

Chronic violence and non-conventional armed actors: a systemic approach

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■ Executive summary

The phenomenon of “non-conventional armed violence, which refers to the hybrid forms of organised violence that emerge outside or alongside traditional armed conflict, is best understood through a more systemic understanding of violence. Many groups and individuals identified as part of the “non-conventional” phenomenon form part of a larger, self-reproducing system of chronic violence. These systems are driven by a complex combination of structural factors and behaviours, cultures, and practices that undermine human development in predictable ways. In short, chronic violence underpins the spread of the hybrid armed groups and factions that are now the focus of international attention in various regions.

As a result, policymakers and practitioners must move beyond the current emphasis on normative approaches that are focused narrowly on security and justice to a broader array of strategies rooted in an understanding of the complex social forces that drive these patterns of behaviour. This requires a shift from single-issue approaches to more systemic multifocal processes; transcending the objective of violence reduction to focus on helping affected communities and groups to “thrive”; combining national-level top-down approaches with micro-level bottom-up strategies; and ensuring that the destructive dynamics of trauma are fully integrated into analysis and programming.

Introduction

New forms of violence that are distinct from those associated with traditional armed conflict have emerged as a major global concern in recent years. International donors and agencies are spending increasing resources on intervening in a broad spectrum of violence-related threats around the world, ranging from the “non-conventional armed violence” associated with gangs, youth, and the illicit economy to the everyday violence embedded in communities and family life. However, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars understand the nature of the problem in different ways and come to starkly different conclusions as to both its severity and what should be done about it.

Given the increasing hybridity among criminal, political and social forms of violence, this report proposes an integrated conceptual framework for understanding these diverse forms of insecurity. This framework is based on the challenges posed by “chronic violence” to the full arc of human development – from the maternal-infant bond to broader social behaviour, the practice of citizenship, the evolution of the state, and institutions and political processes from the local to the international level.

In contexts of chronic violence – where most non-conventional armed violence is currently concentrated – human development is transformed in myriad ways. Critical among these are, firstly, the impact of high levels of traumatisation on all aspects of individual and collective development and, secondly, the increasing confusion and coexistence between licit and illicit practices, beliefs, institutions and cultures – a socially embedded form of the phenomenon of “corruption”. The report first reviews the diverse ways that violence is currently understood and examines how these categorisations shape opinions about the scope of violence, the problem of non-conventional armed actors and related challenges. It then presents a framework for understanding how chronic violence affects human development and outlines the implications of this for public policy.

What is the “violence” that we seek to address?

Until recent decades, violence as a concern for governments and the international community was chiefly focused on that generated by formal interstate or intra-state armed conflict. The 1994 *Human Development Report* of the United

Nations Development Programme (UNDP) offered an early pronouncement as to the concept of human security that transcended narrowly defined military concerns. It argued that to address the challenge of global insecurity, it was imperative to confront the underlying realities of poverty, inequality, violence and development¹ (UNDP, 1994: 3-5). The 2002 *World Report on Violence and Health* of the World Health Organisation (WHO) made a further advance by defining “violence” in a way that combined its various forms: political and personal, structural and symbolic, external and self-directed:

Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation (WHO, 2002: 2).

Transcending the lay notion of violence as injurious behaviour involving physical force, this definition contains several critical ideas:

- Violence is essentially a way to exercise power – against oneself or others.
- The internalisation of violence as powerlessness and/or self-destructiveness is as important as its externalisation. Suicides, for example, constitute up to 49% of all violent deaths worldwide (WHO, 2002: 10), while domestic abuse is by far the most pervasive form of violence and is often at the root of the processes that generate non-conventional armed violence.
- Violence does not need to be carried out physically to be effective. Mere threat can be sufficient.
- Deprivation, maldevelopment and psychological harm are forms of violence that are just as important as physical injury or death.

The 2005 UNDP *Human Development Report* carried this approach further, arguing that “we live in an increasingly violent world” and detailing the disproportionate cost of conflict and violence for all aspects of human development, especially in low-income countries (UNDP, 2005: 154). The essential links between between citizen security, human security and human development were reemphasized in the recent *Human Development Report* for Latin America. (UNDP, 2013: 5).

