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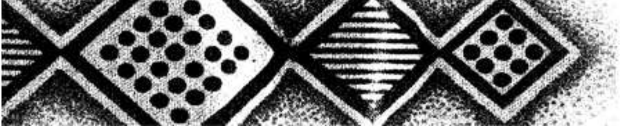

BRIEFINGS

GROWING THE GRASSROOTS OR BACKING BANDITS? DILEMMAS OF DONOR SUPPORT FOR HAITI'S (UN) CIVIL SOCIETY

MORITZ SCHUBERTH

Keywords: Haiti, peacebuilding, civil society, urban violence, gangs, non-state armed groups, MINUSTAH, USAID, Viva Rio

Introduction

The vast amount of literature emerging on the 'local turn' in peacebuilding has hitherto largely ignored one important dilemma donors may face when working with allegedly more locally accepted grassroots initiatives: while the latter are seen as indispensable actors that play important roles within their community, they might also reveal their (un)civil criminal dimension and start to prey on the supposed beneficiaries of peacebuilding and development programmes. This is exactly what I witnessed in Haiti during six months of fieldwork in Port-au-Prince in 2013. Based on semi-structured interviews and overt observation in Cité Soleil — often referred to as the most destitute slum in the Americas — my research investigates the different strategies that international actors take vis-à-vis community-based armed groups.[1] While these groups are seen as legitimate civil society organisations by some donors, and as dangerous armed gangs by others, my research reveals that these two categorisations are not mutually exclusive.

Yet, despite or precisely because of their Janus-faced nature, it is imperative for donors dealing with these groups to act in concert with one another. Failure to achieve this could lead to situations where one donor bankrolls the very group that threatens the safety of aid workers and the local population alike. Indeed, after the ouster of President Aristide in 2004, NGO staff were among the victims targeted by urban armed groups who presented themselves as part of Haiti's pro-democracy movement, but were simultaneously working on behalf of kidnapping rings.[2] The dilemmas of donor support for gangs posing as civil society are not limited to Haiti, however; similar groups are equally prevalent in other countries such as Kenya (Schuberth 2014). Thus, a closer look at the Haitian case allows lessons to be drawn for comparable settings.

Haiti remains by far the poorest country in the western hemisphere, as many a study points out (Dupuy 2007, 51). Because of its tumultuous political history and low development indicators, the country has been a major recipient of international assistance and subject to no fewer than seven UN missions since the early 1990s. However, external actors are regularly criticised for exacerbating rather than relieving Haiti's problems. In 2015 a number of allegations concerning favouritism and squandering of resources were levelled against major donors in Haiti, including the American Red Cross,

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the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Clinton Foundation (Glencorse & Ranjbar 2015). Such instances of aid mismanagement are all the more disastrous in contexts like Haiti where the government wields limited authority to regulate donors and to hold them accountable (Holly 2011).

International Actors and Community-based Armed Groups

For decades, residents of the most notorious Haitian slums, such as Martissant, Bel Air and Cité Soleil, have suffered under the use of non-state armed groups by political patrons, from the infamous *Tonton Macoutes* during the rule of the Duvaliers, to the *attacheés* under Raoul Cédras (Trouillot 1990). Yet, the most infamous example of the instrumentalisation of urban armed groups occurred during Jean-Bertrand Aristide's second presidency from 2001 to 2004 (Fleurimond 2009). In an unsuccessful attempt to avoid his second ouster in 2004, Aristide tried to consolidate his rule by expanding his clientelistic network — the *baz* — while arming their criminal wing — the *chimères* — as a powerful irregular force to silence the opposition (Dupuy 2007).

