gangs turning into criminal organizations that demand extortion and control over territories. That is, gangs exist but they do not spread as criminal organizations.

For those groups that are vulnerable and at risk, the experience with gangs acquires an existential dimension, that invades all aspects of their lives and which influences attitudes and conduct among youth. In their own words, “the eleventh commandment is see, hear, and remain quiet,” which is an oath of absolute loyalty to the neighbourhood and the gang and a threat to not divulge anything that happens since the problems in the neighbourhood are resolved through the social order established the by gang.

The situation is different with those groups of young people who participate in organizations and social movements. As mentioned previously, for a variety of reasons these young people have overcome the survival line and have put distance between themselves and the problem y, therefore, understand it from a more structural and political perspective.

For them, the gangs originate out of the incapacity of the state to halt the problem and the social and institutional complacency to resolve it. In their words, “we isolate the gangs” which translates into a recognition that one of the determining factors of the problem is the exclusion of young people and their marginality. Under this perspective, due to the lack of inclusion, the gangs have set up a parallel system of life under which, for example, they have their own mother’s day or children’s day celebrations. What is more, the gangs assume community roles where no other form of social or institutional organization is capable of doing so, for example, helping to put out fires, getting help from emergency services, and providing social assistance. Gangs control public and private social services; for example, if they extort the public transport system, they make sure that the vehicles comply with the established routes.

For the youth involved in organizations and movements, the problem has no solution because the gangs have strong links to politicians and the police, they have lawyers and links to legislators, magistrates, etc. This represents another level of inevitability, which depends from the political and criminal link that is reinforced by a political system that depends on patronage, corruption, and impunity.

With regards to the gang phenomenon, the young people consulted think that one of the principal mechanisms to reduce the problem is to provide guidance to the children of gang members because they are the ones that could provoke a change in the dynamics of violence and because, in addition, it is much more difficult to ask a gang member to change his conduct.

For the young people who experience daily life next to gang members, one of the principal survival strategies is coexistence itself, mix up with them. This also requires appreciating and respecting the

place and function that gangs have in the community. From their perspective, it is necessary to take advantage of the positive aspects that the gangs have in the neighbourhoods, such as solidarity in the case of emergencies, recognition that gangs (at least the Mara Salvatrucha) do not condone mistreatment of women and the elderly, protection of family units, and prevention of problems in the neighbourhood that might attract the attention of the security forces or other groups that compete for control. According to the opinion of those participants who come from neighbourhoods with gang presence, outside of the fear that gangs inspire, their other face is also recognized: they take care of children and the elderly, protect the neighborhood, provide security, take the fire department to injured and ill people, and lend money to the community. The gangs stimulate the economy of the neighbourhood, and do not allow the utility companies to cut off the electricity or other services which the people are unable to pay for. This situation, which from the outside is perceived as detrimental to the institutional ordering of society, is an advantage in contexts of high marginality and poverty. In addition, the institutional order is so precarious that to disregard it is no disadvantage in the face of the order imposed by the gangs that, all things being equal, provides advantages comparatively less harmful.

The group of young employees in state prevention programmes argued that there is a lack of understanding of the necessary dynamics to approach the neighbourhoods successfully. For example, it is not convenient to enter to work in a neighbourhood bearing all forms of identification (jacket, shirt, tags) of the government programmes because gangs reject the government strongly. However, this is a prerequisite that the state programmes demand because one of their objectives is visibility with elections in mind. In addition, it is necessary to accept that the gangs have control over the neighbourhoods and that mistrust is very high. For that reason, it is counterproductive to request information of a personal nature from gang members and their families, especially because they have experiences about information that has been used by the security forces to undertake repressive actions.

In their opinion, this inconvenience can only be overcome by a process of confidence building in which the gradual involvement of the gangs in the process is vital. This means that in the neighbourhoods one must not talk rubbish, that is, employ demagoguery and hoaxes because that closes off all possibilities of working in the territory. In addition, the government's programmes should demonstrate honesty in their objectives and avoid any type of political slant, especially electoral. According to the experience of the young workers in government programmes, it is necessary to talk with the people who make decisions within the institutions. Gang members do not like to talk to intermediaries because they don't trust them. Agreements must be established under the recognition that the gangs are the authority in the neighbourhoods and communities. This recognition is something that is expected and legitimate because the abandonment has a long history and marginality and exclusion are not only economic but have to do fundamentally with symbolism and identity.

The young workers in government programmes also underlined that the problem of gangs has been understood only from an urban perspective. In rural areas there are experiences that should be taken into account to devise more effective initiatives to treat the problem as an alternative to the use of force only.