In 2011 the World Bank’s *World Development Report* concluded that at least 25% of the global population lives in conditions of long-term violence, which:

does not fit with the 20th century mold. Interstate war and civil war ... are one quarter of what they were in the 1980s [but] ... [these populations] live in fragile and conflict-affected states or in countries with very high levels of criminal violence [in conditions that] do not fit neatly either into ‘war’ or ‘peace’ or into ‘criminal violence’ or ‘political violence’ (World Bank, 2011: 2).

While the World Bank report focused on these hybrid forms of “organized violence” – a concept not unlike non-conventional armed violence – it viewed this challenge through a larger lens. These new forms of organised violence, it noted, emerge in social conditions that are reproduced via multiple causes, such as widening social inequality, state fragility, economic crises, migration, environmental destruction, aid volatility and criminal violence. As a result, not one of the vulnerable countries studied had met the Millennium Development Goals. Moreover, affected countries and areas face cycles of ongoing and repeated violence in which criminal, political, ideological and other forms of violence are linked to one another. “These repeated cycles of conflict and violence exact costs that last for generations ... holding back development, and affecting young males, women and children disproportionately” (World Bank, 2011: 2-6).

Other analyses, however, assume differing positions as to the significance of contemporary violence. The *Global Peace Index 2013*, for example, measures progress in peace – defined as the absence of violence or conflict, and measured through indicators on domestic and international conflict, militarisation, and a narrow range of social indices such as violent crime, perceptions of crime, homicides, political instability, and the part played by security forces in society. The report concludes that global peace has declined for the past six years (Institute for Economics and Peace 2013: 1-2, 38). The 2013 *Human Security Report*, on the other hand, concludes that “there is reason to believe that the historical decline in violence is both real and substantial”, basing its argument on data from the Uppsala Conflict Database (UCDB) and from cognitive scientist Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011). The UCDB measures three kinds of violence: traditional armed conflict; “one-sided violence” (between a government, state or formally organised armed group against civilians), which is reported to be at historically low levels; and a new category called “non-state armed conflict”, which is growing. This last category overlaps with the notion of “non-conventional armed violence” in that it refers to violence between two or more organised groups, neither of which is the state (Human Security Report Project, 2013: 12).

Pinker (2011) also argues that violence is declining steadily. He credits various causes for this fortuitous trend,

¹ The UNDP 1994 report argued that human security has two aspects: safety from chronic threats, like hunger, disease and repression; and protection from sudden disruptions in the patterns of daily life. “Violent conflict undermines human security in both dimensions. It reinforces poverty and devastates ordinary lives” (UNDP, 2005: 153).

including the emergence of a state monopoly over the legitimate use of force; the role of “commerce as a positive-sum game”; increasing respect for women; rising cosmopolitanism that has expanded human empathy for others different from oneself; and the growing power of reason to control violent impulses. While noting that there are exceptions to these trends in parts of the world, Pinker nevertheless regards these as minor blips amid a robust trend of increasing world peace. Yet if we attend carefully to the multiple drivers of chronic violence described in the present report, it will become apparent that this challenge is much deeper and more entrenched than these more optimistic analysts believe. In fact, the very same “civilizing” processes that Pinker showcases are among the factors that cause chronic violence to reproduce and proliferate in certain areas.

Inconsistent concepts; confused approaches

Inconsistencies in the ways in which policymakers, practitioners and scholars understand violence, as well as narrow “siloeed” approaches that fail to consider fully the conditions that generate and reproduce it, hinder our capacity to assess and address this issue. Terms such as “criminal violence”, “drug violence”, “organised crime” and “non-conventional armed actors”, for example, channel our attention toward lapses in desired legal or moral standards of behaviour, leaving little room to consider the social, cultural, economic and political factors that drive these phenomena.

Narrow sector-based approaches also undermine the effectiveness of most violence intervention strategies. Most “gender violence” and “domestic violence” initiatives, for example, tend to focus primarily on women as victims of men, often remaining silent about the forces that lead men to develop violent forms of behaviour as a form of protest against exclusion (Barker, 2005), as well as the violence suffered by children born and raised in destructive relationships between men and women (UNICEF, 2006). Similarly, programmes focusing on youth violence all too often attend to young people in isolation from their families and community networks, and do so with little understanding of the multiple social forces that shape their behaviour and life options (Adams, 2013; Céspedes & Herz, 2011).

