

Keeping Hope Alive

Christian Aid's work on peace

Case study: Central America



Authors:

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Violence and peacebuilding in Central America

After decades of conflict, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras endure chronic criminal violence. Outside of war zones, Central America's Northern Triangle is considered the most dangerous region in the world.¹ Many types of violence exist, including drug cartels and organised crime, gang-related violence, gender-based violence, and state violence from the police and the military. The level of corruption and impunity is high and trust in the police and judicial institutions is low. Young people and women are particularly vulnerable to violence.² Violence affects the economy, keeps people in poverty and fuels migration.

Gang violence

El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are first, second and third in the list of countries with the highest homicide rates – 115, 68 and 60 per 100,000 inhabitants.³ This is strongly affected by widespread gang violence. In gang-controlled areas, where poverty is often prevalent, murders are frequent, and extortion puts every business owner at risk. Girls and boys are in danger of recruitment into gangs, and women experience intimidation and sexual violence from gang members. Families under threat are coerced into abandoning their homes. Other types of violence add to this, such as organised crime, common criminality, police and military corruption, and the legal proliferation of weapons in households in Honduras.

Below: For many years, Bayardo Fargas was a drug user, dealer and gang member. His life has now been transformed after many years of support and counselling from our partner. He helped dismantle a gang, is a husband and father, and works as a painter and decorator. Bayardo also volunteers for our partner, working with other young men in his neighbourhood.



'I am also a threatened person – gangs threatened my daughter. A gang guy told us: "If your daughter is not mine, she won't be of anyone." He threatened that if I opened my mouth, my most beloved one would be killed. I had to migrate with my daughter, and my son too, he was also threatened'

Women's Association of San Pedro Mazahuat, group discussions, El Salvador, 2018

Gender-based violence

The Northern Triangle is one of the most dangerous regions for women in the world. Gender-based violence has a different pattern to gang violence. A global study carried out by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in 2018 noted that the most dangerous place for women is at home – most femicides occur there at the hands of male partners or family members. In Latin America, the ratio of intimate partner homicide at home is five times higher for women than for men.⁴

Below: Children take part in art and recreational activities organised by a youth group that receives support from Caja Lúdica. The activities are aimed at reducing violence in neighbourhoods with gang crime.



Christian Aid's peacebuilding work in Central America

Christian Aid has worked with partners in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras since 1996.⁵ Our Central America programme currently has two lines of work – resilience and climate change, and tax justice and violence prevention.⁶ We support 19 partners, including seven that work on violence prevention – two in Guatemala, two in El Salvador, two in Honduras and one in Nicaragua.

To reduce the levels of violence, Christian Aid and partners have mainly worked with two groups:

1. Young people living in excluded neighbourhoods at risk of suffering violence or becoming violent themselves.
2. Women survivors of gender-based violence.

Work with young people

Christian Aid's partners Caja Lúdica in Guatemala, Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD) in El Salvador and Centre for Human Development (CDH) in Honduras have helped young people take leadership and participate in municipal life to reduce the risk of violence.⁷

Christian Aid has used several strategies to prevent youth violence, including working with perpetrators, high-risk groups and the general population. Based on previous experience and lessons learned, our regional strategy has most recently focused on young people living in neighbourhoods with high levels of violence who are at risk of suffering violence and/or entering gangs.

Young people are encouraged to become active players in their municipalities, engaged in public policy building and cultural processes, rather than regarded as passive and open to recruitment by gangs. This strategy aims to fight the root causes of violence rather than focusing directly on reducing gang violence.

This work is achieved through:

- Supporting the state to improve public policies on youth, culture and violence prevention at municipal and national levels.
- Strengthening youth networks and joint spaces, involving excluded groups, such as women.
- Using arts and culture to challenge stereotypes of violent youth and dangerous public spaces.

Work with women survivors of gender-based violence

Christian Aid partners the Guatemalan Women's Group (GGM) in Guatemala, the Organisation of the Salvadorian Women for Peace (ORMUSA) in El Salvador and CDH in Honduras have helped

'Without Caja Lúdica, we would be either dead, or in a gang'

Caja Lúdica, mid-term evaluation, Carlos Aldana, 2014

women survivors of violence take leadership and participate in tackling gender-based violence.⁹

The theory of change is based around state protection of women survivors of gender-based violence and institutional responses. Institutional responses to gender-based violence include public policies, judicial responses to women's rights violations, and gender-aware treatment of women's violence in the media, challenging stereotypes and regressive cultural patterns. Protection spaces serve as a place for women survivors to become empowered to challenge gender-based violence.

This work is achieved through:

- Ensuring the state protects women survivors and protection spaces serve to empower women.
- Improving institutional responses to gender-based violence in policies, the judiciary and the media.