The survival strategies of young people in the face of the problem of gangs aim to overcome the imminence of death and precariousness. According to the opinion of the participants, "it is difficult in Honduras to become old," which means not only having to deal with a high risk of not being able to plan ahead in the medium or long term but also to forfeit a future of social mobility.

## **Migration: *To row against the stream***

Migration is another one of the phenomena that are analyzed from the perception that young people have about their inevitability. As is the case with joining a gang, migration was considered to be a phenomenon that had to be analyzed from its effects, as well as an opportunity in the face of the precarious structures of the country.

The inevitability of migration occurs, as expressed by the majority of participants in the focus groups, at the moment when the options for avoiding it are no longer effective; in their words, “if there are no options, the best is to leave.”

The focus groups coincided that the main factor that promotes the need to migrate is the lack of employment opportunities. As described previously, the diverse obstacles that prevent access to the labour market mean that young people have few or risky options for income generation. It should be clear that the income that young people require is not destined to cover the stereotypical activities of the young (entertainment, stylish clothes, parties) but instead those responsibilities of adult life that they must assume from an early age due to the context in which they live. Thus, the need to generate income is not something marginal in the life of young people but, on the contrary, it is vital for the subsistence of family groups.

For the LGTBI community, the cause of migration is not only poverty but also stigma, exclusion, and fear of gangs and police officers. For them, the cause is also related to the lack of opportunities to study, especially in the case of transexual women. The participants agreed that within the LGTBI community, the transexual women are the ones that most look to migrate given that they are at the highest level of insecurity. In the face of these limitations, young people consider that the vulnerability of the members of the LGTBI community are greater than that faced by other young people in light of the strong traits of machismo and hate-induced violence in society.

In the spite of the above, migration is also perceived as an opportunity to escape from the precariousness in which young people live in the country. Once the enormous risks of rape, theft, kidnappings, mutilations, and different types of exploitation along the route to the receiving country are overcome, migration is a way to generate income that, under no circumstances, could be had in the country of origin. This is thought out not only in terms of the individual development of young people but fundamentally under the expectation that the next generation will have better income and job opportunities.

The expectations around international migration are similar to those, at a different level, which are held about internal migration. The participants in the focus groups from the interior of the country expressed that young people who cannot migrate abroad lay their hopes on migration to the capital city, because they expect to find there better job and educational opportunities. In fact, internal migration is considered necessary to generate income that will allow for migration abroad.

Nonetheless, the participants reasoned that migration is a “double-edged sword” because the benefits that accrue to some create greater inequality in the neighbourhoods and communities. The young people who have access to remittances or consumer goods sent by their relatives abroad begin to widen the socioeconomic gaps that separate them from other youth with which they coexist in the same contexts of poverty and marginality. For example, the use of different clothes, technological items, education, and even improvements in houses place the receivers of remittances on a different, albeit minimal, status level that is significantly different with regards to the rest of the inhabitants. This is visible in the form of new status symbols that would not be possible were it not for the remittances from abroad.

Along similar lines, the fact that some are able to establish themselves abroad impels others to consider

that, regardless of the risks, it is possible to achieve social mobility. This option is tempered, of course, by the risks of deportation, people smuggling, and the exploitation of migrants as mules in the drug trade. The participants in the focus groups coincided that the lack of assistance for deportees ends up promoting crime and illegal economic activities. In addition, there is no support for criminal investigations in the case of migrants who are kidnapped or medical assistance for those who are injured or mutilated during their journey. Rape and sexual abuse are not looked into by any government institution; on the contrary, it is non-Honduran social and religious organizations that provide assistance to the victims.

All the participants in the focus groups stated that they have a relative living outside of the country and that, even though that has helped families get by, they regret the breakup of families, the separation of children from their parents, and the lack of discipline, control, and affection for those children and youth who remain in the country.

In such a situation, the participants in the focus groups agreed that migration is an opportunity that cannot be rejected. Regardless of their intentions of staying in the country, migration is always an opportunity to escape from violence, poverty, and the lack of expectations that young people must deal with. For youth, disadvantages aside, remittances represent an opportunity that must be taken advantage of in light of the lack of jobs in the country.

## **Factors that aggravate the problem**

During the focus groups in Honduras other factors were mentioned that affect the situation of young people in the country and that are perceived differently according to the sectors that referred to them. While these factors were not considered determinant, they do aggravate the problems and explain a lot about the difficult situations that they must face on a daily basis.

