7.4 Unholy Alliances or Creative Processes? Socio-Environmental Approaches Point Out New Ways toward Local Harm Reduction

*by Wolfgang Hees**

The rapid spread of crack and synthetic drugs can be witnessed all over Latin America. The cartels systematically push the consumption of cheap drugs or the residues from cocaine production into the former production and transfer countries. Helpless governments exacerbate the situation with their hard-handed politics by killing and criminalizing the victims, and violating fundamental civil rights. However, solutions can only be developed in cooperation with citizens and communities within their social environments.

There was a great deal of perplexity. While it is true that it had been expected for years, it had been repeatedly brushed aside and suppressed. This was no longer possible – the reality was too brutal. For so long, people had worked successfully and assumed that things would continue as always – a little more professionally, but with the old charisma. One had achieved and learned a great deal since Paulo Freire and his *educação popular* had been set up – literacy campaigns for the people that actually led to an increase in social awareness among the oppressed. The *educadores populares* in Brazil is a group – which it would be incorrect to translate directly as "the people's educators" – made up of socially committed volunteers, students, professionals, grassroots movements, and dreamers, and it has a tradition of almost four decades of fighting for those marginalized and excluded by society. They had come to focus increasingly on street kids and adolescents, underaged prostitutes, and young people at risk from the *favelas* (slums). And funding from abroad made it relatively simple to obtain money for the street kids. Organizations, movements, and networks were established. These initiatives led to the emergence, in 1990, of the progressive Children and Youth Statute, which in the meantime has led to the setting up of local, regional, and national child and youth councils with equal representation that are responsible for shaping and controlling child and youth welfare policies. The rights of children and youth were being

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guaranteed, also with the involvement of youths themselves. Until the new drugs came along.

Drugs were already widespread before and being consumed by the young people living on the streets and in poor districts, like all over the world – perhaps even more so, considering how diminished their prospects in life were. Cheap sugar cane spirits are cheaper than milk, sniffing glue banishes hunger and stress, and marijuana allows you to dream. But tobacco, alcohol, glue, and marijuana never had the same effects on young people as crack and the new synthetic drugs. Until they appeared, the usual practice in youth programs was to simply ban drugs within the organizations and during common activities – sniffing, drinking, and smoking weed was to be done only on the streets. Of course, attempts were made to prevent youths from consuming outside of the institutions, but soft drugs continued to be used and accepted without comment. The "No to drugs," "Nobody is allowed in who is carrying drugs," and "Zero drugs" campaigns represented a not very well-reflected position that differed little from the hardline "zero tolerance" policies of the state, its police force and legislation.

A serious shortcoming became apparent later. With the emergence and fast spread of crack – a residue left over during the production of cocaine (cocaine salt plus baking soda) – and synthetic methamphetamines (meth, crystal), it was already too late to change course. There was no longer time for drug prevention, education about the effects of drugs, or for practicing "functional" and responsible forms of consuming drugs, because these two new drugs have such a high and fast potential for addiction that the NGO employees – who had little training and hardly any experience in such matters – were like rabbits in the headlights of a fast-approaching vehicle and, in the beginning, they had no strategies for action.

Their clientele began disappearing rapidly. Guilty consciences and addictive habits that had to be fed were among the reasons why young people no longer came to the meetings or to the institutions. There was an increase in how much drug-dealing was happening as well as in the number of shootings among one another. There was fighting over the new profits and fighting with the police, who reacted with heavy hands, resulting in many deaths and the imprisonment of youths, who were increasingly becoming organized in gang-like structures.

The wave of violence and the willingness to use it literally exploded. Brazil became the country with the third highest murder rate in Latin America. Particularly affected are young black males from the slums. With 95.7 murder victims per 1,000,000 inhabitants, Recife is right at the top of the country when it comes to such statistics. Violent death has become the most common cause of death for youths between 12 and 18 years of age.

As the consultant responsible for Latin America in the foreign division of the German Caritas Association, I experienced this process up close with our partners. At that time, we supported the Tecendo Parcerias (interwoven partnerships) network, which we had been involved in setting up. We did this in cooperation

with around a dozen organizations that carried out youth welfare work with a focus on youth protagonism, which aims to make young people capable of taking care of themselves, and of assuming responsibility in the youth councils and in their own environments (school, city district, youth centers). As different partners in the network were involved in different tasks, activities like the following could be offered and promoted: proactive social work on the street; a reintegration into family and school; homework help; preventive action against sexual violence; cultural and sport leisure activities; support for criminal youths outside of the prisons; vocational training and integration into employment. Self-organization, participation, and emancipation for youths were the primary objectives, and a great deal of attention was given to peer education, with youths supporting other youths.