The resulting community-based armed groups (CBAGs) [3] are today often referred to as gangs, but observers disagree whether they should be framed as a politico-social movement (Hallward 2007) or as hardened criminals (v2007). This is due to the hybrid character of Haiti's CBAGs, which act simultaneously as neighbourhood vigilantes, community leaders, criminal gangs, and political militias. Hence, as illustrated in Figure 1, they serve political and criminal purposes for their sponsors, fulfil socio-economic functions for their members, pose as local civil society organisations to attract funds from donors, and protect their own communities as much as they prey upon them (Kolbe 2013; Schuberth 2015b). In the end, CBAGs in Haiti are the product of both greed and structural grievances, including skyrocketing inequality, historical injustice, fragile state institutions, and the absence of the rule of law.

While an estimated 75% of the country's population live below the poverty line, more than half of all Haitians live in extreme poverty (UN 2011). But even in this unfavourable environment, neighbourhoods in which CBAGs are found are particularly worse off. According to a survey of residents in Cité Soleil, 83% report being unemployed and 82% say they would

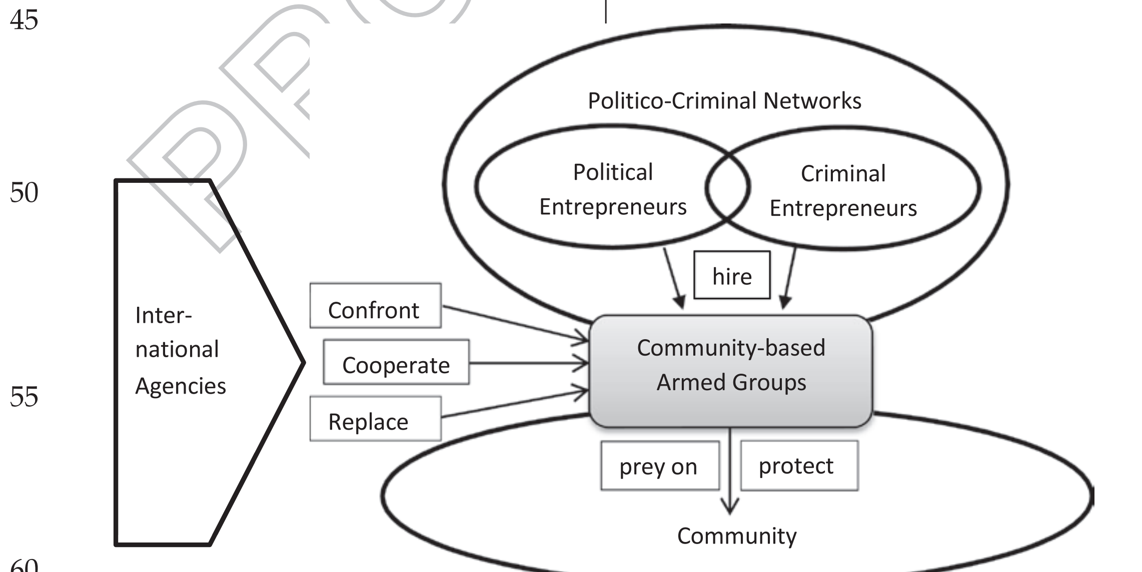

Figure 1: Functions and Relations of CBAGs

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not earn 'enough money to feed their households' (Marcelin 2011, 25). Given these bleak living conditions, the range of options available to poor urban youth is limited and gang members can be seen as violent entrepreneurs who are seeking to improve their limited life chances.

Equally multidimensional are international actors intervening in Haiti, as well as their approaches vis-à-vis CBAGs. While only a few programmes are explicitly labelled as peacebuilding — such as the Peacebuilding Intervention by Concern Worldwide and Glencree — they all work towards the common aim of achieving the ill-defined 'liberal peace'. Their means to achieve this end, however, are far from consistent. As can be seen in Figure 1, it is possible to discern three institutional logics which can each be attributed to different organisational subfields of peacebuilding (Barnett et al. 2007, 49): (1) the coercive logic of stabilisation driving security actors as epitomised by military peacekeepers; (2) the cooperative logic of conflict resolution informing development and humanitarian actors — including Concern Worldwide and Viva Rio; and (3) the substitutive logic guiding statebuilding efforts by USAID and MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti).[4]