The authoritarian culture is seen as a factor that promotes individualism and weakens the capacity for group decision-making among young people. For those young members of the LGBTI community in Honduras, this culture means that acceptance of sexual diversity is a problem in the country because it hampers the administration of justice when crimes occur and, furthermore, means that the young members of that community are excluded from the labour market. According to these young people, “men use our services (sexual) but then are not willing to offer us a job which is not prostitution.”

For young people in social organizations, the authoritarian culture is expressed most clearly in militarism and the ways in which the legal and constitutional provisions in the country are not respected. The most obvious example of this for young people is that elections will be held in which the sitting president could be reelected even though the law does not allow reelection.

With regards to the authoritarian culture, all the groups, except for that of young people in the public sector, recognized the admiration of the violent and corrupt man as an evil that is not distinguishable among young and old individuals. The young people in neighbourhoods at risk said that “violence is something which one learns in order to survive” because there are no other means that offer protection. On the other hand, corruption is considered to be necessary because otherwise one cannot overcome the arbitrary behaviour of the security forces. In their own words, the security forces “arrest everyone and it’s only to ask for money to be set free, it’s extortion.” The young people said that they know they might be arrested but a bribe can set them free because that is the reason for the arrests: corruption.

For the young people of the LGBTI community, the admiration for the violent man increases the possibilities that society will suppress an opening towards sexual diversity and substitute it with violence.

The young people in this group think that they do it “to demonstrate that they are men, machos, who attack young people who offer sexual services on the streets, especially transexual women.”

The young people in this community were emphatic in blaming the churches, especially the Catholic Church, for the situation in which they find themselves. For them, “the church, with its discourses, has turned us into a problem for society” and “I am a believer in God, but the church has hurt me when it accuses me of being a degenerate.” This situation produces violent reactions and serious exclusions among young people who are sexually diverse in the country. According to them, “they accuse us, they discriminate against us, pero they use our sexual services all the same and, what’s more, the seek us out to arrange the saints and decorate the churches.” For the young people in the LGBTI community, the church is responsible for practicing a double moral standard that justifies intolerance and discrimination that they face daily.

With regards to the above, the young people in the LGBTI community and the young members of social organizations consider that another problem that affects them is the culture of machismo (male chauvinism). In the case of young members of organizations, machismo is seen as a factor that threatens the rights of young women. For the young people of the LGBTI community, the problem of machismo is expressed as intolerance and violence which sexually-diverse young people experience in the streets. According to these youths, “we are rejected and attacked for the way we dress and behave but at the same time they don’t give us the opportunity to study or work, they expel us from school and then say we are uneducated people or that we exercise prostitution because we don’t want to work.”

The young people consulted coincide in that the neglect of youth is a determining factor in the problems they face and, at the same time, is a factor that involves them in criminal acts and violence. The young people agree that there is no guidance for young people, neither in school or in the family. Thus, many young people find in the gangs a way of organizing their lives. The young members of soccer fan clubs recognize that the club is a family for thousands of young people that are escaping from environments in which they have been abandoned. For one young club member, “the club is my family, the place where I not only found friends but advice on how to improve my life.”

In similar terms, the lack of confidence is considered by all participants as something which hinders finding solutions and which, at the same time, increases the risk of finding a better life in the “wrong way.” The young people agree that they don’t trust in any state institution, in political parties, and much less in the police. They also recognize that they don’t trust anyone from their own communities because they are seen as slackers, criminals, and irresponsible individuals. One young club member said that “I only have confidence in the members of my club, I cannot trust anyone in the community because they see me as a problem that they want to eliminate.”

For the young people in the LGBTI community, confidence is something they don’t find even in the very social organizations. As they said, “the organizations call us only to fill their quota (of diversity) but they discriminate us all the same,” “I cannot trust in my community because they expelled me, as did my school and family. I only have myself to move forward.”

The abuse of power by the police and groups engaged in extermination and social cleansing were mentioned by young people at risk and members of soccer fan clubs as a problem that makes for a difficult life in neighbourhoods and communities. For them, “the police are worse than the gangs because they are supposed to help us and, instead, they persecute and kill us for being young, in order to fill their quota.” The young members of the LGBTI community said that they know that many of the aggressions that their members suffer on the street are perpetrated by police and soldiers who also demand their sexual services after being arrested. In their words, “they arrest us only to demand some sexual service and then they



beat us or send us to prison where we have to pay a lot of money to get out, all the while without having committed any crime.”

