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Entrenching the Problem? International Organizations and Their Engagement in Latin America to Address Violence: The Case of the European Union in the Northern Triangle

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Abstract: Latin America is the most violent region in the world. Yet, decades of political and financial investment by the international community have not had the desired results. Using the work of the European Union in the Northern Triangle of Central America as a case study, this article asks what explains this failure. Utilizing the conceptual framework of Complexity and Human System Dynamics, it argues that current policies actually entrench the pattern of conditions which lead to, and sustain, violence. It shows how, by reconceptualizing this problem using the concepts of Complexity, policies could be made more effective and sustainable.

Keywords: violence; Latin America; European Union; complexity; Human System Dynamics (HSD).

Introduction

Latin America is the most violent region in the world. This, in turn, is a driver for other problems, especially the loss of human capital, which is either being killed or fleeing this violence in huge numbers. Fearing these ripple-effects, the international community has made a concerted effort to address the problem of violence in the region. These efforts have come from other countries, international organizations, from regional organizations based in the Americas or such organizations based outside the region but with significant historical and economic interest in it.

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Yet, despite significant investments, both politically and financially, violence in Latin America remains at extraordinarily high levels (The Economist 2018), apart from some notable success stories at the local level (Doyle 2011).

What explains this failure? This raises questions about the way this problem is defined as well as the concepts and approaches used to address it. These are the issues that the present work will address.

As a case study, the actions of the European Union in the Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala) will be analysed, using the conceptual framework of Complexity and Human System Dynamics (HSD). It will be argued that Complexity and HSD allow for the reconceptualization of the issue of violence, which allows for a clearer definition of the problem and for the identification of the specific conditions which sustain violence across time and space. Furthermore, areas of further research that could turn this reconceptualization into concrete and executable policies will also be identified.

Latin America as a Region of Violent Peace

Since the end of the of the Cold War, Latin America has become the second-most peaceful region on earth, without any significant military conflicts, with the obvious exception of Colombia (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2018). Yet, it is, by far, the most violent region in the globe, as violence is hereby defined as 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: 4). With less than 10% of the world's population, Latin America accounts for more than one third of all the world's recorded homicides (Igarapé Institute 2017). It houses the most violent country in the absolute number of homicides (Brazil, which in 2016, saw more than 60,000 murders recorded); the vast majority of the most violent countries relative to population-size (amongst them, Honduras, El Salvador, Venezuela and Mexico); and the vast majority of the 50 most violent cities on earth (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal 2018). As such, Latin America is considered to be a 'zone of violent peace' (Mares 2017: 225).

The impact of this situation has been felt throughout the region and beyond. Latin America has been a central focus in the long-running war on drugs (Carpenter 2003). Violence has been a key driver for migration, especially to the United States (Jaitman 2017; Orozco and Yansura 2014) and has fuelled an enormous wave of internal displacement (IDMC 2017). The combination of death and displacement, in turn, has had a negative impact on the economic and social development of the region. It has shone an unflattering light on structural problems of Latin American societies, from economic and social inequality to the structural weakness and corruption of the state (Williamson 2009).

Many of these issues have received considerable attention in both academic and policy debates. During processes of colonization, little regard was given to the well-being of

native populations, which were decimated through a mixture of disease and deliberate extermination. The consolidation of, in particular, the Spanish colonies, spurred independence movements and dreams of Latin American unification, as articulated by Simón Bolivar (1783-1830). Yet, these never came to fruition. Instead, the various wars of independence fought during the 19th century consolidated administrative and political divisions between the different territories and entrenched tensions between and within them, fostering nationalism and class two of the most important cleavages which influence the region's countries to this day (Dabène 2009). As such, as Koonings and Kruijt (1999: 2) argued 'Latin America has a legacy of terror, of violence, of fear.'

During the Cold War, the region was a key battle ground between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union (Pastor 2005). Between 1945 and 1991, there were no fewer than 11 international and 38 internal armed conflicts in Latin America and the Caribbean (Tavares 2014). This history also reinforced a culture in favour of strongmen leaders that spurred some vicious authoritarian dictatorships, which, in many cases, lasted well into the 1980s (Skaar and Malca 2014). This, in turn, cemented a culture of deep mistrust between the state and the population that is crucial to understanding the problem of violence today (Arias 2011).

Bearing this in mind, it should not come as a surprise that the end of the Cold War did *not* lead to an end of violence. Rather, Latin America became a text-book example of the shifting dynamics of security, leading to turbulent peace (Crocker, Hampson and Aall 2001), the region suffering with levels of interpersonal violence, often comparable to actual warzones (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal 2018).

Confronted with the legacy of war, the need for reconciliation, economic reconstruction and the construction of post-war democracies, Latin America soon seemed to be overwhelmed by that challenge. The states which emerged in the post-conflict context were at once weak yet dominated by the same longstanding political and economic elites. Beset by corruption and unable to guarantee even the most basic services to significant parts of its population, several countries soon faced daunting challenges in terms of security (Kurtenbach 2010; Acemoglu and Robinson 2019).