It was an approach in line with current trends and was marked by various innovative features, which continued to be based on the partner's traditional approach of individual orientation. It became apparent that this "subject-related approach," which was also firmly established in Caritas' concept, could not cope with the massive emergence of highly addictive drugs. Individual solutions such as withdrawal and therapies were not sufficient responses to the phenomenon, which had taken hold of almost the entire community and therefore required a collective response.

The search for new approaches and a reorientation in the work being carried out was a drawn-out process. It was not until the first exchange projects took place with those active in Columbia and Central America – where parallel programs succeeded in involving extremely violent youth gangs (*maras*, *pandillas*) in the community – that a willingness to discuss and initiate a socio-environmental, process-oriented approach emerged. Attempts to convince people of the methodological approaches (MeCom and Eco 2) behind this were first viewed with skepticism and only accepted because of the lack of alternatives. A realignment from "clients" – with their subject-oriented supportive approaches – to a social environment with a great number of stakeholders and the active minorities fighting for change meant a paradigm shift for the *educadores populares*. This meant having to think in terms of new structures and to go down a completely unfamiliar path. Nevertheless, the practice of contextual analysis with a self-initiated diagnosis of the social environment and the questions this gave rise to – as well as a prioritization of the necessary changes with the population and, in particular, the active minorities – made a considerable contribution toward an understanding of community life. However, above all, it led to an exchange and to the development of essential knowledge about that local community life.

A stakeholder analysis, which clearly shows the different spheres of influence in a visualization presented in one of the method modules, helped most to achieve a mental breakthrough. It became clear to them in whose hands the power was concentrated, on what this power was based, with whom he/she was connected to, as well as how an own lack of relationships and/or lack of diversity in relationships had led to marginalisation and a lack of influence.

Thanks to the protagonism program and the processes of active participation, they became active in their *comunidades* (= their social environments) and were also better networked with other groups and stakeholders via their peer groups. However, it turned out that they hardly used this "wealth" in relationships to strengthen their positions. Without further-reaching goals and without corresponding strategies, they were exploited within asymmetric relationships and, in the process, drawn into the structures of drug-dealing as dealers or as so-called "airplanes" (*avaio*/couriers). In the short term, they were able to earn money, power, and respect. But, in most cases, their own consumption got in the way.

As part of the methodical training courses, they quickly came to understand their deficits – faster than most of their *educadores* – at the same time recognizing their potential and their possibilities, which opened up new perspectives for action for them. After having largely overtaken their "instructors" conceptually, they also managed increasingly to build up new contacts – to stakeholders within their communities, who can be described as key figures. These are people – sometimes officials – who take their roles seriously, whether they are mayor, head of a cooperative, teacher, head of a police station, or health facility, priest, public prosecutor, etc., and who are interested in the social development of their communities. In addition, there are citizens who also have the same interests: the baker, the hairdresser, the widow, the young person, the retailer, the midwife, etc. These committed key figures, who are referred to as the "active minority" in the methodology, have a great number of contacts and knowledge, especially inside of, but also outside of, the *comunidades*. They are therefore in a position to activate both endogenous and exogenous potentials for change. In this understanding of the social environment as a relational space or environment of relationships, which goes beyond mere geographic space, the paradigm shift away from traditional community work in areas with social problems – the *favelas* – also becomes clear: It is not the deficits or problems that are prioritized, but rather the potentials and relationships among one another and toward the outside. The active minorities are, by definition – and in the project reality – willing to, and in a position to, activate this relationship potential when this is necessary for the benefit of the common welfare.

In a common effort by the *educadores*, the youths, and the additionally mobilized minorities, the situation and context of the community was diagnosed – discussed in detail and independently – over a period of several months in talks with citizens and officials, following a one-week introduction. Other active minorities came on board during this period, while some who had expected fast solutions and financial support left, because the process was taking too long for them or was organized too openly. It became clear to the youth welfare organizations that – in a context in which more than 3 percent of the regional population of northeastern Brazil were crack consumers, a figure that easily rose to 15–20 percent in the deprived areas – clientele-related and subject-related social work was no longer

in keeping with the times and that the challenges facing them could only be met with concentrated and networked community approaches.