Although MINUSTAH is conceptualised as an integrated mission and various mechanisms are in place to enhance cooperation and coherence between its military and civilian components, different UN agencies remain divided by conflicting institutional logics which are based on entirely different worldviews. Yet, widely differing perspectives on CBAGs in Haiti can also be found within one and the same organisation. For instance, a US subcontractor managing grants for a major donor with only limited exposure to the communities in question gave a rather idealistic view of CBAGs as respected community organisations headed by notable leaders which 'everyone in the community looks up to'.[5] This interpretation is in stark contrast to that given by a Haitian respondent who had actually implemented projects for the same organisation on the ground, recalling long and rather frightening negotiations about access with gang leaders at night, where having a loaded gun pointed to their head for the entire meeting was the norm rather than the exception.[6]

Different Strategies vis-à-vis Community-based Armed Groups

How have different peacebuilding and development actors managed — or not — to navigate the uncharted territories of Haiti's urban slums? It is almost impossible for external actors to gain safe access to gang-ruled *quartiers populaires* without direct contact with gang leaders; otherwise the security and, indeed, life of aid workers would be put on the line. Hence, implementing agencies often find themselves in situations in which it is extremely difficult to adhere to their own institutional standards or to those of their donors regarding the interaction, or non-interaction, with CBAGs. As a matter of fact, members of staff of a major international agency in Haiti and of a logistics supplier for MINUSTAH told me that their organisations have been simply paying off gang leaders in order to ensure the security of their staff when carrying out projects within the gangs' turf.[7]

Even donors that have established clear rules on how to deal with CBAGs do not always live up to their own policies. A case in point is USAID's Haiti Stabilization Initiative (HSI). Initially it had been reported that HSI 'explicitly avoided the option to "negotiate" directly with so-called gangs and criminal actors, preferring instead to focus on undermining their source of legitimacy' (Muggah 2010, S452). However, I interviewed one former HSI staff member who had directly negotiated with gang leaders, a claim backed by another

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former HSI employee in a subsequent interview.[8] To make matters worse, different sources confirmed that gang members were involved in the selection of beneficiaries for cash-for-work projects, which enabled them to favour their own family members, while other community members had to pay in cash or sex for a place on the list.[9] This strengthened gang members to the point that Haitians started to complain that 'you have to be a gang member to get a job as supervisor'.[10] In order to avoid such incidents of donor-driven exploitation, donors must make sure that their rules are strictly adhered to by implementing agencies.

In contrast to HSI, the Brazilian NGO Viva Rio works with liaisons who 'speak several languages' — that of the gangs as well as that of the donors, as its director Rubem César Fernandes explained it to me.[11] Perhaps in part because of the access that their language ability provides, Viva Rio has thus been able to establish itself as an indispensable intermediary in the Bel Air neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, negotiating between international agencies and Haitian politicians with resources at their disposal on the one side, and local groups who can grant access and credibility on the other side. While still running the risk of bypassing the state and further strengthening certain illiberal local actors, relying on such gatekeepers whose behaviour can be at least partly monitored by implementing agencies is perhaps the least bad option; it certainly is preferable to paying off the next best bandit who demands 'protection fees'.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, the example of USAID's HSI shows that even when donors formulate clear guidelines not to support criminals, these are bound to be ignored by implementing agencies that do not properly understand the local power dynamics. Viva Rio's use of liaisons, by contrast, is itself a precarious balancing act between the constructive and destructive dimensions of Haiti's CBAGs. While the liaisons have to maintain their ties to criminal actors in order to fulfil their mandate as 'guards of the crossroads' between donors and gangs, their behaviour is easier to control than that of moonlighting protection rackets and their vulnerability to financial incentives offered by criminal third parties can be reduced by a regular salary.[12] Positive results in the Bel Air neighbourhood and many years of successful cooperation with the same liaisons strengthen the impression that this approach is working better than ad hoc payments to gang leaders (Moestue & Muggah 2009).

