

# Discovering gangs

Beatriz Seisdedos

## Resumen

Este artículo trata de un impacto. De una experiencia única en mi vida que me ha permitido conocer y, quizás, entender un poco más la complejidad de unos colectivos tan estereotipados y condenados como son las pandillas o agrupaciones. Indudablemente, la violencia y delincuencia que rodea a muchas de ellas debe de ser condenada; pero también es cierto que hay una puerta alternativa a la intervención represiva. La organización SER PAZ en Guayaquil (Ecuador) ha diseñado otras formas de trabajo que pretenden apoyar a aquellos chicos y chicas de las pandillas capaces de reflexionar y comprender la importancia de la paz en sus vidas. Han demostrado que muchos de esos jóvenes son capaces de darse cuenta del impacto de la renuncia a la violencia en su calidad de vida y, ahora, muchos de ellos, centran sus fuerzas en ese proceso de renuncia. Por nuestra parte, es importante que todos nosotros apoyemos a quienes quieren seguir ese proceso fomentando la comprensión de este colectivo. Esa es la humilde intención de este escrito: abrir ese descubrimiento personal a otros.

## Abstract

This article is about an impact. About a unique experience in my life that has allowed me to know and, perhaps, to understand a little bit more the complexity of such stereotyped and doomed groups as the gangs or associations. Undoubtedly, the violence and the criminality around many of them must be condemned. But it is also true that there is an alternative door to repressive intervention. The organization SER PAZ (Being Peace) in Guayaquil, Ecuador, has designed other ways of working that intend supporting those boys and girls from gangs that are able to reflect on and understand the importance of peace for their lives. They have showed that many of those young people are able to realize of the impact that the renunciation of violence has on their life quality. And now, many of them are focusing their efforts on this renunciation process. On our side, it is important that all of us give support to those who want to go on with this process by promoting the understanding of this group. This is the humble purpose of this work: to open this personal discovery to others.



**BEATRIZ SEISDEDOS**

A Business Management and Administration graduate, she began working in NGO's in 2001, combining this with Conflict Resolution studies. This led to her crossing paths with Nelsa Curbelo and her project with groups of young people in SER PAZ (Ecuador).

I arrived in Guayaquil (Ecuador) after a combination of strange factors: after having taken a post-graduate course and a specialization course on conflicts' resolution, I thought the moment had come to see close up the practical side of theory. It took me a year to do it and I could have never imagined how much.

I had read that other students of that course had "gone round" to Ecuador to work as volunteers with Nelsa Curbelo, the mother of Ser Paz, a local organization working with street gangs. I knew little more than their way of working was to apply conflicts' resolution techniques to help the young ones. I had no idea either of what would be my role, neither of what I was going to come across with. I was coming from a much more structured, planned, and scheduled world. So I was a little bit afraid of what seemed to be a jump without safety net. After having spent several days in Guayaquil, I understood that this way of living day to day is not completely fortuitous. In many cases it is originated by the uncertainty about what is going to happen the next day. Tomorrow they are going to do an activity and everything turns bad because the previous night a gang member was killed by another one. You have to postpone, repair and manage to channel the work again. No way of talking about the finance instability. You can only realize all that by understanding the political reality of Ecuador and the human complexity of gangs.

Thus, everything from my first day were learning and understanding processes, shattering schemes and preconceptions. Even though at a later stage I will try to convey what I understand nowadays about gangs, I would like to introduce which were the two big initial surprises.

First: Ser Paz does not think that the boys have to be taken out from the gangs, but that gangs must redirect their noblest values towards an improvement in their members' way of life and in that of

the communities around them. I did not need more than one week to realize the intelligence of this approach. The boys belonging to gangs need the gang; they need what the gang offers them: acceptance, protection, sense of being member of a group that acknowledges them. Wanting to destroy them is, from my point of view, the same as crushing a conflict with force, provoking the direct refusal of its members. It would make our gap even bigger. Redirecting them, understanding their running and getting the young to make things positive from inside the gang has a double usefulness: on the one hand, we manage to attract the youngsters towards other alternatives in life by promoting violence abandon and, in many cases, criminality. On the other hand, society can enrich itself from the boys' contributions in terms of creativity, initiative, and values of community solidarity.

Second: gangs are not only formed by boys. They also have girls, even though their status, role, and possibilities within the gangs are different from those of the masculine members. However, in their own way, they also have a strong influence on the group. They are not just members, sufferers or passive members. It is important to take them into consideration and to empower them. For three reasons, from my point of view: first of all, they can be more violent and cruel than the men in the same group. Since they do not have the physical force, they need other means, more subtle and aggressive, to manage to be respected. Thereby, working with them means to give a more holistic approach to the work with gangs, to manage to work with all the possible dimensions.

