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Reducing armed violence in the Caribbean: Challenges to civil society

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With an annual murder rate of 30 per 100,000 inhabitants, the Caribbean in the past decade has experienced sharply rising levels of violence, marked by a fairly high and steadily increasing incidence of gun use (UNODC & World Bank 2007). The levels of violence vary widely among and within countries, but for all countries human, social, and economic development have been negatively affected.

As the international donor community and governments implement policies and programs to combat the problem, they are forging partnerships with civil society.¹ Caribbean civil society is taking on an increasing variety of tasks, including

- conducting community-based diagnoses of the problem,
- mobilizing community participation,
- delivering violence prevention services,
- evaluating interventions to reduce violence,
- serving as intermediaries or facilitators between affected communities and the government, and
- advocating policies and programs for violence prevention.

However, civil society faces several challenges.

Confronting violence

A major challenge is the complex nature of violence itself. Violence persists in many societies because it is mostly a “learned behaviour” transmitted across generations through abusive family situations (Buvinić, Alda & Lamas 2005, p. 4). Yet the region’s principal security threats are transnational, linked to international crimes of trafficking illicit drugs and guns. The Caribbean is a transit point between drug producer countries to the south and consumer countries to the north. Drugs head north in exchange for the cash and guns that flow south. However, research has shown that no single factor accounts for the level of armed violence in the region.

Reliable information on the extent of violence is not always available or freely divulged. The dependence of many Caribbean economies on tourism creates an interest in understating or concealing such information. Particularly noteworthy—although the situation is changing—is the lack of information on evidence-based evaluations of interventions to reduce and prevent violence so that current practice can inform future policy and programs.

Because armed violence has multiple and interrelated causes, attempts to address the problem require cross-sectoral approaches that bring together government (police, justice, education, health, and social services), civil society, the private sector, and affected communities. But coordination is difficult.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are also concerned that public security laws and policies do not always comply with state obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law. Security operations have at times led to serious human rights violations such as torture, extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detention, and unfair trials (AI 2009, p. 6).

Relations between civil society and government

Some regional institutions, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), have mechanisms to allow civil society participation in their activities. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has passed a Charter of Civil Society for the Caribbean Community. At the national level, however, wider acceptance and regularization of civil society's role in influencing national policymaking and debate have some way to go.

In most countries, the architecture for **continuous** engagement between government and civil society is still being developed. The strengthening of civil society participation was among the recommendations to come from the Caribbean Sub Regional Civil Society Forum in Preparation for the Fifth Summit of the Americas held on October 30-31, 2008 in Port of Spain (OAS 2008):

The Declaration should include a commitment by governments to institutionalize interactive civil society participation in the design, development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of regional and national policies, programmes and projects; support civil society organizations and their activities through the establishment of a regional agency which would provide funding and thus facilitate their effective partnering with governments in realizing the goals set out in the Declaration and related documents.

Government–civil society collaboration requires a climate of cooperation, institutionalization of civil society participation, and a framework of supportive legal and regulatory structures.

Many CSOs are struggling for legitimacy. Between governments and civil society organizations, mutual respect and trust are still being developed. Hazel Brown, President of the Network of Non Governmental Organisations, commented (Bethel 2009) that the most challenging aspect of the preparation for the Fifth Summit of the Americas had been “getting the national secretariat which is appointed by the Government and the office of the Prime Minister to recognise and value the contribution that the civil society can make.” She said,

We have to find a way to make them understand, recognise and value us as civil society. In particular, their attempt to control every aspect of the preparations including setting the agenda.... Somehow they got it into their heads that this was a forum for civil society and not of civil society.

Citizens fear for personal safety

Widespread fear for personal safety in the Caribbean presents a challenge for civil society in raising awareness, changing attitudes, and mobilizing communities affected by violence to be involved in developing and implementing strategies to address the problem.

“Impose a curfew on yourself and get home by 8 pm, fasten the burglar-proof doors and windows and you are likely to avoid becoming a murder statistic” (*Trinidad & Tobago Guardian* 2009). This is the view of the majority of respondents to a poll conducted by the ANSA McAL Psychological Research Centre at the University of the West Indies on how crime was affecting their lives in Trinidad and Tobago. Of those surveyed, 90 per cent had little faith in the government’s ability to solve the crime problem.

Similar findings are underscored in other studies. In parts of urban Jamaica, residents are afraid to leave their homes and interact less often with friends and family who live elsewhere. Survey data from the Dominican Republic and Haiti show that people avoid activities and locations that they believe expose them to a high risk of criminal victimization (UNODC & World Bank 2007, p. 44).

Civil society funding and professionalization

Many civil society organizations in the region are struggling for resources but restrictive laws limit their ability to raise funds. One of the principal blocks to the development of transnational philanthropy from such sources as private and corporate foundations and wealthy individuals in the Caribbean Diasporas is the lack of an enabling legal environment for CSOs and other possible recipients. For example, measures that make individual and corporate donations to CSOs tax deductible for donors are not in place. A review of the existing legislation is needed, some of which is quite modern (e.g., in Barbados) and some of which is based principally on colonial law (*The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 2001).

A closely related challenge is the professionalization of civil society, particularly NGOs. The pressure for CSOs to become more professional will increase as they enter into working partnerships with government and international agencies to develop and implement programs to reduce and prevent armed violence.

A diverse subregion

Finally, the geographical, cultural, and political diversity of the Caribbean—dispersed islands and coastal states including sovereign states, overseas departments, and dependent territories with three prevailing linguistic groups (English, French, and Spanish)—is in itself a challenge for governments and civil society.

Research has shown that the active participation of communities and civil society is critical in reducing and preventing armed violence. But under the circumstances described, providing “safe spaces” for citizens to talk together without fear for their personal safety or of reprisal from violent elements in the community is difficult. Further, opportunities for civil society organizations from across the region to meet, share knowledge and ideas, network, and come to a

common understanding are unlikely to happen unless there is external support from governments or international institutions.

Note

1. Civil society can be seen as the “third sector,” distinct from government and business, that gives a voice to various groups in society and enriches public participation in democracies. (See Civil Society International at <http://www.civilsocietyinternational.org/whatisCS.htm>.) Civil society includes nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), registered charities, professional associations, labour and trade unions, faith-based groups, citizen advocacy organizations, community groups, women's organizations, professional associations, and self-help groups.

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