

YOUNG GUNS

Children in organised armed violence

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The problem of gangs is not new to South Africa. This is one of the reasons that Cape Town has been included in an innovative international study that has identified the phenomenon of 'children in organised armed violence'. Given the youthfulness of South Africa's population, as well as levels of poverty and unemployment, the risk factors for children's involvement in armed gangs as recorded by the international study should serve as an early warning to us.

In 2003/04 the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) collaborated in a ten-country study to explore the phenomenon of children's involvement in organised armed violence.¹ The study explored the experiences of the ten countries and described a phenomenon that had, up to that time, not been identified as a specific problem within the international human right arena – that of children in organised armed violence (COAV). In South Africa, the study focused on gangs in the Cape Town area.

This article describes some of the key findings of the ten-country study, as analysed by Dowdney.² This is followed by a description of the planned follow-up initiative, the COAV Cities project, and a discussion of some of the implications of the new project for South Africa, and for gang-related work in Cape Town.

Who are 'children in organised armed violence'?

The idea of 'children in organised armed violence' is a relatively new one, and the phrase was coined to describe the situation demonstrated in earlier work undertaken by Brazilian NGO, Viva Rio, in Rio de Janeiro.³ For the purposes of the ten-country study, which sought to describe and analyse the phenomenon in more depth, the term was intended to describe "children and youth employed or otherwise participating in organised armed violence where there are elements of a command structure and power over territory, local population or resources".⁴

The ten-country study⁵

The ten countries that were examined in the study were:

- Brazil (drug factions operating in poor communities known as *favelas*);
- Colombia (criminal groups known as *bandas delincuentes* that relate to larger paramilitary organisations, operating in poor communities);
- Ecuador (local urban youth gangs called *pandillas*, and organised national youth gangs known as *naciones*);
- El Salvador and Honduras (organised youth gangs known as *maras* and *pandillas*);
- Jamaica (area gangs and corner gangs);
- Nigeria (armed vigilante groups and ethnic militias);
- the Philippines (civilian vigilante groups);
- South Africa (street gangs); and
- the United States of America (institutionalised street gangs).

The discussion that follows describes the findings of the ten-country study, with a particular focus on the children who became involved in organised armed groups.

Features of the organised armed groups

The first part of the study describes the nature, structure and history of the identified armed groups. An interesting fact is that in eight of the ten countries studied, the armed groups did not have

criminal origins, although all were involved in criminal activities at the time of the research. Groups initially formed around a range of purposes, including the protection of neighbourhoods, and even the development of the community.

The study argues that external factors prompted the shift of these groups towards becoming violent (or more violent), and towards criminal activities. The two primary external factors identified by the study were illicit drugs and access to firearms.

All the armed groups studied were involved in informal and illicit economies, with crime being the most common form of economic gain. Offences such as armed robberies, robbery, car theft and kidnapping were cited. Nine of the ten groups were involved in the drug trade. In two cases armed groups extorted protection money from community residents. In two countries (Colombia and South Africa), armed groups engaged in or controlled legal business interests. In five cases (Brazil, Colombia, Nigeria, South Africa⁶ and Ecuador), armed groups paid members fixed salaries, primarily for armed services.

All of the groups studied were involved in armed violence. In eight of the countries, this related to territorial disputes with rival groups, and in seven countries it related to rivalry with opposing groups. In five of the countries armed groups participated in vigilantism and/or carrying out executions. Armed groups in four countries participated in armed confrontation with state forces.

Children in organised armed groups⁷

The children in the armed groups studied were often from single-parent families, with many experiencing domestic violence and overcrowded living conditions. Many children had dropped out of school either immediately before or after joining their respective armed groups, citing poverty - they could not pay school fees or they dropped out of school in order to work. In general, these children considered it unlikely that schooling would lead to a job.

Children often became members of armed groups at a relatively young age (on average 13 years and six months), and it was also found that the age of recruitment to these armed groups was decreasing. The process of 'recruitment' into armed groups was demonstrated to be a gradual process, rather than an

event. This was characterised by children's initial exposure to these groups in their neighbourhoods, and their introduction to the group, most often by a family member or friend.

