Local Civil Society
and the New Puzzle of Violence in Central America

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The new puzzle of violence in Central America

Central America[1] is currently considered the most violent region in the world. It leads the world in homicide rate, ahead of the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. The ratio of murders is ten times higher than the world average (ONU 2012–05–16). Unlike periods of recent history, when Central America was characterised by revolutions, civil war, and military dictatorship, nowadays violence in this region is predominantly criminal and generated within civil society, where it imposes a far higher risk for life and security than political violence, (Fox/Hoelscher 2010: 1).

The extent of violence differs considerably within the region: 87% of all homicides in Central America are committed in the "Northern Triangle", Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala; only 13% occur in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. In 2012, Honduras topped Central American and international rankings with 85.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (*El Heraldo* 2014/07/19) – in 2013, it reached 90 –, followed by El Salvador with 68.5 (SICA 2013) and Guatemala with 42 (*El País* 2013/07/11). On the other end of the scale, Nicaragua had a ratio of 11 (Insight Crime 2013/05/31) and Costa Rica 8.9 (*Nuevo Diario* 2013/02/28) [see: Figure 1]. About 20%-30% of today's violent crime in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala can be attributed to youth gangs, especially the *maras*[2] (see: Cruz 2007: 16; Aguilar 24/02/12). The mara is a relatively durable, robust, hierarchically-organised, cross-border, highly militant, and violent form of youth gang with – occasional – links to the drug trade, while the pandilla (insofar as it is not a mara) is a less durable and robust, essentially non-hierarchical, and less violent youth gang with younger members that agitates only locally and not on a cross-border level.

To put this in context with the rest of the world, today, violent crime in Honduras exceeds that of Germany by 90 times (1.0 per 100,000

inhabitants). South Africa, another internationally recognised epicentre of violence, "only" shows an index of 39.5 and, hence, is surpassed by every violence-prone country in Central America (Honduras is even double the ratio of South Africa).

This comparison gives rise to an interesting issue, which I infer as "the new puzzle of violence": *even though the Central American region shares historical-structural similarities, how can we explain the extremely high levels of homicidal violence in the three countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and the low levels in the two neighbouring countries of Costa Rica and Nicaragua?*

If one only looks at Costa Rica, this difference isn't surprising. A democratic welfare state known as Central America's "Switzerland", Costa Rica resembles Western European countries. But Nicaragua, on the other hand, also has low levels of violence despite displaying almost the exact same structural indicators as its northern neighbours of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (notably inequality, social exclusion, poverty, and past civil war).

The explanation for this puzzle is highly complex (see Zinecker 2014), but in reference to the focus of this publication, I will concentrate on the role of local civil society at the community level and try to answer the question *in which way does local civil society engagement at the community level contribute to the enormous differences in the level of violence constituting the new puzzle of violence in Central America?*

Prior to discussion of the empirical evidence in the countries concerned, I will briefly outline the theoretical framework of the research fundamentals, especially the roles of enabling and inhibiting the conditioning of criminal violence.

Homicides in Central America per 100,000 inhabitants, 2012 Source: Own elaboration
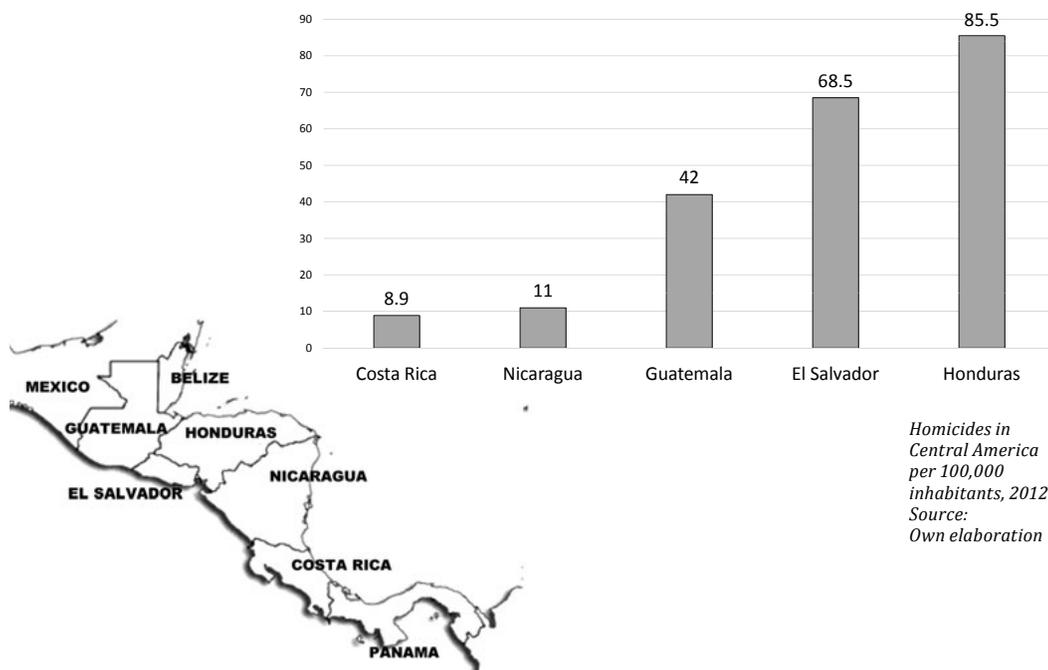
Theoretical framework: enabling and inhibiting structures of criminal violence