Different approaches to violence and the role of the international community

The international community actually played a key role in this debate regarding the post-Cold War security environment. The United Nations developed the concept of 'human security,' defined as 'the security of people, including their physical safety, their economic and social well-being, respect for their dignity, and the protection of their human rights' (Baylis, Smith and Owens 2011: 566). This includes the right 'to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. All human beings are entitled to freedom from fear and want, with equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential' (United Nations 2012: 1). Critically, the concept recognizes the 'interlinkages between peace, development and human rights, and equally considers civil, political, eco-

nomic, social and cultural rights' (United Nations 2012: 1). Furthermore, human security should be pursued in a 'context-specific' form, recognizing the different needs and challenges which exist across time and space. Out of this emerged a concern, amongst other things, about urban crime and its links, for instance, with drug trafficking (United Nations 2012: 1).

This shift in focus found great resonance in Latin America in a post-conflict context of often deep social problems and spiralling violence, which increased by more than 50% in the 20 years following the end of the Cold War (World Bank 2010). Subsequently, there has been enormous public pressure to do something about violence, security being one of the main public concerns throughout the region (Muggah and de Carvalho 2014). Political leaders responded to this pressure in, broadly defined, two ways, whose tensions will be critical for the argument that follows.

Particularly, there has been an acceleration of so-called iron fist security policies by national governments that promise to be 'tough on crime.' These iron fist policies have been adopted by political leaders from across the ideological political spectrum, from right-wing governments in Honduras to ostensibly left-wing governments in Venezuela (Howarth and Petersen 2016; McDermott 2019).

Such an approach rests on three fundamental tenants. Firstly, it relies on a confrontational approach towards what governments define as criminals. Killing and imprisoning as many alleged members of criminal gangs or, more broadly, *bandidos* became the overriding policy-aim, the idea being that the sheer scale of death and incarcerations will act as a deterrent and destroy the structure of any given criminal organization. With this in mind, authorities would routinely round up and imprison literally hundreds of people at any given time in any given area based almost entirely on where people lived, how they dressed, and how they looked (Lehmann 2012).

A second key plank of this strategy is the increasing use of the military in the provision of public security (Pion-Berlin and Carreras 2017). The Armed Forces patrol violent neighbourhoods and confront criminal groups which control these neighbourhoods. They undertake raids to confiscate drugs, weapons and apprehend alleged gang members. They are also frequently granted special powers to stop and search people and their properties, suspending constitutional rights in the process (Mitidieri 2018).

A third, and related, plank refers to the role of the justice system. Here, what has been noticeable is the fact that normal processes of justice are frequently suspended, either explicitly or implicitly (Martínez 2016). Equally, it has become common, and often accepted, that police or other agents of the state use lethal force against alleged criminals without facing the risk of any negative consequences for themselves (Pine 2008). In several instances, killing criminals has been positively encouraged politically (Miragila 2017). As a consequence, many Latin American police forces are now amongst the most lethal in the world (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Many analysts have pointed to problems with this approach in a normative sense (Arana 2005; Pine 2008; Olson 2015). It is a blatant abuse of human rights and disregards any sense of fair and impartial justice, whilst entrenching deep social and economic divi-

sions in the process. Yet, at its most basic, the approach has simply not worked. There is overwhelming empirical evidence to show that, far from reducing violence, in the medium term, iron fist policies, in fact, increase it (Garcia 2015; Dudley 2010; Igarapé Institute 2017).

In response, political actors – particularly at local and international levels - have argued that violence should be seen as part of a much broader concept of 'citizen security' which 'encompasses an array of ideas, policies, and activities intended to promote safety and security, strengthen social cohesion and reinforce the mutual rights and obligations of states *and* citizens' (Muggah and de Carvalho 2014: 6). At a practical level, this means 'the organization and delivery of effective public safety measures in the context of broader democratic norms' (Muggah and de Carvalho 2014: 6). The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) defines citizen security as consisting of three interdependent dimensions: Violence, crime and the fear of crime. From this perspective, citizen security 'incorporates interventions from varied disciplines and policy perspectives that prevent and reduce violence through a menu of different initiatives' (IDB 2012: 5). For its part, the United Nations Development Program defines the concept as

> the process of establishing, strengthening and protecting democratic civic order, eliminating threats of violence in a population and allowing for safe and peaceful coexistence. It means effectively safeguarding inherent human rights, especially the right to life, personal integrity, inviolability of the home and freedom of movement. (UNDP 2013: 1)

In practical terms, citizen security focuses on 5 different types of intervention (IDB 2012):

a. Social intervention

Under this category, actions focus on groups of people 'at risk', both the perpetrators and the victims of crime. In practice, this means particularly young males and, in many cases, members of minority ethnic groups. Actions would also try to address associated problems, like alcohol- and drug abuse as well as domestic violence, which is often a key factor in future broader criminal activity.

b. Situational prevention

The key focus of the intervention is the environment under which people live and at-risk groups act. The objective of the policy is to change this environment in such a way as to reduce the number of *opportunities* for violent behaviour. These actions may include changes to local infrastructure; increased surveillance of space as well as of people; reduce the stress levels within any given group, stricter regulation of the sale of alcohol; and further such interventions with the aim of making potential offenders rationally assess the risks of committing a crime to the point of considering it likely that any infringement will be detected and punished accordingly.

c. Police

A third set of actions focuses specifically on the police, which is a key part of the cycle of mistrust between the population and the state. One issue within this context is that of police *effectiveness* (Sherman 2011a). Here, a lot of work has gone into making sure that there is a police presence in *targeted* areas, spatial concentration of crime being one of the hallmarks of violence in Latin America (Jaitman and Aizenman 2016). Furthermore, since most victims of crime can be found in one particular group of people, interventions focus on the *manner* police interact with this group (Petrosino, Guckenburg and Turpin-Petrosino 2010: 1).