The research also explored with children the question of why they join armed groups. The responses received included poverty, access to consumer goods, lack of alternatives, access to guns, status and girls, a preference for spending time on the street with others in the armed groups, thereby accessing friendship and surrogate families, and revenge.

The study found that children gained access to arms at a very young age (on attaining full membership of the armed group), on average at 13½ years. In some cases, children were provided with training in the use of arms. The children who became active in gangs were reported to routinely witness armed violence and death, while most of the children reported having been shot at or actually hit by gunfire. Children from all the countries that were examined reported that they shoot at and murder other people.

Children across the ten countries indicated that leaving their armed group could be a dangerous undertaking, and might involve a number of complications - but is possible if done in the correct manner.

In assessing trends in government responses to children's involvement in organised armed groups, the study found that, in most of the countries examined, governments used repressive approaches to deal with children in these groups.

The COAV Cities Project: Implications for South Africa

In 2005, Brazilian NGO, Viva Rio, once again requested the ISS to collaborate on a project, this time to follow up on the ten-country study, and initiate discussions with local stakeholders to develop solutions to the problem of children in organised armed violence.

The COAV Cities project aims to engage government representatives, researchers, practitioners and children in five cities in the development of policy recommendations for more effective responses to children's engagement in organised armed violence, and includes Cape Town, Medellin (Colombia), New

York City (United States), Niteroi (Brazil) and Zacatecoluca (El Salvador).

For these discussions to have any meaning for Cape Town, and South Africa more generally, the following are some of the key issues that immediately present themselves.

Gangs in Cape Town: More questions than answers

Recent information about the nature, extent and effects of gangs is limited, notwithstanding some new information generated by the ten-country study. While some efforts were made in the past to estimate numbers and characterise the nature of 'gangs' and their effects on the communities in which they operate, these issues remain largely elusive, which encourages further mystification rather than offering illumination.

Standing has demonstrated that there is little evidence to support current views about gangs (i.e. that they are clearly definable social entities, with identifiable membership, that they are becoming more organised and sophisticated, etc.), yet much of the gang policy that has been developed thus far is based on these ideas.⁸

It is also problematic for South Africa that discussions relating to organised armed groups have been focused on Coloured gangs of the Cape Flats. Recent research and anecdotal evidence indicate that there are different levels of criminal organisation in other parts of the country, and that children are being engaged in the activities of these criminal groups.⁹ While some of the activities of such groups may be examined under the rubric of organised criminal 'syndicates', little is known about the lower levels of organised criminal activity, and children's engagement in this. More information on these issues could assist the development of new strategies to respond to the problem.

Targeted interventions

While much of the discussion in recent years has been in response to the phenomenon of gangs themselves, the COAV Cities project in Cape Town will be expressly about reducing children's involvement in gangs, and reducing the impact of such groups on the lives of children. While these objectives are obviously not mutually exclusive, the

reduction of children's engagement in gangs is a new approach to the issue.

It may well be asked why this strategy has not been adopted previously. Could it be that there is a strong belief that little could be gained from anything but the elimination of armed groups? While this is a question of strategy and targeting, it also raises some useful questions as to the location of intervention efforts. A focus on reducing children's engagement in gangs may be located in the realm of social and environmental programmes, rather than in the criminal justice system.

Gangs and children's rights

This issue has received little attention from the child rights sector, both locally and internationally. While child rights advocates in South Africa have a long history of concern for children that come into conflict with the law, little attention has been given to the existence of organised groups that may recruit children for use in criminal enterprise; and the impact on such children. This weakness is demonstrated by the fact that there is little language within the child rights sector to engage with this phenomenon, with neither 'child offending' nor 'child soldiers' offering an adequate description.

The COAV Cities project may offer an opportunity for the child rights establishment internationally to engage with this particular problem. Recent work in South Africa, done by the Community Law Centre on behalf of the International Labour Organisation and the Department of Labour on children being used by adults to commit crime, may also have opened the door to a far deeper engagement with children's experiences of organised forms of crime and violence.