The dichotomy between “victim” and “perpetrator” that is inherent in normative approaches both ignores the social causes of violence and limits our capacity to recognise the ways that the two become confused when people live in long-term conditions of violence. For example, is the young gang member who seeks refuge in a gang after suffering sexual and physical abuse in his family a victim or a perpetrator? What about the members of the citizen security committee who, fed up with the unresponsiveness of local law enforcement and judicial agencies, mobilise to capture and execute a local drug trafficker? As we will see, morally simplistic categories fail to do justice to the

situation where people live in contexts of long-term violence.

The notion that “violence prevention and reduction” will lead to “citizen security,” which informs some international aid efforts, is symptomatic of a further problem. To begin with, the primary focus on stopping violence provides little guidance as to what to construct in its place. The default use of homicide (and sometimes crime) rates as the lead indicator for the severity of the problem is similarly deficient. How might we begin to measure the multiple forms of violence in the WHO definition that cannot be reduced to that single statistic, such as suicides, chronic traumatisation or the experience of deprivation? If we were equipped with more robust indicators that reflect the broader challenge of human security and human development, it would become evident that reducing one category of violence alone – homicides or robberies, for instance – could not reasonably be expected to generate increased citizen security.

Chronic violence and human development: concepts and framework

Addressing these challenges in an effective way requires greater appreciation of the drivers that make violence and illicit trade a “normal” way of life for an increasing portion of the world’s population. Violence, instead of being a linear process of cause and effect, is a self-reproducing, systemic phenomenon driven by the complex interaction between macro- and micro-level processes and human behaviours. The chronic violence and human development framework described below is an effort to enable policymakers and practitioners to address this challenge in a more realistic and systemic way. It also argues that this problem is a long-term challenge, not a crisis that can be resolved in the short or medium term.

First of all, it is essential to clarify a few basic concepts. The WHO’s social and ecological definition of *violence*, provided above, points to its effects on the entire trajectory of human development – from the individual to the community and society at large.

Chronic violence specifies the nature of the contemporary challenge. The World Bank estimates that a quarter of the global population lives in such conditions, although this may be a conservative figure. Slum dwellers alone (one of the iconic populations vulnerable to such violence) are expected to increase from 15% to 25% of the global population by 2030 (UN Habitat, 2006). Chronic violence is measured in terms of three dimensions – intensity, space and time – where:

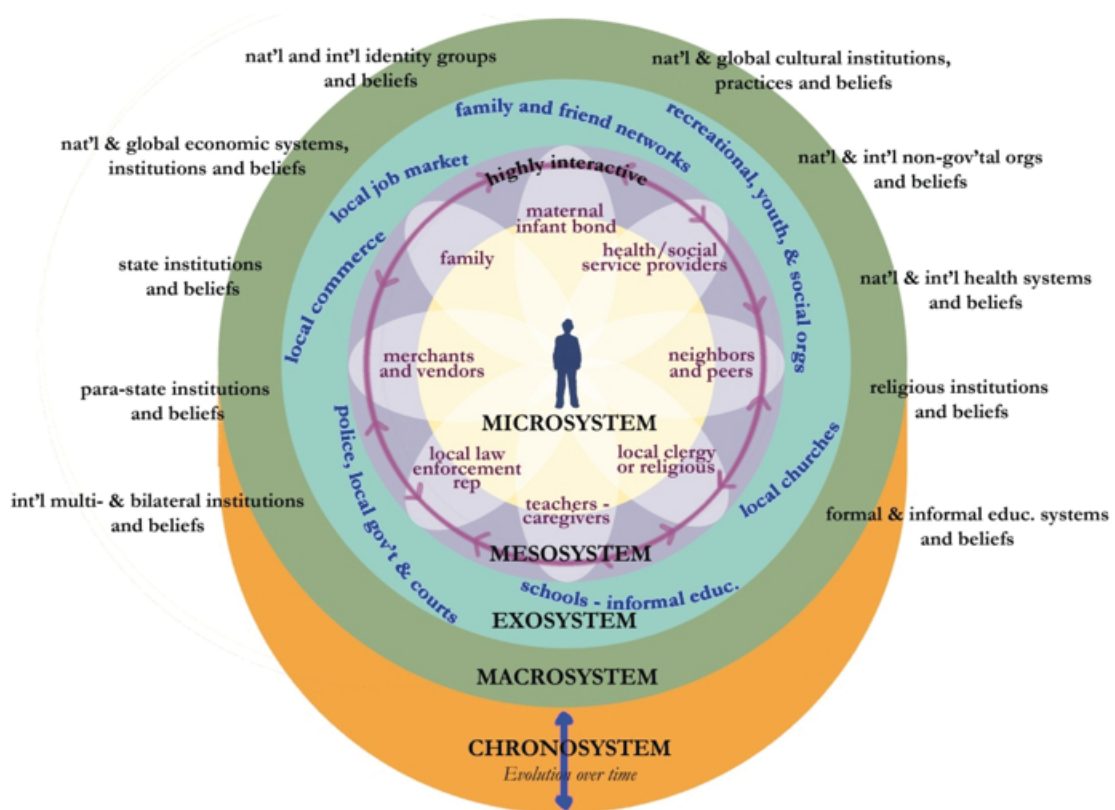
- rates of violent death are at least twice the average for the country income category established by the World Bank;
- high levels of violence continue for at least five years; and
- these occur at high levels in multiple social spaces, such