The young people claim that the police incriminate youth in crimes in order to comply with their policing obligations, as well as inventing evidence and repressing any attempt to denounce violations of human rights. The young people in neighbourhoods at risk said that a common practice of the police is to take youth from one neighbourhood to another so that they might be killed in a confrontation by gangs over territory. In fact, the young soccer fan club members and youth in neighbourhoods at risk coincide in that the police never wear identification not out of fear of reprisals but because they are the ones that collect the war taxes (extortion) of the gangs. They also claim that “the fear to denounce these practices is because the police leaks information on who denounces to the gangs so that these can then proceed afterwards to kill the young people who denounced them.” The youth in these two groups coincide in that the witness protection programmes are not reliable because most protected witnesses end up being killed.”

The media was singled out as a factor that increases stigmatization and exclusion among young people. This was mentioned by soccer fan club members, the LGBTI community, and young people in social organizations. The appreciation of the role of the media is shared by these three sectors in that it stigmatizes youth and covers up the government’s irresponsibility towards young people. However, they address the problem from different angles.

For the young soccer fan club members, the media assigns responsibility to them for any violent act that occurs during a sports meet. According to them, “anything that happens during a soccer weekend is the fault of the clubs, they don’t investigate, they only publish what they want and are not concerned about truth.” This is because the media is the property of the same owners of the soccer teams in the country and in that way they sidestep their responsibility. The club members said that “by blaming us for everything, they are able to evade the corruption and irresponsible acts that they commit in the stadiums.”

For the young members of the LGBTI community, the media act irresponsibly when they publish that any violent act against a young LGBTI person was a “crime of passion” or that the individual was offering sexual services. According to them, “it’s enough for them to see that the person belonged to the LGBTI community to justify the violence that the person suffered.”

The young members of social organizations consider that the media is the main factor that impedes a proper audit of the political system and, thereby, contributes to the impunity and corruption that is rampant in the country. According to them, “what can be expected from the media if they are of the same politicians, they publish propaganda for the government, and all the journalists are paid by someone” and “there is no objectivity and they hide everything from the people and lie to them.”

Since Honduras is one of the countries that receives the most assistance from the international community in Central America, the young members of the soccer fan clubs, the LGBTI community, and the social organizations agreed that the international community is a problem because it is not visible in their daily lives. The young members of the social organizations said that “the international community isn’t honest when it demands transparency from the government about the funds it provides.” For the young members of the LGBTI community, the international community is only interested in filling its diversity quota. In their words, “they call us only to sign the attendance list in their activities but there is no interest in supporting solutions to the real problems that affect us as a community” and “the international community supports the VIH issues but that is only one of the problems that we face; inequality, exclusion, and violence are things which don’t interest them.” For the young soccer fan club members, “the international community repeats the same prejudices of the government; they see us as criminals and loafers, they aren’t interested in understanding our problems or of seeing them through a different lense.”

According to the young people consulted, the lack of real interest by the international community is a problem because it legitimizes inefficiency and corruption in the government. According to the young people in social organizations, “by not expressing a willingness to engage with real problems and denouncing the governments, the international community ends up supporting them.”

**Factores que profundizan la problemática por mención del sector**

	Cultura autoritaria	Admiración por el hombre corrupto y violento	Iglesia como factor de intolerancia y discriminación	Machismo	Abandono de los jóvenes	Falta de confianza (entre las personas, con la familia, hacia las autoridades, para denunciar)	Abuso de poder de la policía	Grupos de limpieza social (ex policías)	Medios de comunicación hostiles a la juventud	Falta de interés de la comunidad internacional
Jóvenes en riesgo, barrios urbanos	Light Blue	Grey	Light Blue	Light Blue	Grey	Grey	Grey	Grey	Light Blue	Light Blue
Barras juveniles barrios urbanos	Light Blue	Grey	Light Blue	Light Blue	Grey	Grey	Grey	Grey	Light Blue	Grey
Comunidad LGBTI,	Grey	Grey	Grey	Grey	Grey	Grey	Grey	Grey	Light Blue	Grey
Jóvenes en sector público, urbano y rural	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Grey	Grey	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
Líderes juveniles de organizaciones urbanas y rurales	Grey	Grey	Light Blue	Grey	Grey	Grey	Light Blue	Light Blue	Grey	Grey

## What young people expect

The young people who were consulted listed a number of actions and guidelines that are summarized below and which constitute a vision for transforming reality as expressed by youth in Honduras. It should be mentioned that the items in this list reflects important differences with regard to the sector that proposed them.