Additionally, women have an ability to influence on men when they are sentimentally linked. The instinct of protection becomes active in boys and they reflect more thoroughly on the importance of being alive.

Moreover, I think that the women members can be a courageous example. They can promote a bigger respect for women within Ecuadorian society, where there are still many gender inequalities, where women go on with their traditional roles renouncing to their own development. The gangs' women, especially the leading ones, are women with initiative. They would be able to focus that force, that proven force, on the defence of women's rights and on showing that it is possible.

## WHAT IS AN ASSOCIATION?

After the first two surprises, the first clarification from the boys arrived. There is an essential difference between gangs and associations. A street association (or "pandis" - from the Spanish "pandillas") is what in many places is known as street gang. They are groups of young people, between 15 and 30 years old (the average age is approximately 18 years), usually coming from the most marginal and impoverished strata of population. The associations are created according to a series of life and coexistence ideas between their members or brothers. They have their own hierarchical structures which must be strictly respected. They have defined their behaviour codes, rites, symbols, colours and ways of communicating. They have their own internal order structures.

Gangs do not have anything of that. They are just groups of youngsters devoted to crime. There are no elaborated structures, nor specific hierarchies.

As I went deeper in the world of associations, I began seeing surprising parallelisms between them and any other kind of society, community or tribe. I remembered all the complexity and creative effort of Tolkien when writing *The Lord of the Rings*. He crafted each one of the societies that form history. He developed every behavioural code, he even invented the languages. He created a new world from scratch.

The origin of associations is something similar to that. The boys and girls themselves, young people not older than 25, have created symbols, behavioural codes (which are transcript), rules of acceptance and rites, and have even developed their own slang, which can only be understood by themselves and those knowing the associations from inside. Some members are in charge of compiling the associatio-

n's history. On the other hand, they have their own power territories within neighbourhoods or cities. They struggle to dominate that territory, they fight one another and they refuse other associations in order to reinforce their own identity. Depending on each pandi and, sometimes, on each leader, they collect taxes among the members in order to finance the group's operation, or to carry out supporting actions inside the associations, or to cover expenses of the leaders themselves.

Is not this a microscopic vision of the components of any country or community? And is not it surprising that such young people had been able to imagine, create, maintain and spread something that came out from thin air? Is not a phenomenon the strong expansion of *pandis* and their sense of membership without a previous historical origin?

The associations have tyrannical leaders, leaders devoted to the cause and the association, corrupted leaders, leaders, leaders... Which national political history does not have an example of this among its presidents? Associations are subdivided into groups having their own leaders and whose representation, in most cases, allows them to choose the leaders of all the group or nation. Is not this an example of the democratic political system?

With this fascination for the complexity and the discovery of associations, I decided to counteract with the dictionary to make sure that I was not straying off my comparative process. According to the Dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, a society is a "natural or negotiated association of people that constitutes a unity different from each of its members, the purpose of which is to comply with all or some of life ends through mutual cooperation".

The origin of associations is always the need of being together, of associating to create an entity stronger than the individual (first coincidence). It is an entity that offers acceptance and the sense of membership that the community they live in does not offer. One of the basic values of *pandis* is their solidarity with the group. Supporting the "hermanito" (little brother) or "hermanita" (little sister). This mutual cover up grants that they are not going to be alone. It is a contract accepted by all of them according to which they receive common protection and security (second coincidence).

Another essential value is loyalty. They must be loyal to the brothers, to the association and its principles. Those that do not stick to the rules are seve-

rely punished. The penalty imposed to those not respecting them can be criticized and modified, especially if it is violent. But it is true that the aim to “impose” loyalty, and the purpose of preserving it, even by force, is to keep the solidarity and cooperation necessary for their survival in life (third coincidence).

Moreover, I began linking all these things to my experience in countries in conflict or in post-conflict situation. I was marvelled to see so many similarities between associations and the ethnic groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina. There, every ethnic group has its own colours and representative symbols. In many cases, they are also defined by a religion. They consider as legitimately theirs a part of the territory they are sharing. The refusal to the other ethnic group reinforces their own identity. They all feel the need to repair the damage caused by the other one, and the life objective (apart from going away and outstand as much as possible from the other ethnic groups) is to survive. Associations are like this. The only difference is that the associations’ membership is not linked to a genetic or historic legacy. As for the rest, associations have their colours, symbols, and flags, which they want to make prevail at any meeting or border between territories. They have their own rites and codes that, although being similar, they reinforce them as being their differential factor. The pride of being a member is shown, among other things, by bringing themselves out and depreciating the rest of pandis. They defend their dominated territories in neighbourhoods and they always consider the “an eye for an eye” revenge (in some cases, multiplied by 3) as the mean to repair the harm suffered. He was killed by that association and they will have to pay for it. They have to make amends for it by getting rid of the other one. And finally, at the really bottom of this matter, all of them are boys and girls who enter the association with the same purpose: their need to be accepted and their search for survival, for a better life.