Most importantly, the findings of the ten-country study, Standing's research,¹⁰ and that of Frank and Muntingh,¹¹ raise the thorny issue of the choice that children make in becoming involved with armed groups. Such choices indicate that the alternatives available to them may be limited, unattractive, or unresponsive to their specific needs, and it is these that require further examination.

Strategies for responding: Options for SA

South Africa obviously needs to look at the question of children in organised armed violence both in terms

of policies and programmes. While the policy arena has, for some years, been dominated by the development of the Child Justice Bill, children's rights advocates fear that key provisions in the Bill that could have impacted on this group of children have been removed during the process of deliberations in the Justice Portfolio Committee.

This relates particularly to situations where children aged 16 and 17, who are accused of serious offences, may not have access to diversion and alternative sentences. Under these circumstances, the revised Bill (which has not been made available since these deliberations in July 2003) would be unlikely to respond to the particular needs of these children, and render hard-won law reform efforts only partially of service to children.¹²

Existing programmes for children who may be engaged in gangs are also quite limited, with many more diversion than prevention programmes. Many innovative programme interventions have been specifically developed for children and youth that have been engaged in violence (such as the National Peace Accord Trust's Ecotherapy) and some organisations have developed considerable expertise and models of practice for working with violent young people (such as Khulisa). But these programmes represent only a small fraction of the range of programmes that are required. Most importantly, the programmes most required to help children exit gangs and reintegrate back into homes and neighbourhoods, do not exist.

In terms of prevention, school-based programmes seem to offer the greatest potential, yet there has been little effort to define the best implementation strategies in this context. While 'school safety' interventions have abounded, both nationally and in the Western Cape, few have grappled with the question of how schools may contribute to reducing the vulnerability of children to organised armed groups.

Addressing state failure and/or collusion

Standing has noted that there is considerable evidence to support the contention that corruption, and the collusion of state functionaries with gangs, may promote their continued existence.¹³ However, the ten-country study also alerts us to the failure of

other government services, such as those related to the social support of children and families. This is not only about the failure to make services accessible to people, but also about the failure of services to specifically orientate themselves to the needs of the particular children, families and others.

Conclusion

The COAV Cities project, which follows on from the ten-country study discussed above, offers a significant opportunity to engage in discussion and debate relating to children's involvement in gangs and in other forms of organised armed groups. As such, it offers the unique opportunity to bring together a range of perspectives including children's rights, child labour, urban renewal, child justice, organised crime and gangs, etc.

Given the youthfulness of South Africa's population, and current trends relating to poverty and unemployment, the risk factors for children's involvement in organised armed groups as recorded by the ten-country study should serve as a resounding early warning to us.

Endnotes

- 1 L Dowdney (ed), *Neither War nor Peace. International Comparisons of Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence*, ISER/IANSA/Viva Rio, 2004.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 LT Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade: A Case Study of Organised Armed Violence in Rio de Janeiro*, Viva Rio/ISER, Rio de Janeiro, 2003.
- 4 L Dowdney, 2004, op cit, p 15.
- 5 The full study may be accessed at <<http://www.coav.org.br>>
- 6 Payment for services was noted to take place during times of 'war' with rival gangs, and where hit men were paid a fixed monthly salary of R1,000.00.
- 7 It should be noted that the analysis provided is based on a relatively small sample (i.e. 120, 111 boys and 9 girls).
- 8 A Standing, *The Threat of Gangs and Anti-Gangs Policy*, *Occasional Paper 116*, Institute for Security Studies, August 2005.
- 9 C Frank and L Muntingh, *Designing pilots to address a priority area of child work activities in South Africa: Children Used by Adults to Commit Crime (CUBAC) Child Consultation Research*, International Labour Organisation, 2005.
- 10 Standing, op cit.
- 11 Frank and Muntingh, op cit.
- 12 J Gallinetti, Children's Rights Project, Community Law Centre – personal communication, 12 December 2005.
- 13 A Standing, *Reconceptualising Organised Crime*, *African Security Review*, 12 (2), 2003.