Donors should closely monitor how projects are implemented and beneficiaries are chosen. This especially applies to short-term quick impact projects, which should ideally be supplanted by more sustainable long-term programmes. Sexual exploitation in exchange for aid is a prevalent malpractice not only among gang members posing as civil society actors, but also with regard to staff of international agencies operating in Haiti, as evidenced by repeated accusations of this nature against MINUSTAH troops (UN OIOS 2015). For donors to reduce the risks of sexual exploitation in cash-for-work schemes, women-led NGOs such as MOIFECS in Cité Soleil should be responsible for the recruitment of female workers and only women should be assigned as team leaders. Moreover, all beneficiaries of quick impact projects and all peacekeepers should receive training on anti-corruption and exploitation on the work site.[13]

Most importantly, it is imperative for donors to ensure that everyone involved in implementing projects firmly sticks to the rule not to simply pay off bandits to gain access to their turf. However, this guideline poses a serious moral dilemma: while the principle of do-no-harm forbids the implementation of projects that risk

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exacerbating exploitation and criminal violence by financing bandits, is abandoning the most vulnerable parts of the population not a type of harm as well? Alternatively, donors could try to enter the strongholds of CBAGs with representatives of what could be described as Haiti's 'genuine' civil society, as these actors often command considerable authority even vis-à-vis criminal groups. While it is difficult for external actors to distinguish between Haiti's 'civil' and 'uncivil' society, working only with NGOs registered with the Ministry of Planification could be a first step in this direction.[14]

A quite different approach could be to include CBAGs in community platforms as representatives of one section among many others — such as business, education, health, culture, and religion. By doing so, one could give gang leaders the impression that the rule they exercise over their territory is respected, while they are actually sidelined by the other actors that dominate decision-making within the platforms.[15] Ultimately any recommendation will come with trade-offs. Indeed, in the long run, only substitutive approaches — such as MINUSTAH's Community Violence Reduction initiative and efforts to reform the justice system, which is seen by many as unjust, corrupt, and useless (Marcelin 2011, 22f) — can weaken the grip of gangs, strengthen the community, and provide alternatives to former gang members who are willing to change.

MORITZ SCHUBERTH is a PhD candidate in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His research focuses on non-state armed groups, peacebuilding, statebuilding, and urban violence. He is the author of recent articles in *Africa Spectrum*, *Conflict, Security & Development*, and *Contemporary Security Policy*.

Disclosure Statement

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Endnotes

[1] I conducted 35 interviews between June and December 2013 with community leaders, religious leaders, current and former gang members, local NGOs, CSOs, peace initiative workers and a number of international agencies working in communities with gang presence. In order to increase the validity of the research, I triangulated the data by carrying out overt observation within informal settlements in Port-au-Prince between June and December 2013.

[2] Author interview, Pétion-Ville, October 2013.

[3] For a discussion of the concept of community-based armed groups, see Schuberth (2015a).

[4] The substitutive logic entails making CBAGs obsolete by replacing the different functions they fulfil, for instance by reforming the security sector so that communities do not have to rely on vigilantes, or by offering alternative means of income for gang members.

[5] Author interview, Pétion-Ville, September 2013.

[6] Author interview, Port-au-Prince, November 2013.

[7] Author interviews, Haiti, November and December 2013.

[8] Author interviews with HSI staff, Port-au-Prince, October and November 2013.

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[9] Author interviews, Haiti, September to November 2013.

[10] Author interview with Haitian development worker, Port-au-Prince, November 2013.

[11] Author interview, Pétion-Ville, November 2013.

[12] Author interview, Pétion-Ville, November 2013.

[13] Author interview with Monitoring and Evaluation consultant, Pétion-Ville, October 2013.

[14] Author interview with Community Violence Reduction (CVR) section of MINUSTAH, Port-au-Prince, October 2013.

[15] Author interviews, Haiti, September to November 2013.

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