Challenges for Resilience in Central America

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Cúcuta Forum | October 2022
Translated into English from the original Spanish version.

This document presents the discussions and topics addressed during the Ninth Workshop on Regional Responses to the Crises in Latin America and the Caribbean held through the Latin American and Caribbean Civil Society Forum for the Prevention of Mass Atrocities (Cúcuta Forum).

Context

Among its main objectives, the Latin American and Caribbean Civil Society Forum for the Prevention of Mass Atrocities, known as the Cúcuta Forum, aims to strengthen the preventive capacities and build resilience at the regional level, as well as increase interinstitutional cooperation through advocacy strategies and communication campaigns. The Cúcuta Forum has held a series of workshops with a wide variety of actors to discuss and coordinate follow-up actions related to its objectives.

In October 2022, the "Ninth Workshop on Regional Responses to the Crises in Latin America and the Caribbean" was held in Panama City. As part of this forum, discussions were held about the reduction of civic spaces in Latin America and the Caribbean; migration, forced displacement, and human rights; and challenges for resilience in Central America. The main inputs for the preparation of this document have been obtained from the discussions of this last panel.

How We Understand Resilience

In the Mesoamerican context, there is a tendency to talk about resilience within the framework of victims of violence, political repression, and organized crime. However, it is important to understand resilience in the context of peace and conflict studies, which have a broader and more structural view.

The United Nations, through *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention*, sets forth that, "Prevention is an ongoing process that requires sustained efforts to build the resilience of societies to atrocity crimes by ensuring that the rule of law is respected and that all human rights are protected, without discrimination; by establishing legitimate and accountable national institutions; by eliminating corruption; by managing diversity constructively; and by supporting a strong and diverse civil society and a pluralistic media."[1]

In the document *UN Common Guidance on Helping Build Resilient Societies*, resilience is proposed as "the ability of individuals,

households, communities, cities, institutions, systems and societies to prevent, resist, absorb, adapt, respond and recover positively, efficiently and effectively when faced with a wide range of risks."[2]

It is therefore important to understand that when we talk about resilience, we are also talking about prevention. The commitment to preparation is what also builds resilience. This means identifying potential situations, capacities, and learning opportunities, and recognizing what is preventable and what is not. There are situations that cannot be prevented, but you can be better prepared to address them, for example, displacement and confinement. Confined communities, which have no chance to move from where they are, are now called communities in resistance. They seek to prepare themselves to better face their situation. This gives communities a chance to build their development plans or life plans. Likewise, a resilient community is not one that is not necessarily forced to move, but in the event of displacement, it can continue with its community life project.

Certain actors demonstrated their level of resilience in the context of COVID-19. Many civil society organizations, despite not having resources, faced the need to continue their work of promoting and defending human rights. Adaptation and use of technological tools were key factors. On the other hand, contexts of repression and violence generated by the state have also forced people and social organizations to reinvent themselves in order to continue their work. This is even under conditions of high risk and insecurity such as in Nicaragua, a country where retweeting a message from international bodies can be presented as evidence in a criminal proceeding and involve imprisonment for human rights defenders.[3]

In general, resilience is the ability of an individual or group to recover from adversity to move themselves into the future. However, it is also important to understand the concept of societal resilience, rather than only viewing resilience as an individual capability. We can speak of active and passive resilience. Passive resilience implies the decision to do something to gain the space and conditions to be able to organize resistance, but it is necessary to differentiate between communities that survive and adapt from communities with resilience.

From Resilience to Collective Resistance

We speak of the importance of prevention, preparation, and resilience building, but structural forces generate or demand a collective response. That leads us to talk about social resilience, understood as the capacity for resistance, organization, and identity. Identity is a key factor. There is resistance because there is a group, a sense of belonging. Resistance is neither individual nor passive, but rather becomes something done as a whole. It becomes something collective that ends up accompanying other movements.

Resilience has two moments:

1. Acting against paralysis after a serious event, such as a human rights violation that has been suffered.

2. Transcending the individual and moving to the collective that mobilizes, acts, and finds ways to change the reality.

Resilience involves being aware of the specific situation being faced and a strategy to overcome that adverse situation. Resistance, from the collective point of view, occurs when people are made aware of the situation, forces join together, a path of action is drawn, and there are leaders who push for action.

It is important to focus on how to strengthen these strategies in authoritarian contexts. Many social organizations work on it, assuming that the act of resisting can become very complex and involve dismantling fears that arise from the very beginning, including dismantling the fear of resisting. Based on the experiences of social movements, it also involves dealing with resistance strategies that have failed.

The Need to Build Resilient Societies

Since 2018, key leaders from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) have argued that resilience is key to furthering the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is recognized that, "Progressing towards more resilient societies is an even greater challenge for our region due to its high degree of vulnerability to natural disasters, particularly in Central America and the Caribbean, whose fragility to these events increases as a result of climate change."[4]

Then what is the purpose of studying resilience? Capacity building, increasing levels of resilience, or detecting situations where society is resilient? The commitment to resilient groups effectively implies training for this, based on experiences and learnings from resilient communities such as Indigenous communities in Guatemala.[5] Due to the constant training and learning, communities and collectives are more skilled, and they generate better and innovative resistance strategies. In authoritarian and repressive contexts, collective leadership and horizontal structures are better able to cope with repression. Also, in contexts of generalized violence carried out by nonstate actors such as organized crime, resilience is linked to community networks, grassroot organizations, and support from nongovernmental bodies.[6]

Consolidating More Peaceful and Humane Societies

Strong social ties, organization, and networks for support and solidarity are indispensable. Resilience is resisting, but it also forces you to think about what to do differently in new situations, to innovate. This involves defining alliances.