What is more, in the diagnoses, the varied changes that had come about as a result – fear, mistrust, parents, schools and police unable to cope, hopelessness, a withdrawal into the family sphere, people leaving the district, etc. – and that had intensified in the city districts when drugs moved in and the ensuing violence emerged were accentuated differently within the respective *comunidade*, depending on the particular context. However, when the topic "origin of the community, the present situation and perspectives" was linked in the discussions to the analysis of the stakeholders, it became apparent to those involved what their roles were with respect to change and how much power they had in this respect. Instead of waiting for someone else to do something, the community itself got moving in order to demand change and then decide what form this change should take. They defined and prioritized their needs, weighted them between necessity and practicability by analyzing their potential and their corresponding power to act, and began carrying out the process of change.

Despite the stakeholder analysis carried out beforehand and with a heightened awareness coming from the discussions about questions of influence and power as well as structural violence, the active minorities were treading new ground by establishing contact to the stakeholders and creating new local network structures. This new ground, however, was mined territory, because not every police president, drug boss, leader of a youth gang, or even mayor was enthusiastic about this initiative and, in the beginning, many were not even willing to take part in the dialogue. However, this made it increasingly apparent what other money and power interests – as well as mutual dependencies, agreements, and corruptive elements – had established themselves in a vacuum devoid of state and civil society presence. And yet, in the medium term, the community-family environment allowed hardly anyone involved to escape the discussion taking place, because that meant isolation, a loss of face, and loss of power. The more consolidated the network became, the more important it was to participate in it. At the beginning, straw men and informants were sent to the meetings and training events. They did not take part in the actual happenings, but rather looked for opportunities to restrain the new movement. However, in most communities, the numbers of those taking part increased and they became more active, both in making suggestions and in putting these into practice.

And so, in 8 out of 12 communities participating in the project, it was actually possible to enter new processes of negotiation and create a new scope for development. This "success rate" is strongly dependent on the dedication of the active minorities, the strength of the opponents, the intensity of the support for these processes, as well as on the implementation of initial steps and achievement of small successes. These "successes" are the projects that the stakeholders have developed from their analyses of their social environments and jointly put into practice. They do not have to concentrate primarily on the drugs, but should act, above

all, to reinforce the shared social life of the community. These projects arise out of the respective context, they are varied, and they are owned 100 percent by the respective community. They include activities such as getting rid of rubbish and litter; improving the water and electricity supply or sewage systems; planting initiatives to make the district greener; repairing and improving the roads; building community meeting rooms, a chapel, or a neighborhood football pitch; providing mutual childcare; improving school buildings; and they can go as far as organizing a collective bakery, community gardens, and so on.

The creativity of the communities knows no bounds. The examples mentioned here are only a small sampling of those that methodologically trained communities in our project environment have put into practice – on their own and with only local financing.

Of course, there are also activities that work directly within the drug context. As such, "gun-free periods" have been negotiated with the drug bosses, so that the children can play outside during these times. Police have been trained about human rights and how to deal respectfully with drug users. Protected community spaces for drug users have been set up to take drug use out of the public arena. Shop owners were persuaded against and prevented from employing death squads to "get rid of" drug-dependent street kids. Due to intervention by the community, healthcare facilities undertook classic harm-reduction measures by handing out needles and condoms – all small measures and every single one a matter for debate.

However, the communities have a response to this: What is fundamental are the measures for social survival oriented toward the respective context and not the provision of help in individual states of hardship. It is not the drugs that have priority, but rather social relations in the community, for example, on how to deal with the drugs situation.

It is clear that these steps will not do away with drug use or drug-dealing; this will only happen when all drugs have been legalized and then controlled, are pure and of consistent quality, and can be sold on the market without the illegality surcharge. Only then will the severe and expensive collateral damage caused by the "war and the heavy hand against drugs" cease and a self-determined and functional *conviver* (cohabitation) with drugs and addiction become possible. The key to this and the path toward it lies within the *comunidade*, in the social environment.

Caritas international, the foreign department of the German Caritas Association, has been working since 1998 with a Latin American program to develop alternatives in the "War on Drugs" and has developed and tested socio-spatial procedures for prevention and harm reduction as well as projects to empower and include drug users, working together with Latin American partners and using the ECO 2 methodology and community-based treatment. Today, more than 600 organizations are in contact with the RAISS network, which was the result of this work. There are five specialized drug colleges that train people in Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Brazil, and Chile as well as a great number of Latin American governments – from the local communities to the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), an agency of the Organization of American States. The partners are in close contact with one another and use the new approach to influence the policies in their countries.