## WHY DOES THE ASSOCIATION ARISE?

For most people, gangs mean violence and crime. It does not matter the name you give to them: Latin King, Nación de Hierro, Masters... They provoke suspicion and fear. Nobody wants to know about them, just to be far from them.

I suggest doing an empathic journey allowing us to create a bridge, to understand the reality of the associations’ members and their need to join them.

We should imagine them, in Ecuador for instance, immersed in the hustle and bustle of enormous and chaotic cities, full of traffic, contrasts, and people. Some of the rich ones are very rich; many of the poor ones are very poor. Let’s go to the marginal neighbourhoods, let’s follow the sand paths, where there are no sidewalks, there are plenty of pools and potholes, rubbish on the corners, no sewer system. We enter the house of families with poor resources. They are simple houses, some of them made with cane on an unhealthy inlet. The spaces are small, with a few windows, soft light bulbs; there is not enough light and, even sometimes, air. They are full of children, youngsters and aged people. A lot of noise. The walls are made with curtains. The most fortunate ones have a bathroom or a toilet inside the house. In some cases, there are unstructured families that struggle for survival and for surviving to each other. Their educational level is very low and the way of imposing ideas and order is by the use of force. That is direct violence. The structural violence comes then, and it is especially shown through exclusion and rejection.

Thousands of young boys and girls grow up under such conditions: without clear future expectations, with serious life experiences in a short period of time, and shortages in many areas (economic, educational, affective...) What would we do if we were them? What do you feel without having a point of reference? What would we look for if we were 15 years old, if we had a less than basic education, no economic cushion, dreams about a better life, so many problems at home that you do not want to come back, and so much more on the street as to want to run out? I think I would cling to whatever I could. I would cling to the first opportunity offering me security, protection, and some alternative. Because I would want to live; to live better than I had done up to that moment.

Suddenly, a door opens. Someone offers you relief to your life stress. Someone counts on you for a pandi. The association protects you, helps you (even economically), it supports and understands you. It is formed by people like you. They understand you much better than your parents, your grandparents or any other adult of your environment.

The association asks for your commitment. How much are you ready to give and to sacrifice for fee-

ling accepted, for having a reference, something to cling to? Suddenly you have brothers everywhere that protect you, understand you and ask for your contribution as any of them. You are one more of them, but you are not anybody. Your participation is valued. Doors that had been closed now open. You see that the association's members are fine. They have got money, a good mobile phone, a beautiful girl. They are respected and even feared. It is quite tempting. Basically, it is almost the alternative to your situation. And, on the other hand, it is normal that they ask you for something in exchange, that they want to test your entry. You must show that you are worthy, that you can also take part in it. In addition, you will become an exclusive member of society since each association considers itself to be exclusive, and this is the reason for their different codes and symbols. Being a member of it is like belonging to the elite, it is outstanding from a society that does not appreciate you. It is to find someone that really appreciates you as a person, as someone that makes contributions. Essentially, you want to contribute because it makes you feel more as a part of the group. The "ordeals" or entry sacrifices are ways of seeing your courage, your ability to really belong to the group, to follow the rules and the values they instill. If you are to belong to those elite, you need to prove it. You want to protect and to be protected.

And so, while you are looking for protection or friends or comprehension, you are already inside. You are accompanied. The rules are simple: you have to obey the leaders and engage yourself. The problem comes when this engagement is linked to violence as a way of defence and attack, and to crime as the system to earn your living.

Obviously, violence and crime cannot be justified, but their reasons can be understood. Of course, it is the simplest and quickest answer to problems. However, from my point of view, it is not the most efficient. It is not possible to win with it. The concept of winning has completely disappeared from the very beginning of the violent spiral. When one, two or three people from your group are dead, how can you think that revenge will allow you to win? In my opinion, we must be guided by the concept of stop loosing. But when there is not a reflection process on the vicious circle that violence represents, to have a weapon and a group of brothers by your side is the grant for protection and for imposing your will. Since you are dominating, it is

easier to be tempted by crime. It is also a quick way of having some revenue. I do a job and I can live during a week. This is easier than to work a whole month for the same amount of money. This way of living day to day is one of the obstacles to work with those boys. It is difficult for them to figure out their future, to think about the need to save, to invest in order to progress. For many of them, the use of money is just to spend it in what I want today and right now. In most cases, this perception changes when they begin having their own family.

## THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

The creation of a family and the closeness of death are often the main triggers of change for the boys. And this need arrives. It arrives because violence generates tension. Being constantly aware of whether the enemy is going to attack you while you are walking on the street, while you have lunch in a restaurant, is not what people want for their children and for themselves for the rest of their lives. During the meetings and encounters held with them on the streets, you could see that they were looking at every single person passing by. They analyse and evaluate the risk. They are constantly alert, even in their own territory. There is no rest. The attack from other associations or from the police may arrive at any weak moment. It is a permanent war. It is terribly exhausting.

When a loved one dies, many questions and strong feelings arise, especially if the dead person is a young close to oneself. Then, in many cases, they begin to think about other life alternatives.

Ser Paz has been working for years with the associations' members in their process of change and to promote the peace culture. If you listen to the boys that have taken part in the activities, it is perfectly clear that there has been a work on reflecting, repeating, and getting convinced of the message. Thanks to that, they are the ones who talk about peace with their peers, the ones who have been able to understand that violence is not a mean and that it does not lead to any good end. They have had the courage to make a shift and assume their responsibility. They are young people who, after workshops and discussions, are able to analyse and give an answer to different approaches. I admit that I admire many of them, just as I admire those that manage to give up the drugs or smoking. I admire them even



more because they have changed their way of life while being still in the association. They have managed to keep their leadership by refusing not only what they had defended before (the use of force) and what may have probably driven them to that status in the chain of command; but they have also trusted so much in it so as to be opposed to the association's heads that might be above them. In this "macho man" society, force and courage are valued according to violence. Those who are able to kill for their peers are more valued. Those who do not hide from a threatening bullet are praised. But, is it there anything more courageous than deciding to change one's people without leaving them? Some of those boys have managed to go on leading without weapons, to convince with the brain and not with kicks.

The conclusion from my stay is that it is possible. It demands patience, effort, understanding and faith in it. But it is possible. And the results obtained are so satisfactory that the only possible issue is to admit what is evident. Less than 6 months after Ser Paz began running, crimes decreased by 60% in the neighbourhood where we began to work.

## THE FRUITS OF CHANGE

If we want to look at figures, we could not stop: trained boys, integrated families, relieved neighbours. But I would like to explain something that I do have experienced and seen. It just so happened that I was in the right place at the right moment to witness the first mediating intervention carried out by the boys in order to avoid a large scale crash.

The conflict burst out in the city of Esmeraldas (north of Ecuador). After a long history of mutual aggressions, a Latin King was killed by one or several Masters. Agitation and fear grew among the associations. The ones were ready to take revenge; the others were ready to defend themselves. No matter how many lives it would imply. This is part of the deal. If there is war, you have to die for the association.

Is it not easy to find parallelisms with an ethnic conflict, with a civil war? How did World War One burst out? Pandis are like that. An event, a bullet at the wrong moment between wrong people and in an environment full of rancour may plunge youngsters and teenagers in a revenge bloodbath. Because boys and girls are armed. This is inevitable, just as the use

of those arms would have been was it not for a quick intervention.

The boys linked to the work of Ser Paz in Guayaquil, leaders of confronted associations in Esmeraldas, suggested to travel there as "ambassadors" in order to negotiate with the representatives of their respective associations in Esmeraldas. And so it happened. Restlessly, during 5 days, the boys met their groups, they talked, negotiated, they were convinced of the importance of finding non-violent alternatives and, finally, they were totally successful. They stopped the war. There were no more deaths and they managed to establish compensating options for the damages caused.

It is impossible to convey the strength and the intensity of those moments. There was a palpable tension among the young. Little was needed to start the fight. Any mistake would have been a catastrophe. And, nevertheless, it was not like that, quite the contrary. I admire those who were able to hold themselves at the last minute and, even more, to those who, having succumbed to violence, were then able to dominate it through words.

Nothing of that would have been possible without a previous work, a lot of information, and reflection processes and changes that have allowed the boys to trust in their ability to make positive contributions to their peers and, furthermore, to the society they live in, that society which is not theirs and which excludes them.

But peace is not just a given moment, it is a process. It is a situation in progress that must be nourished by being positive and by believing that it is possible to live like that. Many times we think that the ultimate end is to come to peace. But it is just a part of it. Its maintenance demands, on many occasions, the same or even greater efforts as for getting to it.

It is obvious that not all of us are able to think like that; not all the boys in the associations have the courage to radically change their way of life. But we must not judge them, we must just ask "would we do it?" and go on backing those who are ready to make the shift. And this is so because they can make important contributions if we are able to take the values and abilities typical from associations (solidarity, creativity, loyalty) and transform them and focus them on society, a more "global society". They can enrich our horizons and become a social example; a peace example for a society immersed in the use of violence as the method to solve problems. ■