Employment	In all the groups that were consulted, the main goal of young people is to get a job because they said that they have economic needs that need to be satisfied above all else, even more so than education and political participation.
To be heard	All the young participants in this study stressed that they needed to be heard. This demand includes arenas for everything from dialogue with political authorities to the family. The young members of social organizations and sports clubs coincided that their belonging to such groups was motivated fundamentally by the need to have a place where they can be taken into account. The young members of rural areas said that this situation is less important in rural communities because they still maintain communal links.
Support and orientation	The young people who work in the public sector expressed that the success of the programmes is limited but that their importance lies in that provide a minimum of orientation to young people. The young participants in the groups coincided that the success of any activity with youth depends on the support and guidelines which are provided to overcome the problems that youth confront.
Opportunities	For the young people consulted, opportunity means employment and education and vocational training. The demand for opportunities originates in the situation of exclusion from the workplace that was mentioned by young people during the consultation.
Education and training	The youth consulted coincided that the main support they expect to receive is the creation of places for education and vocational training. Those who live in neighbourhoods at risk said that the few existing programmes are valuable because they provide training in a trade that will enable them to earn a living, something which the educational system does not provide.
Projects in arts, music, trades in accessible places	The young people agreed that the situation in the country is depressing and overwhelming. Although work and education are necessary, it is also fundamental to have access to activities that will provide recreation and spaces for socialization that are free of violence, alcohol, and drugs. However, they insisted that if these programmes are not accompanied by opportunities (work and training) they are useless.

Support must be provided at the right moment, beginning in childhood	The young workers in government programmes, the soccer fan club members, and the youth in social organizations agreed that programmes aimed at young people must start in communities and neighbourhoods when the participants are still children. When one is young it is probably too late already. The young people who reach 16 years of age without joining a gang or becoming involved in illegal economic activities very possibly will never do it later. The age at which young people become involved in violent activities is earlier, when they are still children.
Take advantage of the abilities of young people	The young people said that the abilities of youth should be used and on that basis devise the programmes to provide assistance. They recognize that they have abilities for work, arts, and culture that are not taken into account and if they were the impact of programmes of support and community initiatives would be much improved.
Reduce corruption, inequality, and selfishness	Although the young people consulted recognized that they do not have the capacity to transform the structural problems of the country, they demanded that these be addressed because otherwise it will not be possible to transform the environments in which they live and develop.
Protection for spokespeople of organizations such as the LGBTI community who are very vulnerable and are attacked	For the young members of the LGBTI community the protection of their spokespeople and leaders is fundamental because they cannot expect to have influence and carry out activities when they are constantly at risk of suffering violent attacks. The same situation was denounced by young members of the student movement and young community leaders in territories controlled by drug traffickers. The protection requested must come from human rights institutions and the international community.
Develop an understanding of problems such as gangs and illegal economic activities from their own contexts	The youth consulted expressed that gangs are a problem that must be understood within the context of the country, as well as involvement by young people in illegal economic activities. For the young people consulted, the problem cannot be seen only as a criminal phenomenon because it has profound social and economic causes. The fact that all the participants have some type of everyday contact with gangs means that young people understand that it is a reality that cannot be seen only from one angle, that of crime. For that reason, the young people propose an understanding of the phenomenon of the gangs and illegal economic activities which is contextually rooted.
Political participation	Political participation is a demand of young people in social organizations and the LGBTI community. However, they say it should not be under the traditional mechanisms employed by political parties because they are corrupt and use young people only for electoral propaganda. For the other groups, political participation is secondary because they cannot see any immediate and visible effects in their precarious surroundings.

## Regional Analysis of the Results

The regional analysis of the results of the focus groups is predicated on the basic assumption that regional reality is not the simple sum of each country and their similarities. It is, in addition, the nature of their differences even though each country shares similar fundamental problems. In this context, the analysis of the three countries confirms the fact that being young does not imply an attitude or a vision of the world in itself which only depends on the specific quality that characterizes a given moment in life. On the contrary, the fact is reaffirmed that the structural differences of economic status and urban-rural origins are conditioning factors that are above and beyond the specific quality of being young.

In the following chart, similar and different factors that make up the regional reality are summarized on the basis of the analysis that the young people developed for each country.