Connected to the issue of police behaviour, however, it has been noted that, oftentimes, the police do not have the *capacity* to act effectively in the areas where the people most vulnerable to crime inhabit (Sherman 2011b). Therefore, the question of *police-reform* has become a key issue of discussion across Latin America, focusing on the structure of the police force, training within the police, and the way police interact with the population (Ungar and Arias 2012).

d. The judicial system

Closely linked to the police is the justice system which stands out in most of Latin America for being both inefficient and mistrusted by the population (Pine 2008; Lehmann 2019). As a consequence, there is a widespread perception – backed up by significant empirical evidence - of impunity, as well as the idea that the system only works for a privileged few. This, in turn, sustains alternative power structures which keep order in places in which the state has no or little effective presence (IDB 2012).

Within this context, interventions focus on reforming both the institutions and the strategic focus of the criminal justice system. Examples thereof are reforms of how the dealing in 'softer' drugs by small-time dealers, as well as drug users, are dealt with (Gendreau 1996). This also includes ideas to make the justice system more flexible, allowing it to differentiate between *types* of criminals and adjusting sentencing accordingly (IDB 2012). Finally, it involves attempts to make the justice system a key actor in the *prevention* of crime. In practice, this means the provision of pre-trial services, the increased use of non-custodial and rehabilitative sentences, and/or the development of so-called 'alternative dispute resolution mechanisms,' such as restorative justice (Sherman and Strang 2012: 215).

e. Penitentiary system

Finally, one key area of activity within the context of citizen security are reforms of the penitentiary system. This has long been identified as one key problem in the region, along with prisons hopelessly overcrowded and a lack of control over its population which, in turn, often lives in inhumane conditions, turning them into finishing school for criminals (d'Aubuisson and Dudley 2017).

Citizen security as a concept, then, is a recognition of the multi-faceted nature of violence. It acknowledges violence as a problem across several levels which is expressed in a number of different ways and, therefore, requires a number of different responses. Citizen security is also a recognition of the multi-faceted *causes* of violence, which have been dis-

cussed in minute detail in the literature (World Bank 2011; UNDP 2013). Organizations such as the United Nations have made a concerted effort to incorporate personal security within its framework of human security, of which citizen security is a fundamental part (UNDP 2013). As will be shown, the EU, at local the level, has also incorporated some of these principles. Politically, this means the need for an integrated and wide-ranging approach, one which incorporates questions such as food security, environmental protection and education into the security agenda. Caballero-Anthony (2015) adds to this the concept of 'community security' of which citizen security is part but which depends crucially on human development, and on the establishment and consolidation of democracy.

What one has, then, is a 'complexification' of the issue of security in conceptual terms, pushed and embraced, at least rhetorically, by the international community. The UN assumed a leading role in promoting the idea of 'human security' as a basis for defining and addressing security by challenging and broadening that field considerably in the process. Other actors moved in similar directions, showing in detail both the causes and consequences of violence and their interconnections (UNODC 2018; World Bank 2011; WHO 2002).

Yet, despite this shift and 'complexificaiton' of the concept of violence, the overall results of the policies applied have been disappointing. Violence has remained at astronomical levels in the region. Whilst there have been some local success stories, the pattern of violence and insecurity has not shifted in the region (Dominguez 2017).

The question, therefore, becomes what explains this failure. It will be shown that the shift towards citizen security in a conceptual sense has not been accompanied by a shift towards citizen security in terms of actions across all levels of the political and social system. In fact, in many cases, the very organizations applying concepts of citizen security at one level embrace ideas of iron fist approaches at another, thereby significantly undermining its potential to bring about desired and sustainable change.

To illustrate this confusion and its consequences, I will now introduce the conceptual framework of Complexity and Human Systems Dynamics (HSD) before applying it specifically to the actions of the European Union to address the problem of violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

Violence as a Complex Adaptive System

As shown above, violence has been tackled essentially using two different approaches: the iron fist approach and the citizen security approach. The iron fist approach basically applies a strongly reductionist approach, very typical of traditional approaches to most spheres of public policy. With the application of the right policies and sufficient resources, it would possible to work out solutions and implement them. There is a clear relationship between cause and effect, and the impact of proposed policies (i.e. solutions) can be predicted. In other words, the problems are "linear", with certain actions leading to predictable results (Geyer and Rihani 2010).