High levels of criminal violence are a result of both (present) enabling and (absent) inhibiting structures and arise from specific structural configurations of the state and civil society:

1. Existing enabling structures of criminal violence arise from the precarity and the lack of empowerment of labour, as well as from the lacking democratic substance of the political regime. Above all, political exclusion and/or missing political inclusion strongly influence enabling structures of criminal violence.

2. The absence of inhibiting structures of criminal violence are the result from a poor *performance* of the political regime alone, and here particularly of the state's part of the security sector and discouragement of civil society engagement.

Enabling structures form the structural breeding grounds for violence. Inhibiting (or preventive) structures can – alone or in combination with individual precautions – help to ensure that violence, despite the general existence of enabling structures, never erupts. Well-functioning preventive structures, can decisively curb violence, even if enabling structures exist.

03.
Criminology differentiates between the protective factors of "self-control" (of the potential perpetrator of violence) and "external control" (that of the state and society). In this text, only external controls – as a characteristic of the (fundamental) preventive structures – are taken into consideration (see: Lamnek 2008: 263).

Preventive structures function well when the external[3] controls mechanisms are neither defunct (inability of the security sector in a weak state) nor excessive (*mano dura* ["iron fist"] policies of a repressive state). Hence, a functional security sector is characterised by a balance of controls and can preventively intervene in the tide of violence with a policy somewhere in between the undesirables extremes of laissez faire and repression Such a balance in the application of state control mechanism (police, judiciary, prisons) should be mirrored by an equivalent balance in violence prevention strategies in civil society (also excluding both, control deficit and control surplus). This assertion is based on the general comparison of two characterisations of civil society: civil society in its democratic and therefore necessarily civilised form, and civil society in its non-civilised, and therefore a non-democratic form (see Zinecker 2011). The particular character of civil society, then, is to be found in a co-operative and peaceful relationship with the state.

A democratic civil society implies the acceptance of a separation of executive, legislative and juridical powers and therefore participates in the prevention of violence peacefully, which means unarmed. This differs from a vigilante civil society which claims autonomous juridical powers at the community level and, in the case of a weak state, can even do so in consent of government authorities. To resume:

a) In the first case, a democratic civil society agrees on symbiotic control together with the state. Both sides are strong in terms of not lacking the necessary control, but also without accumulating a surplus of control. In this case civil society will not react to violent intervention by a third party by a violent act on its own.

b) In the case of civil society resorting to vigilantism, the control surplus is an expression of imbalance in both the civil society and the state (who tolerates vigilante engagement among civil society).

The underlying concept of control (im)balance has been developed by different authors and especially by Charles Tittle (1997, 99 pp.), whose theory on self-control likewise fits for analyzing external control. Tittle assumes that both a deficiency as well as a surplus of social control would lead to deviance. Since crime is commonly understood as deviant behaviour, this theory explains crime and violence. Tittle's model resembles both Peter Wallensteen's (1999) distinction between "under consolidated" and "overextended states" in relation to state failure, as well as the Theorem of Democratic Civil Peace, which has been verified in the case of civil wars and political violence (Ellingsen/Gleditsch 1997; Henderson 2002; Hegre/Ellingsen/Gates/Gleditsch 2005). The corresponding alternative would be a balance of external social control which eliminates control deficiencies as well as surpluses. Hence, rampant crime can be explained as a result of imbalanced control.