Problems that threaten peace and security in the Northern Triangle of Central America

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras
Unemployment	<p>Unemployment is a problem that is in first place among priorities identified by the young people consulted. The young people of the Northern Triangle of Central America struggle to obtain income to help out with the family economy because given the lack of institutional structures of social assistance, young people must assume responsibilities at an early age which are typically associated with adult life. This situation is a determining factor that explains that large numbers of youth enter the informal and illegal economy in the region and also conditions a tacit acceptance that the negative consequences that it produces because the immediate returns are greater than the concerns about the consequences in the middle and long term. The young people consulted agree in the three countries all transformative action of their environment begins with the minimal satisfaction of their economic needs. Their capacity to contribute to the solution of the fundamental problems of peace and security depend on how those needs are minimally satisfied. Otherwise, their actions go no further than absorbing and adapting to the problems which they face.</p>		
Violence/ crime	<p>In the three countries, violence and crime are factors which surpass the capacities of young people to transform the social roots of these problems. The range of violence that affects the lives of youth extends from violence in the home to aggression by security forces and extermination groups. This situation produces fear, anxiety, and a profound sense that life offers no certainties beyond that which is immediate. Crime affects the possibilities of young people to aspire to a stable economic life which fulfills their basic needs. With regards to this point, youth of the three countries coincide that adaptation to the environment is the most effective action to ensure survival. Thus, association among equals (gangs, sports clubs) are conceived as a form of surviving an imminent phenomenon. For others, individualism and isolation and, in many cases escape, are ways to endure violence and criminality. Some young people find in religion a way to escape and transform on an individual level that does not transform the causes of the problem but does provide some sense of things which allows for a search of alternatives. In the three countries, a determining factor that prevents young people from becoming involved in violence and criminality is obtaining a steady job or any form of self-employment that generates income and reduces the risk to life.</p>		

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras
Gangs	<p>In Guatemala gangs are not yet an imminent problem for the young people consulted. For that reason, it is easier to identify proactive attitudes to overcome the problem. The most notable one is that of the indigenous conception where the existence of traditional networks of support and control allow young people to transcend to adult life without the natural attraction the world of gangs offers to youth. In other words, young people suggest that the problem can be confronted by strengthening support and control networks that will avoid young people joining gangs.</p>	<p>In El Salvador and Honduras gangs are considered something inevitable. The absence of support and control networks means that gangs, notwithstanding their negative consequences, become inevitable ways out of bigger problems that young people do not think they can overcome. The overall opinion of the youth consulted in these countries is that gangs aren't a problem that can be resolved just by youth willing it. For them, escape and adaptation are possible solutions. Adaptation means recognizing the need to incorporate young gang members into the rest of society and, at the community level, get along with them but keeping at a distance. Escape means internal migration, a change of residence and, whenever possible, migration to another country. Notwithstanding this, the young people provide information to address the problem, for example, the need to recognize the gangs, the solidarity and cohesion of the groups, the identity they provide, the inclusion they produce, and the protection that young people find in them.</p>	
Migration	<p>In Guatemala, migration is still perceived as a distant possibility among most of the youth consulted. The urban-rural difference plays a fundamental role in this respect. For youth from urban environments there are more possibilities to avoid migration. However, for young indigenous individuals migration is an imminent possibility because they face the most negative effects of exclusion, poverty, and inequality in the country. In this regard, young people propose education as a means of accessing basic job opportunities that will prevent the need to migrate.</p>	<p>En El Salvador and Honduras migration is considered an inevitable option because there are no viable alternatives for security and income generation without the risks associated with violence and crime. Young Salvadorans consider that the existence of support networks among the migrant communities abroad stimulate the desire to migrate. In the case of Honduras, such networks do not provide any support at all and it is economic needs which makes the desire to migrate an imminent option. In both cases, migration is considered an alternative to even bigger problems that young people do not think they can confront. Migration then becomes a strategy to transcend immediate reality and as a way to plan ahead beyond the stage of youth.</p>	

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras
Family breakup	<p>Except for groups of young people linked to religious organizations, the other youth consulted agreed that the breakup of families is not a fundamental problem. But dysfunctional families, instead, are a problem. The majority of young people come from problem families, mostly where the father is absent. However, they agree that it is not an obstacle; what is a problem is when heads of family do not want or cannot provide supervision and guidance to young people. Young people consider that in the majority of cases the family is the origin of the problems they must face on a daily basis. It is in the family where the first experiences of violence occur and where individuals learn to use violence and crime as strategies for survival. The young people suggested psychological and educational orientation so that the new families would not repeat the same drawbacks that they must now overcome.</p>		
Education	<p>Notwithstanding the precariousness of the Guatemalan educational system, education is still perceived as a viable option to transform the immediate environment of young people. Thus, young people consider that an expansion of quality education is urgently needed as an effective way of overcoming the living conditions that hold back its human development.</p>	<p>In these countries, the participants of the focus groups believe that education does not necessarily lead to overcoming or transforming their immediate realities. This is due basically to the belief that the labor market excludes young people for reasons that are not directly related to the associated with the educational reached. In the case of El Salvador, school attendance is, on the contrary, a risk factor in some communities and neighbourhoods because it implies moving through territories controlled by rival gangs. In Honduras, the situation is worse because desertion from schools is motivated by the precariousness of the educational system and by the urgent need to employ one's time looking to supplement the family's income.</p>	