By contrast, citizen security, as a concept, begins to recognize violence as complex, not just in a descriptive, but also in a conceptual sense. That is to say that it is a problem characterised by the following:

- The presence within the system of a large number of elements
- The interaction of these elements in a rich manner – that is, with any element in the system influenced by, and influencing, a large number of other elements
- Interactions that are frequently non-linear
- Feedback loops in the interaction
- The openness of the system and its elements to their environment
- The operation of the system in a state far from equilibrium
- The existence of a system history
- Elements of the system are ignorant of the behaviour of the system as a whole (adapted from Geyer and Rihani 2010)

Eoyang (2010: 466) has defined such systems as complex adaptive, 'a collection of semi-autonomous agents with the freedom to act in unpredictable ways and whose interactions over time and space generate system-wide patterns.' As Edwards (2002: 17) has observed, such systems 'have remarkable resilience in the face of efforts to change them.' This is partly due to the fact that, in such systems, the elements and agents 'are constantly changing, as are the relationships between and amongst them.' As a consequence, 'uncertainty becomes the rule' (Eoyang and Holladay 2013: 17).

Nevertheless, this uncertainty does not mean permanent instability. In fact, in most cases, changes in the relationships between agents take place within a framework of fundamental systemic stability. Interactions 'simply change the conditions and relationships among the parts and the whole, they do not change the system in any fundamental way'; the interaction between the parts and the whole often sustains existing patterns, as 'parts interact to generate emergent patterns while the patterns influence parts and their interactions' (Eoyang and Holladay 2013: 17-18). The result is a self-generating, self-organizing reality of human systems dynamics which is based on the interdependence between the parts and on the whole of the system. Self-organisation here is defined as a process by which the internal interactions between the agents and conditions of a system generate system-wide patterns (Eoyang 2001).

In such a situation, change is dynamical; it is the result of multiple forces acting in unpredictable ways and generating surprising outcomes, which even the most powerful actors cannot control at all times. Change, then, is at best partially predictable and is characterised by tipping points, at which the dynamics of the system change profoundly to settle into a new pattern. However, it is impossible to know when and in what form the tipping point will arise (Gladwell 2000). Even if an action could be executed exactly as planned, it would not guarantee the right result. Because the elements of a complex adaptive system are multiple and interdependent, one can never do only one thing: one action will have multiple impacts, meaning that unintended consequences abound (Jervis 1997).

If one accepts these premises, then one has to accept that the future remains unknowable. This being the case, any action taken cannot have as its principal objective the defin-

itive resolution of a particular problem since the self-organisation of a complex adaptive system does not stop at a particular – less so at an externally predetermined – point. Instead, 'the best you can hope to do is to build adaptive capacity to coevolve with the system as it changes over time' (Eoyang and Holladay 2013: 25).

As such, actions have to be constantly evaluated and adjusted depending on particular local circumstances. Decision-making processes and the actions they produce have to be flexible, adjustable, and decentralised. They have to be able to respond to the unforeseen changes and circumstances that arise as agents of the system respond and adapt to any given policy. They have to be able to respond to change in a system with a high number of variables.

To enable such an approach and effective action in such a system of high unpredictability and uncertain outcomes, Eoyang and Holladay (2013: 30) propose 'Adaptive Action,' a 'method for engaging in dynamical change in an ever-emerging, always self-organizing world.' They argue that to approach any given problem, it is necessary to do so by exploring the current state of self-organisation, as defined above, so as to allow for targeted intervention that can change this pattern of self-organisation, which has given rise to, and is sustaining, the problem to be tackled. This process is based on three simple questions:

What?

The 'what' question tries to identify the current state of the process of self-organisation, which is dependent on three conditions: the elements which hold the system together (such as shared objectives, geographical locations, social class, etc.), differences between the agents of the system which generate tensions that allow for change (such as different interpretations of a particular issue, class, resources, location, etc.), and the channels through which these differences can be expressed (media, assemblies and meetings, etc.). Eoyang (2001) defines these conditions as containers, differences, and exchanges (or connections) (CDE). She also shows that these are interdependent across time and space. As such, they can serve different functions within different contexts.

Questions that might be asked to reveal the current state of self-organisation include: What do we see? What containers are the most relevant? What differences exist and what impact do they have? What exchanges are the strongest and what are the weakest? What has changed and what has stayed the same? What do we want these patterns to look like in the future? What did these patterns look like in the past?

So, what (does it mean)?

The 'so what' question tries to make sense of what has been observed. What do the patterns we observe mean for any possible action? Such a question is critical in that it generates options for action but also allows for the adaptation of action to different circumstances across time and space. In other words, the 'so what' question is crucial to making actions

adaptable to the particular circumstances within which they have to be applied. Questions might include: So, what does the current state of affairs mean to you, to me, and to others? So, what does that mean for our ability to act? So, what does that mean for the future development of the system? So, what options do we have for action?

Now what (do we do)?

The 'now what' question, finally, allows us to take action, having considered the current state of self-organisation and its implications. Crucially, this question allows for the consideration of different actions and different types of action across time and space. Questions may include the following: Now what will I/you/we/they do? Now what will be communicated to others? Now what will the results and the consequences be? Now what will be done in response to these results?