Below: The Dolores neighbourhood on the outskirts of San Salvador has suffered from gang-related crime. Our partner FESPAD supports a female committee in this area that works with victims of domestic violence, supporting women to understand their rights.



Our impact

Guatemala

- Municipal authorities approved six pioneering youth and culture policies between 2014 and 2016 (Caja Lúdica).⁹
- Budgets were allocated to youth municipal policies in Villa Nueva, Aguacatán and Chiantla (Caja Lúdica).¹⁰
- The government approved a National Youth Policy in 2012, which included a code to set up municipal youth offices in all municipalities (Caja Lúdica).¹¹
- The first centre for women survivors of violence opened in 1991 (GGM).¹²
- In 2008, the Guatemalan state assumed the responsibility of financing all 10 women's protection centres after 17 years of civil activism (GGM).¹³
- The state budget allocation for women's protection centres was increased in 2017 (GGM).¹⁴

- There were 405 women survivors of violence who attended a centre in the first quarter of 2018 (GGM).¹⁵
- The media stopped depicting femicides as unrelated crimes of passion and started to gather evidence on structural gender-based violence (GGM).¹⁶

El Salvador

- The Municipality of Mejicanos accessed the gang-controlled area El Nazareno to provide community health services for the first time in years (FESPAD).¹⁷
- The Ministry of Education introduced the 'Strong Families' project in the gang-controlled area of 28 de Enero (FESPAD).¹⁸
- From 2011, 32 women protection units were integrated into police stations (ORMUSA).¹⁹
- Training on gender-based violence at the police academy has been extended from two days to six months (ORMUSA).²⁰
- Specialised courts for cases of violence against women were created in 2017 after advocacy work (ORMUSA).²¹
- A comprehensive report on acts of violence against women was published (ORMUSA).²²
- The concept of femicide is now a penal type under the law. From 2018, the murder of a woman is assumed to be a femicide, unless proven otherwise (ORMUSA).²³

Honduras

- Five municipalities created committees of violence prevention. The committee in Apacilagua municipality was strengthened (CDH).²⁴
- In Namasigüe municipality, the youth network succeeded in its campaign for the mayor's office to fund a centre for juvenile offenders (CDH).²⁵
- Municipal authorities approved two youth municipal policies, which include violence prevention (CDH).²⁶
- A Regional Observatory of Violence has been set up and provides strategic data to advocate violence prevention policies to local, regional and national authorities (CDH).²⁷
- A union leader receiving death threats obtained government protection (CDH).²⁸
- The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Frost, was informed about women, post-electoral and company mining-related violence during his 2017 visit (CDH).²⁹
- In 2017, several municipal offices of women were involved in developing their 2018 plans, including funds for women survivors of violence.³⁰
- In Santa Ana de Yusguare municipality, advocacy by the women's network has resulted in the announcement of a centre for women's protection, but funding still has to be provided (CDH).³¹

Lessons learned

Christian Aid Central America and its partners take a diversified approach to reducing violence, with several strategies tailored to the type of violence tackled. This is important, since gang violence does not operate in the same way as gender-based violence.

Much of the progress we demonstrate in this case study shows changes in policy and knowledge about violence, but less about whether violence has reduced for the targeted groups. It is hard to prove whether the theories of change lead to a reduction in violence. In such challenging contexts, achieving a reduction in violence is a long-term process. However, investing in stronger monitoring and evaluation in order to better document impact is important.

Another area for reflection is displacement and migration. This continues to be a key issue in Central America and strongly relates to levels of violence and a lack of opportunities.³² Any attempt to address violence is affected by this issue and more needs to be made by donors and non-governmental organisations to address migration and economic opportunities.

Central America shows how high levels of violence do not only happen in countries at war. Violence continues to be high in the region several decades after conflict ended and is higher than in some countries with active conflicts. This case study challenges the division between conflict and post-conflict, because it shows many of the structural causes of violence during conflict, such as the exclusion of youth and lack of access to employment, continue in the post-conflict period.

The Central America case study also shows interesting relationships between violence and poverty. On the one hand, excluded and poor areas tend to be more violent. On the other hand, violence creates more poverty, for instance with the migration of young people because of violence or the additional burden put on women to collect food and water due to the withdrawal of natural resources. These links are worth exploring further.

Christian Aid's work in the region will continue to seek to address these structural issues and dynamics of poverty and violence.

'Something quite positive about Christian Aid is that the processes are long, of four and five years. That allows us to deepen into changes, particularly with community work. We cannot work on empowerment with projects of one or one and a half years'

FESPAD, El Salvador

Endnotes

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- Christian Aid Central America also works in Nicaragua.
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Cover: Christian Aid's partner Caja Lúdica supports the Young People for Life group in Guatemala City. The group organises art and play activities for children and young people in deprived neighbourhoods where gangs, crime and violence are a part of everyday life
Photographs: Cover, p3, p4, p6: Christian Aid.

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