as the household, neighbourhood and school, contributing to the further reproduction of violence over time (Pearce, 2007).

Human development is a self-contained and multi-tiered social and ecological system, which is depicted in its idealised version in Figure 1. Rooted in the primary relationship between infant and mother, human develop-

ment evolves from the individual in the family context into successively broader sets of social and civic relations and practices, eventually encompassing systems, structures, and cultures from the local to the transnational – all of which are mutually constructive and interactive. This concept, developed by the late social psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, also informs the WHO’s definition of violence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 27-41; WHO, 2002: 12-15).

Figure 1: Ideal ecological system of human development



Trauma, meanwhile, is a biopsychological response that is one of the major consequences of experiences of violence. In scenarios of chronic violence, a large portion of the population is likely to be suffering from chronic traumatisation. Freud characterised trauma as “a breach in the protective barrier against (over)stimulation leading to feelings of overwhelming helplessness ... the urge to escape coupled with the perception of not being able to do so” (Freud in Levine, 1997: 197).

Harboured at a precognitive level of our brain function, traumatic responses are triggered by mechanisms to which our cognitive brains have no conscious access. When something reminds the body of the traumatic event or experience, the emotional and instinctual brain may react as if the real threat is still present, causing alterations in thought processes and behaviour, as well as in physical and emotional health over the lifetime of affected people. The toxic stress associated with trauma, which can result from prolonged and unrelenting situations of extreme poverty, physical or emotional abuse, or family violence, can disrupt the brain architecture and increase the risk of

stress-related physical and mental illness (Betancourt et al., 2014).

Traumatisation in childhood in particular contributes to a higher incidence of lifelong physical and mental illness and destructive behaviour. Left untreated, it affects all aspects of human behaviour, undermines how individuals see themselves in relation to others – including the capacity of parents to raise their children constructively, and the cohesion and functioning of communities – and enables more violent social patterns to take root and become normalised, stimulating further polarisation and conflict (World Bank, 2014: 9-11).

Psychologist David Becker has described the effects on Chileans of the 1973 coup and the repression that followed as an instance of “[e]xtreme traumatisation”, in terms quite consonant with those of chronic violence:

Extreme traumatisation is an individual and collective process that refers to and depends on a given social context; a process that is marked by its intensity,

extremely long duration and the interdependency between the social and the psychological dimensions It [results in] the destruction of the individual, of his sense of belonging to society and of his social activities (Becker, 2004: 5).

A substantive and growing literature argues that trauma needs to be contemplated in all programming that seeks to assist vulnerable populations, from efforts to improve basic processes of child raising, education, and livelihood development to economic development and conflict resolution (World Bank, 2014: 20-36).

Fear is an activated aversive response to threat that provokes both intense negative feelings and strong bodily manifestations. Denoting dread of impending disaster and an intense urge to defend oneself, this emotion has been central to the evolution of mammals and more primitive species. Extreme danger elicits intense fright, provokes the coping response of escape or avoidance, and can have long-lasting consequences, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Fear turns to anxiety when coping attempts fail and the situation becomes uncontrollable (Lewis et al., 2008: 710-11). How we experience fear is influenced both by how the human brain works and how we make sense of our environment as individuals and in society.

In short, fear is a primal, biologically driven response to risk that provokes the escape/avoidance response. While it is a subjective experience, fear is “socially constructed and culturally shared”, and is marked by the need to “find a way to explain, according to the rationality of the situation, the fears experienced”. *Social fear* is the term given to the way our fear drives us to identify a “cause” or “name” for it – in ourselves, in something or someone outside ourselves, or both (Reguillo, 2002: 192ff.).