These three questions allow for the identification of the conditions and patterns which sustain a particular problem across time and space. They allow us to exercise '[c]onscious influence over self-organizing patterns [as they permit] seeing, understanding, and influencing the conditions that shape change in complex adaptive systems' (Eoyang and Holladay 2013: 30). In this particular case, they allow for the identification of the conditions and patterns that give rise to, and sustain, violence. As such, it is useful to define more precisely what we mean by conditions and patterns.

Conditions

Conditions are the elements of the social system which, individually and in interaction with one another, determine the speed, direction, and path of a social system as it evolves (i.e., self-organises) into the future. As stated above, there are three conditions which determine self-organisation: containers, differences, and exchanges (or connections).

Patterns

As these different conditions interact, they form patterns, here understood as the similarities, differences and connections that have meaning across time and space. In other words, patterns are the expression of the interaction between the three different conditions just outlined above (Eoyang and Holladay 2013: 30).

These terms have critical implications for action. They indicate that social problems are in fact the expression of a pattern of interdependent conditions across time and space. This being the case, what needs to change are the conditions which form the pattern that sustains a particular problem.

With these considerations made, the question, then, becomes what explains the failure to change the patterns of violence that have been so notable, and persistent, in Latin America? It is this we shall turn to now, looking specifically at the work done by the European Union in Central America.

The European Union in Central America: undermining its own chances of success?

At first glance, the choice of the EU as a case study to illustrate the difficulties of the international community in acting effectively to address the issue of violence in Latin America may seem odd. It is, after all, a regional organization which has relatively little leverage in Latin America as a whole, bearing in mind the overbearing presence of the United States as the regional power.

Yet, the EU is quite representative of the problems faced by the international community. Firstly, more than any other international organization, the EU explicitly embraced the role of being a normative power (Manners 2002), making an explicit link between the promotion of democracy, open markets, respect for human rights and peace (Diez and Tocci 2017). Secondly, the organization tested this approach first, and extensively, in Central America in the aftermath of that region's civil wars during the 1980s and 90s, making it one of the first regions where the EU proactively defined a foreign policy role for itself in that process. Its aim was to 'extend peace, democracy, security and economic and social development throughout the entire American region' (European Commission 2003: Foreword).

As such, the EU stresses the need for a balanced approach to drugs policy; the need for an effective policy in relation to the circulation of small arms, which represent a particular problem in the region; the need to build anti-corruption capacity in partner countries, and reforms of national security- and justice sectors, focusing in particular, on access to the justice system for all citizens as well as the respect for human rights at all times and by all actors (European Commission 2011). In other words, the European Union has taken on board many of the basic principles of citizen security, clearly seeing violence as a multi-faceted problem in which many conditions interact in a non-additive fashion to produce what, in the language of Complexity, can be described as an incoherent pattern of conditions. Using the CDE model it is, in fact, possible to illustrate this incoherence graphically, as seen in Table 1 below:

Table 1: CDE model – Conditions of violence in Central America

Conditions for Self-organisation	Violence
Container	Recognition of violence as a problem Social class Community
Difference	Experience of violence Priorities in dealing with violence, objectives Purpose of violence: Why is it committed? Social and economic differences
Exchanges/Connections	Media Political structures to address violence Violence as a means of exchange: 'against criminals' or as a defence mechanism of community
Emergent Behaviour	Incoherent. Incompatible containers; too many significant differences; exchanges insufficient to release tension. System not resilient enough.

Source: Elaborated by the author.

There is broad consensus across the region, amongst political actors at all levels, as well as the population at large, that violence is a serious problem which needs to be tackled. This, then, becomes a key container as policy-makers prioritize this issue politically.

Yet, Central American society actually lacks any strong and enduring bonds that hold it together. It is frequently noted that nation-formation has been very weak (Leonard 2011). Therefore, it is the *differences* between the agents that predominate. Here one can find deep social divisions between a small elite which controls the vast majority of wealth and large parts of the population which are extremely poor (Leonard 2011). Additionally, there are political divisions, economic divisions and, as will be shown below, differences in the extent to which particular problems, such as violence, impact on specific segments of the population.

This enormous difference in the distribution of wealth has a huge bearing on a host of other differences that mark Central American society. For instance, it contributes to, and reinforces, a geographical segregation, with poor people disproportionally living on the periphery of the big cities or the countryside. It equally reinforces professional differences, with poor people disproportionally working in service jobs – for instance as maids, security guards, porters, and the like. It reinforces educational divisions between those who can afford private education and those who cannot. It reinforces differences in access to quality health care, which, in turn, has led to, and sustained, a remarkable difference in life expectancy and other health outcomes (IFAD 2011).

As a result, each agent and group has developed its own containers. For instance, the upper and middle classes often live in gated communities to which 'outsiders' do not have access, creating a strong spatial container. Equally, it is virtually unheard of – and often considered dangerous – for outsiders to enter the poorer communities, as the author knows from personal experience. Gangs control who can and cannot come into their ter-

ritories and going into the 'wrong' community can be fatal. Gangs, however, are a crucial container, providing order and an opportunity to overcome, for instance, resource differences (Farah 2016).