Tittle's theory is also very close to the model suggested by Jaime Suchlicki:

> *"When force (punishment) is very permissive as well as very restrictive, anomic violence is negligible. Punishment in the mid-levels of intensity (apparently acting as frustrator) elicits high levels of anomic violence."* (Suchlicki 1972: 32)

While self-control avoids the automatic link from frustration to aggression, external control eliminates the turning point from aggression into violence. This, however, is only true if external control is balanced as outlined above.

The theoretical framework, only partially outlined here, served as a guide for the empirical field studies in the five countries covered in this paper.

Empirical Findings

In countries characterised by high levels of violence, notably **Honduras**, **El Salvador** and **Guatemala**, a surplus of control exists both on the part of the state, as well as on the part of civil society. Civil society thus interferes in matters of security by resorting to vigilantism, eventually overcoming both its own control deficiencies as well as the deficiencies of the state's security sector. Therefore, civil society engagement corresponds to those control surpluses provoked by the state.

In contrast, in countries characterised by low levels of violence, notably **Nicaragua** and **Costa Rica**, the following assumptions apply (and will be tested in the remainder of the paper):

Nicaragua's violence inhibiting structures of the state and particularly of civil society can be characterised as a well-functioning external control equilibrium. Neither the police (in contrast to the judiciary) nor civil society has control deficiencies or surpluses.

This also holds true for **Costa Rica**. However, an increase in homicide rates was observed since 1990, and particularly since 2008, and may be attributed to a conservative movement of "citizens' security" (*seguridad ciudadana*). This campaign makes reference to the broken-windows-theory and call for vigilante justice justified by an irrational need for civil society engagement to take the fight against criminal violence into their own hands.

Honduras

Honduras, as the country with the highest incidence of homicide in the region, is poorly equipped with police. Moreover, the reputation of police work cannot be worse, in terms of repression and the violation of human rights. The Honduran judiciary is the least independent and the most politicised in Central America and receives the lowest level of trust in its rulings – except for decisions by the Supreme Court. Equally, the conditions of prisoner detention ranks among the most inhuman in Central America (along with El Salvador, see Zinecker 2014, Chapter 10.4.2.).

However, Honduras has surprisingly for a short time earned a relatively good reputation in terms of co-operation between civil society and the communitarian police (*Policía Comunitaria*), second only to Nicaragua (see below). Being part of the *Programa de Comunidad Más Segura* it was governed by the idea that the police can assume full responsibly for security in cooperation with civil society.

President Ricardo Maduro (2002 – 2006), being known for his "iron fist" policies (*mano dura*), promoted neighbourhood networks to prevent violence under the command of the *Policía Comunitaria*. Different from the former *Comités de Seguridad*, which had transformed into paramilitary groups, the new *Comités de Seguridad Ciudadana* were unarmed and engaged in the restoration of public spaces, particularly public parks, and in improving security by providing electric lighting in the neighbourhoods. Furthermore, these committees were supposed to collaborate with the police by revealing locations where drugs and alcohol were traded, by reporting about the possession of guns, as well as building a sense of community and vigilance without falling back into panic. In the case of "extraordinary incidences", these committees finally should call the *Policía Comunitaria* (Romero, R. 21.02.07) for assistance. Although less democratic and unstable in comparison with Nicaragua, this kind of civil society engagement was considerable stronger in Honduras than in other countries suffering from high levels of violence.

The subsequent president Manuel Zelaya (2006 – 2009) inherited Maduro's plan and pursued it under the new title "one thousand round tables and citizens for security" (*un mil mesas de ciudadanos y ciudadanas por la seguridad*). Initial suspicion that the round tables would be a catalyst for vigilantism has not realized (Peetz 2012: 190/191). However, with the coup against Zelaya (2009) and the repressive tendencies against "his" civil society by the governments of Roberto Micheletti (2009 – 2010) and Porfirio Lobo (2010 – 2014), the democratising engagement with civil society has been reversed. Even the initial positive appearance of the *Policía Comunitaria* and local civil society in Honduras should not

*Figure 2:
The National
Police in Honduras
(Source: Mora 2013)*

be praised without also mentioning the dark sides of the state's security sector. Other elements of the state security sector (i.e. police, judicature and penal system) are rather dim, even in comparison with its neighbouring countries. Finally, the (temporary) community-oriented security policy did not produce any sustainable positive outcomes. In summary, civil society in Honduras has been unable to compensate the poor performance of the state in matters of security.