The drivers of chronic violence

Let us now review both the macro-level factors and the behavioural and cultural adaptations that contribute interactively to the entrenchment and reproduction of chronic violence.

Macro-level and structural causes

While specific factors that may be pertinent to a particular locality must be identified on a case-by-case basis, certain processes tend to appear regularly. These include the experience of “new poverty”, meaning the confluence of rising urbanisation and literacy with stagnating possibilities for economic advancement (Ward, 2004) – a combination that is strongly linked to growing perceptions of extreme social inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009: 22). The enduring weaknesses of many new democracies (Caldeira & Holston, 1999: 693-726) also lead to grave limitations in the legitimacy of states that are often aggravated further by the failures of efforts to strengthen the security sector. These setbacks in security sector reform have been well documented in Mexico and

elsewhere as causes behind the spread of criminal violence (Pearce & McGee, 2011: 7; Guerrero, 2011).

Other significant drivers of chronic violence include the rise of organised crime and illicit trade (Garzón, 2013: 1-3); the enduring legacies of armed conflict and historic state-society tensions; urbanisation policies that have spurred the proliferation of marginalised informal settlements at the edges of cities (Davis, 2012: 74-76); neoliberal forms of economic development that tend to reward the privileged and well-connected (Parfitt, 2013: 1176-79); and the socially destructive effects of natural disasters, which are worsening today in some regions as result of accelerated climate change (IPCC, 2014).

However, we must recognise that these economic and sociopolitical dynamics are only part of the picture. To understand why violence becomes embedded over generations and in some areas more than others, it is also essential to consider the processes operating at the individual, family and community levels, and how these macro- and micro-level processes interact with each other.

Weakened capacity for individual physical, psychological and social development

As psychologist John Bowlby first demonstrated in 1951, the maternal-infant bond is the single most important element in enabling human beings to “thrive”. Secure attachment enables infants to become more successful in all realms of life than their insecurely attached counterparts, enabling them to develop resilience, affection and intimacy, and significantly predicting the capacity for moral development (Bowlby, 1951: 350-73).

Neurobiological studies of parents living in conditions of high stress and fear, on the other hand, show that their ability to nurture children adequately, and above all to empathise with them, becomes blocked. This contributes directly to weakening the maternal-infant bond, creating instead a defensive and hostile engagement between parent and child. As result, children’s capacity to develop genuine emotional attachments is depleted, making them more prone to significant behavioural and relational problems throughout life (Baron-Cohen, 2011: 48-49; Bowlby in Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 133, 156). This finding has been supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control’s studies of adverse childhood experiences, which showed that the more traumatic experiences people suffer in childhood, the more illnesses, mental problems and destructive behaviour they suffer throughout life (Larkin & Records, 2006). In conditions of chronic violence, such traumatisation is a major risk faced by both children and adults. For example, between 40% and 70% of the children surveyed in eight marginal settlements in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, reported family violence to be their greatest problem, with street violence following closely behind. (Duque Martín, 2014: 14-102)

Weakened capacity for constructive social relations

When people live with constant fear and uncertainty, survivalist impulses tend to prevail over more reflective action. “Social silence” conditions the way that people engage with one another – they tend to trust others less and isolate themselves more, seeking safety behind walls, barriers, security gates and guards. As distrust grows, people look for protection in smaller, more reliable “in-groups,” such as churches and gangs, or through the intensification of ethnic or regional identities. One Salvadoran woman expressed this mix of suspicion and passivity as follows:

Learning how to live means only talking about good things, nothing dangerous. It is better not to talk about dangerous things because, in the first instance, you don't know who you are talking to, and another thing is that you can't do anything (Hume, 2008: 71-72).

While “bonding” social capital can strengthen the ties between members of these small groups (as opposed to the bridging social capital that strengthens their ties to “others”), exclusive in-group relations often go in tandem with more tension with “outsiders”. Social relations become more polarised, as shown by increased intolerance to others, scapegoating, and xenophobia, while violence and tolerance of illicit acts become increasingly normalised.

When people are bent on survival, self-protective and rapid decision making and action tend to predominate over longer-term thinking and reflective reasoning. Short-term tactical thinking and action anchored in the bipolarity of “us vs them” enable people to act quickly in emergencies to protect themselves. However, when “emergencies” become everyday life, this kind of thinking and acting become normalised. The ability to work constructively with ambiguity and uncertainty to make more complex long-term decisions and to develop empathetic understanding of others is undermined and weakened.