This segregation is underscored by the exchanges in the system. Here, one crucial role belongs to the media. Concentrated in the hands of few, the media play a critical role in pushing one particular narrative with regards to violence (Pine 2008). They define violence as being the acts of one particular group (gangs) involved in a couple of activities (drugs, extortion) coming from a particular area (slums). They therefore strongly reinforce existing differences, be they social, political, or economic (Farah 2016).

This amounts to an incredibly incoherent pattern of self-organization. Coherence is defined as the degree to which parts of a system 'fit' each other or the external environment, and it is a necessary factor in sustainability. In Central America, the parts of the system do not 'fit.' Rather, the different parts and agents are in antagonistic opposition to one another.

Patterns, as defined above, are similarities, differences, and connections that have meaning across time and space. Yet the conditions just described point to patterns which simply do not have meaning across the social system as a whole. What containers there are apply primarily to certain *sub*-groups of society. For instance, the political and economic elite is bound together by an enormously strong container (wealth, access to economic opportunity, geographical location, etc.) which in most other sections of society serves only as a marker of significant difference (for instance, most people cannot live where the elite lives, or cannot dream to work where they work, or cannot go to the schools that the elite can send their kids to, etc.).

Critically, what the above understanding indicates is a lack of connections between the different parts of society. Different agents acting within the system are essentially living separate lives. They do not come into contact with one another in such a way as to turn the tensions generated by their differences into opportunities for meaningful change. Rather, any contact serves exclusively to reinforce their respective status so that everybody always remembers who they are.

It is within this context that international organizations work to address violence. Yet, as shown, they have not overcome the incoherence which leads to, and sustains, violence. Violence in Latin America has remained at astronomically high levels (Asmann and O'Reilly 2020). The region has remained the most violent in the world (The Economist 2018) and, within it, Central America has continued to be the most violent sub-region, with both Honduras and El Salvador amongst the most violent countries in the world (World Bank 2020). In fact, as Ashman and O'Reilly (2020) have shown, after some decline, in 2019 homicide rates increased again in Honduras. The question, then, is what explains this. Looking at what the EU does in Central America is, once more, instructive in this respect, as the following table illustrates:

Table 2: CDE model – The political approach to Violence in Central America

Conditions for Self-organisation	Violence
Container	Citizen security approach to violence by the EU
Difference	Emphasis given to violence by various actors at regional level Difference between regional, national and local approach to violence Internal differences between actors Differences in interests between international organizations and (some of) their respective member states
Exchange	Funding for projects from actors at regional level Political structures to address violence at regional, national and local level Public opinion
Emergent Behaviour	Incoherent. Weak containers; countervailing differences; exchanges too narrow to release tension. System not resilient enough.

Source: Elaborated by the author

As shown above, there is a clear focus on citizen security on the part of the EU in its stated approach to addressing violence in Central America. Yet, this emphasis is often not shared by other actors. For instance, a significant part of the funding for Central America coming from the United States is explicitly for hard security purposes, aimed at confronting organized crime groups and gangs in combat (Huey 2014). Bearing in mind the power this country has within, and over, the countries of the region, this is a significant distinction which makes a difference.

Yet, critically, such differences exist not only *between* actors, but also *within* particular organizations, depending on a host of factors, including which political level they are engaging at. The EU has a host of initiatives which clearly aim for both economic and political *change* in the region. This is shown by what the EU does at local level, for instance through its projects to bolster education in poor communities or infrastructure development (European Union External Action Service 2020). In doing so, the EU actually adopts, consciously or not, principles that are clearly compatible with an HSD approach, as outlined above, and citizen security. What's more, according to data compiled by the Association for a More Just Society (AJS), such local initiatives have often led to a significant reduction in violent crime *at local level*, sometimes up to 75% (AJS 2020).

Yet, at the same time, the organization has been contradictory when it comes to dealing with national governments. For instance, as one senior EU diplomat stated who, at the time, was stationed in Honduras: 'What we want here is stability' (Senior EU Diplomat Honduras, interview, 2014). In relation to specific problems in specific countries in the region, the EU has been unwilling to challenge the status quo – the social, political and economic structures and conditions – in any significant way. For instance, in response to the disputed Presidential elections in Honduras in 2017, the EU attested that the problems in the vote count were 'merely of a technical nature' (European Union Electoral Observer Mission 2018) and did not question the legitimacy of the result, which saw President

Hernandez re-elected by a razor-thin margin, having been considerably behind before a power outage stopped the electronic counting of the votes. When power returned, he had wiped out the deficit in votes to frontrunner Salvador Nasralla. The EU merely called for further efforts at inclusive government. In attesting a technical fault in the counting process, the EU was actually more timid in its findings than the Organization of the American States (OAS 2018). Similar observations can be made in relation to Guatemala and the bland EU response to the shut-down of the UN-sponsored anti-corruption and impunity commission (European Union External Action Service 2018).

Such tensions are also evident when looking at the interaction between the EU and its member states. Many of those have their own *national* interests in Latin America, strongly shaped by historical connections (as in the case of Spain) or particular national commitments in relation to, for instance, development aid. In practical terms, this means, amongst other things, that some of the work related to security and violence in Central America is financed by the European Union whilst other is financed by one or several of its member states. In some of these cases, the *national* funders are clearly interested in, at the macro level, stability and protecting the status quo whilst, in others, the aim is clearly to bring about change (Grefe 2012).