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras
Political participation	<p>In Guatemala, political participation is considered viable only at the level of social organizations which have strengthened since 2015 when they added their participation to a middle class urban movement. In rural areas, young people conceive of political participation as something viable at the community level where traditional participatory structures include young people. However, rural political participation does not transcend to the national level. For this reason, youth coincide that political participation must be geared to social mobilization and freedom of expression and not necessarily towards political parties which are considered sources of corruption.</p>	<p>In El Salvador political participation equals support for the party that has been supported by family and community. The two dominant parties that have ideological strength are a reflection of a society that continues to be polarized. Other options for participation such as communities and social organizations are influenced by party affiliation. Young people who were consulted are critical of the political parties that represent their identities but they do not identify alternative forms of participation that lie outside of the control of traditional party allegiances.</p>	<p>In Honduras the traditional political identities changed after the 2009 coup d'état. Until then, political identities were shared by a two-party system. However, a third political force awoke among youth the illusion of greater political pluralism. This was rapidly dashed by the implementation of patronage and political pressures. Thus, young people do not see ways out from the weight that parties exercise on the job market. Young people consulted demand changes in the political system, but they think that adaptation to patronage and political pressures are inevitable because they affect their employment directly. To keep one's job is more important than transforming the political system in the short term. The preeminence of the political parties is greater than any attempt to expand networks of alternative participation. From their perspective, sooner or later political parties will determine who gets a job, either in the private sector or in the government.</p>
Economic inequality, discrimination and exclusion	<p>In the three countries these factors were identified as inevitable and, therefore, they are beyond the existing capacities of young people to transform them. Thus, the solution that is considered is individual employment or migration. Notwithstanding, young people identify actions that might reduce the negative effects of these problems. For example, the focus groups reaffirmed the need for more inclusion in all public, private, and international actions that aim to improve the life of young people in the countries. More inclusion means overcoming prejudices and stigmatization and criminalization of youth. This goes all the way from discrimination, inequality, and exclusion based on ethnicity, gender or sexual diversity to groups of a criminal or delinquent nature (gangs, soccer fan clubs).</p>		



# Proposals for action in the region

From the analysis of each case at a national level and the analysis of the region, a list of recommendations have been extracted from the recommendations that the participants identified as fundamental for work with young people in the region. These recommendations for action come out of their very own life experiences and the ways in which they adapt to circumstances in the specific contexts where they live.

## **Focus actions according to the capacities and needs of each young person**

Each group of young people recognizes that its capacities are varied and that the success of the initiatives to transform reality depend on the identification, appropriation, and strengthening of these capacities. The young people consider it fundamental not to assume what they can do but, instead, build on their capacities according to their context. Socioeconomic differences in this respect are fundamental in determining the type of capacity that young people have and from there project their potential to contribute to transformation.

Along similar lines, the needs in the face of the same problems are not the same. The young people agreed that actions are successful to the extent that they are adjusted to their immediate needs. The actions will be appropriate and sustainable if they address the specific need of each group and thereby strengthen the transforming capacity of young people.

## **There is no need to invent the wheel, just make it turn**

The young participants in the focus groups in the three countries agreed that the region has been at the receiving end of countless national and international initiatives that have produced limited results because they have not been able to address the central problem: political will.

They state that the solutions to the problems in the region are already known but that their success depends on political decisions from which they are excluded. Interventions therefore should include the creation of effective mechanisms to exert political pressure aimed at transcending the formality of institutions (public policies and specific laws) when assigning resources and undertaking social audits that will allow them to get involved and guarantee their proper use.

There is generalized disappointment with the political class in each of the three countries. Even where

political identities are strong, young people recognize that traditional politicians fail because of their selfishness which translates into corruption and indifference. This situation does not exclude international actors who are perceived as part of the established system and who do not provide support to demand that the state perform better than it does.

For the young people consulted, the political issue is central to achieve a real transformation. They propose to support those spaces of alternative political participation (movements, social networks) that will allow for more transparency and audit of political management by parties and government officials.