The specific analysis of each situation will indicate with whom and what the alliances are. It is possible to predetermine actors, but these will be defined in each specific case with a network vision. In some cases, alliances should be thought of even with actors with whom any rapprochement would seem impossible.

In Colombia, for example, in the context of peace agreements and efforts to end armed confrontation, resilience cannot be seen outside of more-complex reintegration processes,[7] because the main parties responsible for human rights violations are neighbors of those who have been their victims. They are people who live in communities and with whom the future is shared. In this scenario, the bet is on transitional justice, and the questions revolve around how to "humanize the enemy"[8] and generate processes of social restructuring. This is not only raised in terms of truth, justice, and reparation, but also, and above all, in terms of prevention of nonrepetition. It is about looking for ways to become viable societies, and that implies that those who were outside the law are part of the community to move forward together. This is expected to reduce the chances of crime.

The Challenges

We currently face a global human rights crisis. One of the main challenges is finding the link between resistance and action.

Emerging risks that mark the current decade come from:

1. Very-short-term economic recession.

2. Climate change.

3. Consolidation of authoritarian systems.

Taken together, these elements generate one of the other most important challenges—forced migration, refugees and internally displaced persons whose massive numbers collapse systems of humanitarian care and international protection systems in destination countries such as Panama and Costa Rica, as well as nations of transit and origin, such as Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

In terms of prevention, it should not be assumed that Central America has adequate diagnoses. Social organizations may have a good perception of what the problems are, but greater capabilities for monitoring must be developed.

In the case of community resilience to organized crime, the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) works with the *Global Organized Crime Index*, an instrument that precisely proposes a methodology for understanding the responses to organized crime through the design of resilience indicators. This index collectively evaluates 12 indicators, including political leadership; legal framework; security and justice system; victim support mechanisms; and prevention activities. From GI-TOC's experience, the existence of greater resilience to organized crime is linked to high levels of democratic participation.

From the United Nations, the *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes* is a useful tool for the identification of present risk factors, including the concentration of power; hate speech and propaganda; digital violence; police violence and militarization; and the lack or weakness of protection systems against this type of situation.

The absence of protections and guarantees by the state toward its population may create an environment conducive to the commission of atrocity crimes. In these cases, prevention involves the adoption of initiatives aimed at slowing the probable course of events. Atrocity crimes are usually not unique and random events. Rather, they tend to develop in a dynamic process that offers entry points to prevent them from occurring. In order to reach the level of violence associated with atrocity crimes, their perpetrators need time to develop the capacity to do so, mobilize resources, and take concrete steps to help them achieve their goals.

Since atrocity crimes are processes, it is possible to detect red flags or indicators as they could occur. This is especially true in the case of genocide and crimes against humanity. The *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes* states, "If we understand the root causes and precursors of these crimes and are able to identify the risk factors that may lead to or enable their commission, we can also determine the measures that States and the international community can take to prevent these crimes. The earlier risk factors are defined, the greater the opportunities for early prevention will be. As time progresses, preventive measures become more difficult and costly."[9]

Indeed, identifying and updating risk factors is key. Strengthening capacities for this can be one of the main challenges, as well as strengthening the capacity of joint actions from the widest diversity of actors. However, the main challenge that organizations and social movements in Central America could be facing lies in the definition of what really calls to them, where the common points for collective resistance are, and where to direct the action. Beyond narratives and speeches, there is no easy answer.

Endnotes

1   United Nations, *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention,* 2014.

2   United Nations, *Executive Summary: UN Common Guidance on Helping Build Resilient Societies,* 2020, 3.

3   Confidential, "Sentences of Political Prisoners Based on 'Ridiculous Evidence,' February 15, 2022, https://confidencial.digital/nacion/condenas-a-presos-politicos-basadas-en-pruebas-ridiculas/.

4   Alicia Bárcena, "Resilience: Key to Implementing the 2030 Agenda," *Cooperative,* July 11, 2018, https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/article/files/cooperativa.cl_chile_11-07-18.pdf.

5   Pascal Oliver and Girot Pignot. "Recursos naturales, medio ambiente y biodiversidad: la contribución, las responsabilidades y las demandas de América Latina." *América Latina y los bicentenarios: una agenda de futuro,* 295-324. (Madrid: Fundación Carolina, April 2010), https://www.fundacioncarolina.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Ame%CC%81rica-Latina-y-los-Bicentenarios.pdf.

6   Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, *Violence and Resilience in Latin American Cities* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

7   Kimberly Theidon and Paola Andrea Betancourt, *Transiciones conflictivas: combatientes desmovilizados en Colombia* [Conflictive transition: demobilized fighters in Colombia], political analysis no. 58, Scientific Electronic Library, 2006.

8   Johan Galtung and Carl G. Jacobsen, *Searching for Peace: The Road to Transcend* (London: Pluto Press in association with Transcend, 2022).

9   United Nations, *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes.*

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