Similar tensions can be observed at the national level. Governments often pursue hard-line security policies following the iron-fist approach outlined above. In recent years, all three Northern Triangle countries have sought to define street gangs such as MS 13 as terrorist organizations with associated extraordinary powers for law-enforcement and, increasingly, the army to act against these groups without the usual recourse to due process (Blake 2017; Puerta 2018). Such measures, whilst of dubious effectiveness in terms of reducing violence, are very popular with significant sections of society (Dudley 2010; Phillips 2014). Soldiers, then, become, for this segment of the population, the significant difference in addressing their fears. Such a narrow definition of the problem of violence generates a sense of security through the idea that the problem can be contained, both socially and geographically.

Yet, this runs contrary to some of the very policies that other levels of the state pursue. At the local level, there has been a considerable increase in citizen security initiatives across the region over recent years, often sponsored by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), other outside organizations (national or international) or local authorities (Muggah and de Carvalho 2014). There have been both social initiatives – such as education and infrastructure projects – but also initiatives to improve the quality of policing within the community in order to establish more trust between the population and local law enforcement. This has happened by encouraging and facilitating joint work between state institutions and independent organizations – mainly NGOs which work on specific questions such as Children's or Women's rights (Rísquez 2017). Once again, there are several success stories across Latin America which show the effectiveness of such approach at the local level (Muggah and de Carvalho 2016).

Yet, this same third sector is often subject to enormous intimidation by the national government (Frank 2018). As one Executive of one NGO concerned with children's rights

put it: 'I have cars with police observing me permanently stationed outside my house' (Senior civil society and children's rights activist, interview, 2015). Another senior official for a different children's charity hence stated: 'We do the state's work for them. Really, [the state] should make sure children are in school, not us' (Senior official from international NGO in Honduras, interview, 2015). In other words, the state is undermining some of its own policies, working extraordinarily hard to stop any meaningful change from occurring (Lehmann 2019). One can illustrate the inconsistencies in policy visually, described in the Table 3 below:

Table 3: Violence and political responses as a process of self-organization in Central America – A summary

Conditions for Self-organisation	**Stability and iron fist policies**	**Citizen security-based initiatives**	**Iron fist, stability AND citizen security policy**
Container	Small and few: Violence as a clearly definable problem committed by clearly identifiable actors	Many and entangled: The social conditions ('root causes') of violence	Large and many: What are the aims of the policy? Aimed at whom? What actions?
Difference	Few: Gang-member or not; how many killed or imprisoned	Many, some significant: Resources from international community, for instance	Innumerable: The same agent projecting different objectives to different partners; Tensions within and between different actors
Exchange	Few: Media The 'ok' from the international community for actions undertaken	Ambiguous: NGOs at meso-level working with state and local community	Arbitrary, Meaningless: Who communicates what to whom and how? Too many conflicting messages
Emergent Behaviour	Predictable pattern Clear cause and effect Tight coupling	Emergent patterns Emergent structure Nonlinear cause and effect Loose coupling	No patterns Random No cause and effect Uncoupling

Source: Elaborated by the author

The key issue to emerge out of this debate is the problem of inconsistencies within and between different political actors. Within a context of many more significant differences than containers and few meaningful exchanges, no coherent pattern of action can emerge. In what has been described above, it is possible to observe three different patterns of action being pursued often by the same actors. On the one hand, the international community, as represented by the European Union, seeks stability and predictability in Central America. To do so, it supports the status quo at national level. On the other, it seeks change through a host of initiatives, often quite explicitly embracing the principles of citizen security. Yet, with this contradictory strategy of change and stability that coexist, the end result is a

random pattern in which cause and effect are 'de-coupled': 'Every dollar [the international community] spends is money to fortify the status quo' (Frank, interview, 2013).

The end result of this is clear from the available data: Violence *fluctuates* both in terms of intensity and *where* it occurs, but the overall pattern remains unchanged (Igarapé Institute 2017; World Bank 2020). Rather than addressing the issue of incoherence, of which violence is one of the most visible consequences, this inconsistent approach *contributes to* and *locks-in* this incoherence. In other words, the international community helps perpetuate the very problem it sets out to address. The disconnect between policies pursued at the various levels of the system means that there can be no scaling of successful policies across the system as a whole. It also makes it much easier for actors trying to resist changes to do so. Actions at one level, for instance, the national level, can significantly undermine the effectiveness of actions at another (for instance, at regional level).

Now what? Addressing the issue of incoherence

The are several points to come out of the above case study: Firstly, in many ways, one of the key problems confronted by the international community in addressing violence is that its members ask the wrong questions. Violence is the expression of social, political and economic *incoherence*. As such, the key question for the international community is *not* how to eliminate violence but *what can be done to increase social cohesion within the region*? In other words, what conditions need to be changed in order to increase social cohesion across the system as a whole.

This leads to a second point, namely the question of which social conditions identified as contributing to, and sustaining, social incoherence actors like the European Union actually have a chance of significantly and sustainability influencing? There needs to be recognition that large-scale so-called reform programs will inevitably confront enormous resistance by those who stand to lose the most from any change. Recent experiences with anti-corruption efforts in Guatemala and Honduras have demonstrated clearly that political and economic elites will fight back. Are organizations like the EU prepared to take them on? The evidence suggests they are not.