El Salvador

El Salvador, ranking second highest in homicide rates in Central America, has detention conditions for prisoners as poor as Honduras. Regarding the two other components of the state's security sector, the police (*Policía National Civil*, PNC) and the judiciary system, El Salvador however can still be considered the best within the "Northern Triangle" (see Zinecker 2014, Chapter 10.4.2) but still worse than Nicaragua and Costa Rica further South.

However, even compared to Honduras before the coup of 2009, Salvadoran civil society's participation in state security policies remains weak. For most parts, civil society has been less vigilantism compared to Guatemala (see below), by assuming passive role. The inactivity of civil society in El Salvador combines with a particular weakness of the communitarian police, which have played only a minor role in crime and violence prevention (a positive exception is Santa Tecla[4]). *La Policía Comunitaria* existed for some time but it never had a clear assignment until 1999, when it's cooperation with civil society was attempted in the form of the *Patrullas de Intervención Policial Comunitaria*. They engaged in neighbourhood patrols, but according to the view of a higher police officer, they never believed in the idea of violence prevention.[5] In 2004, this program

04.
In 2013, Santa Tecla was declared a peaceful Municipio (municipality). Under the leadership of Mayor Oscar Ortiz, who followed a consequent (primary) preventive security policy, Santa Tecla became one of the safest cities in the country (see: La Prensa Gráfica 2013-01-24).

05.
Official interview with PNC, cited in: Savenije 2010, 74.

was scraped and the idea of community policing was given up for the time being.

Hence, the National Police Force was to assume the exclusive task of violence control, and limited their contact in the local neighbourhoods to the collection of information. After two years of absence, the *Policía Comunitaria* was brought to life again under the leftist government of Mauricio Funes (2009 – 2014) and was backed by the United States of America through the *Asocio para el Crecimiento*.[6] Yet, the government was undecided about which role the *Policía Comunitaria* was to play: should it exclusively engage in violence prevention or should it extend its functions into an investigative body, as well? Was it supposed to operate in all barrios (neighbourhoods) or just in a selected few? A dominating opinion suggested that the *Policia Comunitaria* should reward the relatively violent-free *barrios* and keep clear of the more violent ones. An official in charge literally said: "The *Policía Comunitaria* should only be used where the state and its laws were respected" (see Flores, L. 25.02.12).

In summary, the Salvadoran situation illustrates the absurd but frequent view that (primary) violence prevention and sanctions against violent offenders (as secondary prevention) are not compatible and need to be detached from each other. The consequence of such policy would imply that (primary) prevention would be useless in those areas where violence is already a dominant feature of community life.

Guatemala

Also in Guatemala local civil society engagement was, and still is, extremely weak when it comes to containing violence in a coordinated and democratic manner. Vigilante reactions are particularly rampant. Concerning the state's role within the security sector, Guatemala is ranked worse, in terms of corruption and militarisation of the police, than Honduras and El Salvador – although its "iron fist" policies (mano dura) have never been
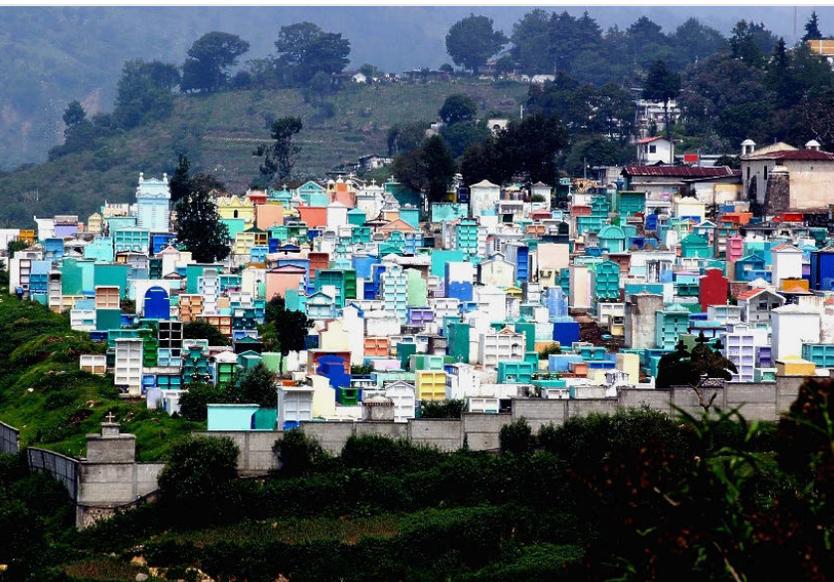