Along with the rise of survivalist impulses, the experience of being invisible and valueless also grows in highly unequal societies. The psychiatrist James Gilligan, working with young men in U.S. prisons, argues that acts of violence are attempts to ward off feelings of shame or humiliation – which are painful and can even be intolerable and overwhelming – and replace them with their opposite, the feeling of pride (Gilligan, cited in Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009: 133). A related experience is that of “social death”, especially among young men. First identified through observations of young men in Guinea-Bissau, “social death” refers to the trauma young men experience when they find themselves unable to make the transition from adolescence to productive adulthood, symbolised by access to dignified and viable work and the economic autonomy to start a family (Vigh, 2006: 104). Illicit activities and migration become the main strategies to combat the resulting sensations of entrapment and impotence.

While young women can impose their existence in a world in which they feel thrown away by having children, this in turn generates a whole new set of problematic consequences for the next generation. In workshops sponsored by the Inter American Foundation in 2013 with groups living in conditions of chronic violence in several Latin American countries, participants found the concept of “social death” to be particularly powerful in understanding the experiences and impulses of youth in their communities.

Reduced support for human rights, due process and democracy

When vulnerable citizens cannot count on the state to provide them with basic security and legal protection, they respond by taking matters into their own hands. Neighbourhood watch groups or citizen security committees are formed to protect communities – often with the express support of national governments and/or international agencies. However, such groups can soon resort to de facto justice when they find themselves unprotected by state law enforcement and judicial agencies. State absence or weakness also enables illicit actors – often drug traffickers – to move into the gap by assuming parastatal powers and providing badly needed social services (DRC, 2009: 33-34). Analysts who view these illicit actors as primarily motivated by economic motives often overlook the critical social and political significance that they can acquire for vulnerable populations.

Moreover, the sense of vulnerability that citizens feel in these scenarios can fuel increased public opposition to democratic governance, due process and human rights. As Cruz (2006: 241-42) has noted on the basis of Latin American opinion surveys, “support for the break with democracy due to criminal violence is the highest precisely in those countries where violence is a serious problem”. Why, citizens ask, should criminals be accorded human rights and due process when they have no such luxuries? As they perceive it, rights are ephemeral and arbitrary in states that are fragile, perverse or absent. In these conditions people “move in and out of rights” – having rights as adolescents in their home towns, and becoming “rightless” if they join a gang or migrate through Mexico to the U.S. (Burrell, 2010).

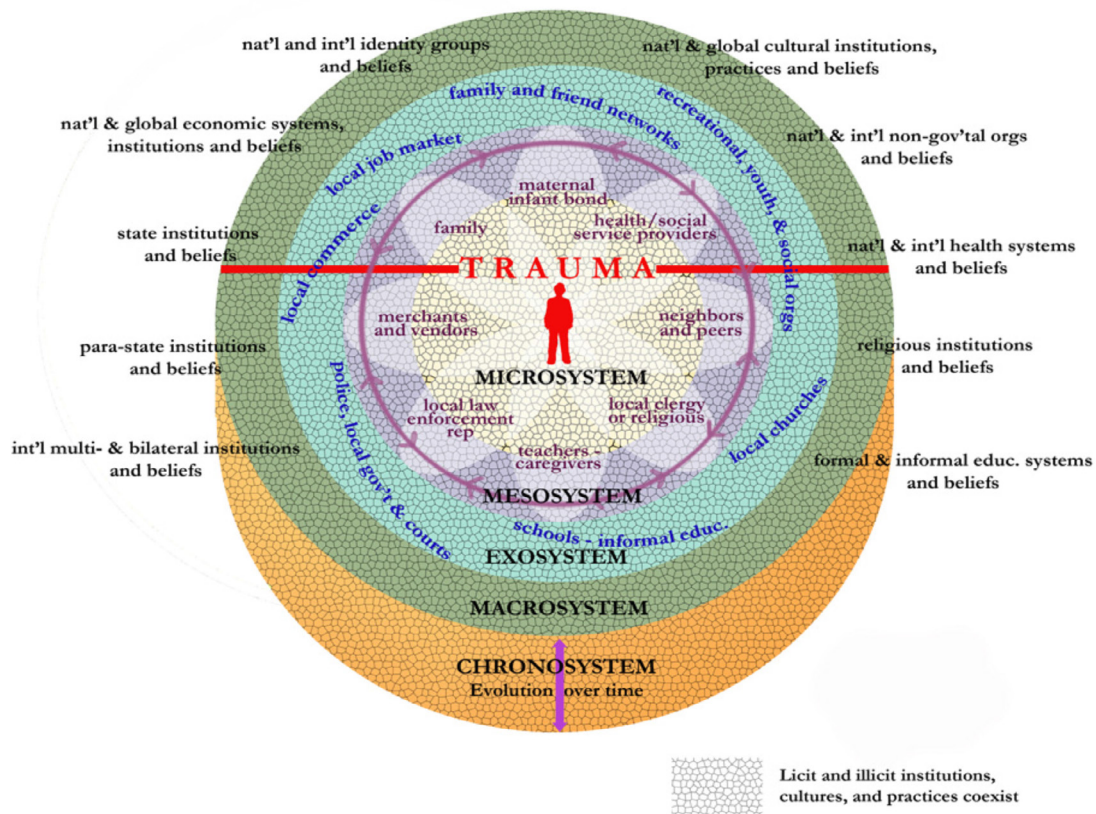
At the same time, vulnerable citizens who find themselves unprotected by the state often perceive themselves as passive “victims” who need and deserve “rights” rather than as citizens who are protagonists and responsible for their lives and actions. This type of thinking, informed by a sense of helplessness, shame and indignation, is well documented among participants in lynchings, among those who have gathered money to pay a hired killer to do away with a local criminal, and among members of local security committees who have resorted to violence to protect their communities.