Thirdly, efforts to increase coherence *have* to focus as well on the internal coherence of those international actors working in Central America. In the case of the European Union, it is of little use advocating and implementing change at the micro level (which has often been done with some success) whilst aiming for stability at the macro level. The result of this internal incoherence is that even when there are local successes in violence reduction, there is no way of scaling these successes across the system as a whole. Incoherence is not only sustained but increased.

With these three issues in mind, it is possible to make some tentative practical suggestions as to what international organizations could do in order to increase social coherence within the system in which they work.

The first critical change in approach should be one towards increasing *de-centralization*. There are several micro-level success-stories which have not led to a change in the

overall pattern of conditions (Diez and Tocci 2017). One of the reasons for this is that there is no critical mass of successes at local level which could be used to change the practical and *political* dynamics at meso and macro levels. Can international organizations show *what works* at local level and use this to change the dynamics of the system as a whole? How this can be done is a key question for further research.

To achieve widespread decentralization, however, it would be imperative to make international organizations *less risk averse*. Therefore, one challenge is to demonstrate the utility of an approach such as de-centralization using traditional methods of social sciences and policy-making. Data shows that violence in Latin America is a highly concentrated phenomenon, both geographically and socially. It occurs in very specific neighbourhoods against very specific groups of people and is committed using predominantly one method: firearms (Jaitman and Ajzenmann 2016). Whilst violence *moves* from place to place, these characteristics are very stable. This allows for clearly targeted policies within a stable strategic framework of objectives.

As such, what is suggested here is not particularly radical in terms of method but *does* represent a significant departure in terms of approach. Therefore, one key challenge is to *sell* the utility of this approach, based on Complexity and Human Systems Dynamics, to policy-makers. How this can be done will be a key area for research in the future.

Conclusions

Violence in Latin America is a long-standing problem, as are efforts on the part of the international community to address this issue. Yet, just about every piece of empirical data shows these efforts have not been successful or, even in cases they have been, they have proven unsustainable.

In this article, it has been argued that the reasons for this lack of success lie, first, in the way violence has been defined by those actors trying to confront it. It has been shown that violence is an expression of an incoherent pattern of social conditions. As such, the objective of any policy to address violence needs to be to increase the coherence of the social system within which the problem exists.

Yet, current efforts by the international community contribute to the *worsening* of this incoherence by adopting, and facilitating, essentially two different, and contradictory policy approaches. While on the one hand they implement political actions clearly aimed at *change* at the local level, they preach, and help sustain, *stability* at the macro level. In doing so, they add an extra layer of incoherence that can already be identified in the common existing tensions between local and national political actors and their actions.

As such, the urgent task for policy makers is to increase both their own coherence as well as that of the system within which they are acting. How this can be done leads to some key questions for further research, amongst them, how successful local initiatives to address violence can be scaled to the national and regional level.

This, in turn, calls for much interdisciplinary work on how to reform *policy-making* organizations to become more open and adaptive so as to embrace self-organization as

a process to be *encouraged* and pro-actively *shaped*. As argued above, this will require a commitment to an open, inclusive and decentralized approach to policy-making. Its proponents should be incumbent on demonstrate, in detail, how it could be encouraged and implemented across all levels of the policy-making and implementation process. This is particularly true in the area of international politics and political cooperation at the international level of the type analysed in this work, since, here, we are often dealing with several *huge* organizations which cannot simply be transformed from *one* state to *another* state. The way such organizations work and evolve needs to be *adapted* over time.

Finally, this leads us to the question of expectations as to which social conditions international organizations can actually influence and which results can be obtained. It may well lead to a re-examination of both the problem definition and one's own working practices. Whilst such a conclusion may be politically initially uncomfortable, it is also necessary, bearing in mind the disappointing results of policies so far. It would also be liberating, since it would free these actors from the unrealistic expectations they are often subjected to. In other words, such a re-definition of purpose and reform of decision-making structures would, in and of itself, initiate a process which can increase the coherence of the social systems within which these actors engage. The task is urgent, and time is pressing.

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Enfatizando o Problema? Organizações Internacionais e Seu Engajamento na América Latina para Enfrentar a Violência – O Caso da União Europeia no Triângulo Norte

Resumo: A América Latina é a região mais violenta do mundo. No entanto, décadas de investimento político e financeiro da comunidade internacional não tiveram os resultados desejados. Usando o trabalho da União Europeia no Triângulo Norte da América Central como estudo de caso, este artigo pergunta o que explica essa falha. Utilizando o enquadramento conceitual de Complexidade e Dinâmica do Sistema Humano, ele argumenta que as políticas atuais realmente consolidam o padrão de condições que conduzem, e sustentam, a violência. Ele mostra como, ao reconceituar esse problema usando os conceitos de Complexidade, as políticas podem se tornar mais eficazes e sustentáveis.

Palavras-chave: violência; América Latina; União Europeia, complexidade; Dinâmica do Sistema Humano (HSD).

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