## **Central Americans all, but underlining the differences of context in each country**

For the young people in the focus groups, interventions that seek to transform should start off with a profound understanding of the specific reality of each country, its cultural, ethnic, physical, geographic, historic, and economic characteristics. This implies an increased participation of young people in the design of interventions and initiatives that look to transform. Many young people expressed their discontent with participation in actions they were never consulted about and are therefore perceived as foreign to their own reality.

The young people from the three countries believe they possess knowledge about their social environment and the reality they live in; therefore, they believe they can make a significant contribution to assure the success of interventions and a better and more efficient use of available resources. The participation of young people in the design and implementation of actions aimed at transformation should be a general rule from the community level all the way to the national and regional level, as well as recognizing the differences between countries and taking advantage of their similarities.

As was expressed in a focus groups in Honduras, “only the spoon is privy to the secrets of the pot”; thus, only the young people of each specific community know what is best to address their needs.

## **Gender and sexual diversity for a better life**

The transformation of inequalities and multiple exclusions generated by hatred, intolerance, and a lack of understanding about gender and sexual diversity, represent an urgent need.

However, sensitization alone is not sufficient. For the young people consulted, it is not sufficient to remain at a level of proper conduct according to accepted codes of behaviour by a small group of sensitized individuals in society. What is necessary is strong-willed action to provide job opportunities for those young people who have been excluded by reason of their sexual orientation or gender.

Activism and incidence will be more effective if the needs of young people are satisfied, at least minimally. This will enable young people to defend their rights more actively and overcome the existing prejudice, even within social and international organizations, that still reproduce patterns of discrimination when they involve young women and individuals that represent sexual and ethnic diversity just to comply with politically correct standards.

## **Young, but citizen above all else**

The young people who were consulted recognize that, in most cases, youth in these countries assume responsibilities that go far beyond those assigned traditionally to young people. In this sense, the young people consulted recommended that seeking respect for citizen rights be placed before the satisfaction of stereotypical needs commonly associated with youth.

The majority of young people consulted work, less than half study at the university level, and nearly all have to contribute to their family's income. In other words, they face a world of "adult" needs when they are still young. Each sector that was consulted stressed the respect for a variety of civil rights as a need that should underpin all definitions of what it means to undertake transformative actions. Among these rights, the respect for labor rights, access to justice and protection, access to family health, access to a job, and freedom of expression and association stand out.

## **Real inclusion**

According to the young people consulted, in addition to the economic problem, violence and insecurity are highly determined by the lack of inclusion of those young people who have entered the circuits of violence and criminality.

The principal recommendation that youth made was to include those young people involved in violence and crime by recognizing the place they occupy as a result of a lack of opportunities and effective presence by the state and other support networks. It is necessary to accept that the problem has acquired dimensions that can no longer be ignored and that in each community or neighbourhood there are young people who would like to be included in the activities of other young people who are not stigmatized.

This situation was especially singled out in the case of the gangs and other forms of young people's organizations linked to violent activities. For this reason, the young people consulted described in detail the manner in which they survive in neighbourhoods highly affected by violence. Their strategies for survival provide lessons that initiatives and actions geared to transformations should incorporate.

Inclusion also means that youth should have the capacity to carry out audits to confirm that actions are really being effective and are up to what was offered. Young people are aware of the multiple manipulation by governments, civil society and international organizations of which they are the victims for simply being young.

The greatest concern in this respect is to have access to mechanisms that allow young people to be the main promoters of transparency and efficiency in the use of public, private, and international resources which have been allocated for young programmes.

The last sphere of real inclusion in issues of security and peace is the one that looks to rehabilitate the young perpetrators in a comprehensive way. The participants stated that while penal detention centres continue to be more precarious than the social reality from which young people try to escape, there will be no comprehensive solution to the problems of violence and crime.

## **Political participation**

One of the issues that has mobilized youth in the region has been the fight against corruption. In this sense, young people consider it important to dismantle corruption and the criminal networks in the state and to purge those bodies in charge of administering justice and the security forces (police and military).

The fight against corruption is not something to be done quickly. It should be advanced as much as possible... in order to achieve deep transformations, not only legislative but also by transforming society itself if a real change is to be achieved. For that reason, for some young people - especially those organizations of young people involved in the fight against corruption in the the case of Guatemala - legal reforms continue to be an important struggle that unites them. In countries like Honduras, instead, the concern of young people that participated in the anticorruption struggle is that their leadership is mostly coopted by the established traditional system, and that means that efforts to transform are lost. Thus, it is important to support the emergence of new leaderships that have the capacity to make a difference in comparison to leaderships currently in place in the region.





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