*Figure 3:
For some people, life after death is more colourful than before:
A cemetary in Guatemala.
Source: iStock./
JudyDillon*

developed as repressive as those in the other two countries. Public trust in the Supreme Court is the lowest in the region and resources of its judiciary system are the scarcest. Nevertheless, compared to the neighbouring countries of the "Northern Triangle", Guatemala offers the best conditions of detention for its prisoners (see Zinecker 2014, Chapter 10.4.2).

Explanations given for the presence of vigilante practice in civil society engagement in Guatemala refer to the (after-) effects of the Civil War, in which the civil society was – on both sides – even more involved than in El Salvador or Nicaragua. In that period social networks at the community level were accordingly ruptured and destroyed. Specifically destructive was the appearance of Patrullas de Autodefensas Civiles (PAC)[7] and, from 1993 onwards, the Grupo Guardianes del Vecindario are crucial.

Public trust into the police is low while the police keep complaining about civil society's lack of cooperation. According to the argumentation by the police, civil society would often have no idea of what was happening on the ground at the community level and would avoid reporting crime... (Member of PNC, cited in International Crisis Group 2011: 12). Consequently, more money is spent on private security protection in Guatemala than on the police (Oficina de Derechos Humanos 2012: 59). The vigilante tendencies in civil society thereby are much stronger than its 'democratic' representation, the Guardianes del Vecindario, Grupos de Ronda (civilian patrols equipped with sticks, machetes, pasamontañas (ski masks), but frequently also carrying guns) or the Juntas Locales de Seguridad (neighbourhood watches).

The vigilante neighbourhood groups were founded under the government of Álvaro Arzú (1996 – 2000)[8] and often led by a chief of police, and in 75% of cases, even by the military (Carballido Gómez o. J.: 19). Their activities lack any democratic endorsement or consultation with civil society and include lynching (Handy 2004: 534), social cleansing, kidnapping, and extortions. Furthermore, these groups and committees tend to

07.
The Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (PAC) were founded by the Guatemalan military at the end of 1981 under the government of General Romeo Lucas García. By 1985, the PAC incorporated approximately one-third of Guatemala's rural male population.

08.
Their operations were mostly coordinated by the government, especially by the Oficina de Relaciones e Información de la PNC (ORIS) and the Consejo Municipal de Seguridad Ciudadana (CMSS).

Figure 4:
Juntas Locales de Seguridad in Guatemala (Source: Emisoras Unidas, 2013-06-18)

be better equipped than the police and frequently have helicopters, night vision aids, wiretap devices, and GPS at their disposal (Argueta 2010: 13).

In some municipalities these groups were mixed up with former members of PACs. Parts of PACs – calling themselves leader de comunidad – maintain close links with private security services. Vigilantism thereby "substitutes" state authorities by "convicting" (suspected) offenders. As a result, the population now seeks to protect itself against vigilantism, consequently founding additional local security groups.

Costa Rica

In contrast to all other countries in Central America, Costa Rica is not as prone to violence because of its flourishing market economy (instead of rent economy)[9] and democracy. Costa Rica, in this sense resembles Western industrialised countries (see Zinecker 2014) which are characterised by similar low levels of violence.

In respect to violence prevention, the framework of a strong democratic government provides good inhibiting structures against crime. The state security sector in Costa Rica is considered to be the best and most robust in Central America and even in Latin America, along with Chile. (Programa Estado 2008: 485). This is the main contrast to the countries of the "Northern Triangle": Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Inhibiting structures in Costa Rica are even more encompassing compared to Nicaragua, as they are strengthened by the good performance of the judiciary. The police, however, according to Elías Carranza (18.05.06), are not only worse than in Nicaragua, but also inferior to Costa Rica's judiciary system.