Chronic violence and the system of human development

Chronic violence undermines human development from the micro to the macro levels. Figure 2 demonstrates how it affects all aspects of the process of human development through, firstly, the impact of high levels of traumatisation

in all aspects of development and, secondly, the increasing confusion and coexistence of licit and illicit practices, beliefs, institutions, and cultures, manifested in the corruption and destruction of primary development processes and human relations, cultures, practices, and institutions.

Figure 2: Ecological system of human development in situations of chronic violence



Primo Levi (1998) described this blurring of the boundaries between right and wrong, moral and immoral as the “grey zone”, based on his experience as a prisoner in Auschwitz. He argued that in long-term conditions of violence and fear, where everyone is focused on survival, the distinctions between moral and immoral, licit and illicit, right and wrong – and even between victim and perpetrator, as discussed earlier – become increasingly blurred (Levi, 1998: 36-69). Through the complex and interactive processes described above, chronic violence has become a new perverse normality for a growing portion of the world’s population and must be addressed in ways that acknowledge its systemic, self-reproducing and long-term nature.

Implications for policymakers, researchers and practitioners

Because of the deeply entrenched nature of many of the macro-level drivers of violence and the self-reproducing tendency of traumatisation, it is prudent to assume that this phenomenon represents a long-term dilemma, not a short-term crisis. The challenge of chronic violence is

clearly expressed in the way the structures and organisations responsible for high levels of insecurity change, as do their apparent objectives. Even so, the levels of violence as experienced by affected people can remain extremely high – a pattern that has become evident in post-conflict Central America, sub-Saharan Africa, marginal settlements of major cities around the world, and more recently in the transitional countries of the Middle East.

As a result, understanding the origins and texture of chronic violence is an extremely important part of tackling the emergence of non-conventional armed actors operating beyond the confines of traditional armed conflict. The analysis and framework presented here strongly support the use of a multipronged approach that extends beyond efforts to “interrupt” or reduce violent behaviour to address the conditions that cause this phenomenon to reproduce.

A systemic approach

The new framework for understanding chronic violence and human development shifts the focus from violence as

a series of discrete problems (non-conventional armed violence; youth, drug, or domestic violence; etc.) to its systemic basis. Similarly, the emphasis moves from shorter-term projects to longer-term processes, and from thematically and institutionally isolated efforts to longer-term intersectoral, interdisciplinary and intergenerational ones.

Questions that must be asked in any effort to diagnose chronic violence in a given locality include the following. What are the behavioural, social and macro-level drivers that underlie the problem? How does non-conventional armed violence relate to other forms of violence and to the various drivers mentioned above? How might specific interventions affect – and be affected by – other dynamics in the multi-tiered system? A critical aspect of this approach is to identify and map the macro- and micro-level factors that contribute to reproducing violence in specific locales. While certain drivers will be beyond the scope of specific interventions, they nonetheless should be contemplated in programme design.

The need to shift from violence prevention to what enables vulnerable populations to “thrive”

What conditions would enable target populations to “thrive” – to develop adequately as individuals, as social beings and as citizens?² Indicators of progress in human development – which naturally will contribute to reducing violence over time – include various elements that are not always recognised at present. These are an improvement in the capacity of families to adequately nurture and raise their children and youth, and a reduction in family-based violence and indices of trauma; growth in the breadth, density, inclusiveness, diversity, and reach of social and civic engagement and action; a reduction in destructive social and civic practices and beliefs that prevail in a particular locale; reduced perceptions of violence and insecurity; and increasing support for and practise of social and civic responsibility. Critical to this shift is a new emphasis on restorative rather than retributive-justice approaches where possible, with a corresponding focus on “rehumanisation”.

A new emphasis on integrated bottom-up approaches

A critical priority is to understand the ways that different drivers and forms of violence interact with one another in the life experience of target populations. Integrated bottom-up approaches require the careful mapping of specific causes and forms of violence in order to identify how to pursue a variety of objectives. One such objective is strengthening conditions for the primary development of children, i.e. through family and primary networks. These relations represent a first line of defence against violence, but strengthening them requires shifting from the single-

group focus of most current youth- and gender-violence programming towards an emphasis on relational and multigenerational approaches. The family-systems approach to gang reduction and youth development pioneered in Los Angeles and currently being tested in Central America is one example. The dual approach to gender violence taken by the Brazilian NGO Promundo – rooted in a nuanced understanding of male, female and parenting perspectives – is another.

Another approach is to assist vulnerable micro-level organisations, groups and communities in strengthening resilience and civic practice. Key elements include collective learning processes that enable groups to understand the systemic nature of the challenge of violence, and how violence and chronic trauma affect their lives.

Both processes help vulnerable groups to shift from a sense of passive “victimhood” (seeking “rights”) to focus on fundamental responsibilities toward family and community, thus building new bases for civic sensibility – and, ultimately, citizenship.

A “trauma-informed” approach to all violence-related interventions

Since trauma and traumatic re-enactment are among the major drivers and consequences of chronic violence, they should be contemplated in a wide range of programming for vulnerable populations – from educational policies and the diagnostic practices and routine care given by primary health-care providers to the strategies used for vocational training, conflict resolution and disaster relief.

Policymakers, government officials, and practitioners should be educated about how trauma works, and to identify signs of trauma in target populations. Lay trauma/resilience counsellors should be trained with effective and responsible methods to work with people through schools, health clinics, community-outreach centres, and faith-based and other relevant organisations. Programmes that currently aim simply to keep high-risk youth “off the street” could be converted into vital spaces for healing and human reconnection with drama and other expressive therapeutic techniques. A broad range of programming for vulnerable populations – from child care, schooling and health to livelihood development – should incorporate trauma-informed approaches. Finally, practitioners working with traumatised populations should receive specialised training, ongoing supervision and support, because they themselves risk both primary and secondary traumatisation in the normal course of their work.³

² The term “thrive” comes from Bronfenbrenner. A complementary, but somewhat narrower, concept is that of “positive resilience” and the co-production of security proposed by Davis (2012: 31-38).

³ The Centre for Victims of Torture and the Youth Readiness Initiative (Betancourt et al., 2014), for example, are among those that have developed models for the training of lay counsellors. The North American Drama Therapy Association and the British Association of Drama Therapy are leaders in the field of therapeutic drama techniques, along with groups in Argentina and Israel.

A mechanism for integrating national-level violence and resilience policy

Approaching the challenge from the national level, this framework can be used both to generate a comprehensive assessment of the multiple factors that reproduce violence in a particular country or region and the existing and potential roles of relevant agencies to address them, as well as to catalyse a consultative process among governments, the international community, and civil society to integrate and align national policies and practices to address these challenges in a coordinated way.

Conclusion

To sum up, this report argues that the challenge posed by non-conventional armed actors and the broader problem of chronic violence should be approached from a strategic perspective that seeks to understand and address these phenomena in terms of how they fit into the larger system of human, social and civic development. This approach provides all major stakeholders – from policymakers to vulnerable populations themselves – with a more realistic framework that permits us to place the narrow goals of “citizen security” and “crime and violence prevention” squarely within the broader and more fundamental objectives of human security and human development.

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