While Costa Rica never has a serious security problem in the past, the homicide rate suddenly increased in Costa Rica from 4.5 to 11.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants between 1990 and 2010 (Huhn 2011: 345). This triggered off an exaggerated political discourse and process of "securitisation"[10], sometimes even preceding public perception of the announced problem: an image of the offender was discursively constructed as an "enemy" of the community. The theory of "securitisation" is based on the assumption that safety is built upon "securitising". That means, as in accordance to Wæver (1995: 51): "(I)n naming a certain development a security problem, the 'state' can claim a special right (…). Power holders can always try to use the instrument of securitisation of an issue to gain control over it. By definition, something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so."

Such discourse referred to a conservative version of the broken windows theory[11]. In particular, Rico/Chinchilla[12] referred to New York's police strategy with reference to that broken windows theory[13]. Such propaganda prepared the field for real "securitisation" involving 'iron fist' security programs and a growth of the private security sector.

According to Lara Blanco (17.05.06) from UNDP, the Costa Rican population perceives the threat of being victimised 20 times more than what actually occurs. Thus, the perception of insecurity in Costa Rica is the highest among Central American countries.[14] On the whole Latin American continent, this perception is only exceeded in Venezuela (Lagos/

09. Rent-seeking, combined with marginality and non-democratic political regimes, is typical of developing countries.

10. The securitisation approach works in particular in conjunction with labeling and moral panic (see: "politics of panic").

11. For this distinction, see the paper by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2008: 24 pp). The FES paper, however, is only theory-oriented and does not integrate the case of Costa Rica.

12. Laura Chinchilla was first minister of security and then president of the country between 2010 and 2014.

13. In New York, commissioner William J. Bratton initiated the 'iron fist' strategy in 1994. He assumed that the severe punishment of petty crime (or at least having information about these crimes) would prevent the same perpetrators from committing serious acts of crime later on. At the same time, the impression of hard external control could and should be made (see Frühling 2000: 231).

Figure 5: Police on patrol in Sámara, Costa Rica. Photo: iStock/ ukulelegirl

Dammert 2012: 5). This perception includes that maras would be present in the country, although these youth gangs never developed in Costa Rica. Moreover, if four of five youngsters meet somewhere, this is perceived as a gang (Espinoza 12.05.06). Huhn (2011: 121) claimed that fear of crime led to "punitive populism" in Costa Rica.

The inflated debate about insecurity obviously had an effect on the local and central state levels and a top-down stipulation of community policing. The first Comités de Barrios were founded on the provisions ruled in the Ley de Policía in 1994 (Policía Comunitaria) as well as later in the police reforms of 1998. The slogan appeared that civil society had to take the law into its own hands since the state was not able to provide security. Implicitly, vigilante civil society engagement has been legitimised in the fight against crime and violence. Consequently, schools of security were opened and neighbourhood watches founded, and for some time all adults became voluntarily members of the Comités de Seguridad Comunitaria.[15] Yet, these activities and the civil society engagement exclusively were organised on the neighbourhood level and never became part of central planning or coordination. The police, long since having lost its relations towards civil society, now hurried to re-establish these bonds in a vigilante manner. In the long run, however, only elders and women stayed involved while the youth never could be enlisted (Matul 18.05.06).

Initially, the population inside the barrios even were trained in self-defence (Guzmán, J. 16.05.06), and learned how to "swing the stick" (Loría 16.05.06). Later on, civil society's focus shifted increasingly towards providing information. Most of the time, civil society stayed passive. But on a few occasions it happened that the population of the barrios engaged in self-defence and sometimes even lynching (Chaves 1996: 32 pp.). A number of people bought guns and rifles to defend themselves against delinquents (Matul 18.05.06).

Although signs of vigilante civil society engagement developed and were backed by the state it would be wrong to refer to vigilantism as a characteristic of civil society in Costa Rica. On the whole, Costa Rica generally remained a country with relatively low homicide rates. But precisely

14.
The existing difference between perception and reality is a characteristic of both low-violence countries (in other words, of Nicaragua – although on a lower level – as well). It is not, however, characteristic for highly violent countries, where the perception is also (somewhat) higher than the reality, but equal to the trend (Lagos/ Dammert 2012: 5).

15.
This was accompanied on the community level by COVIRE-NAS (Comités de Vigilancia de Recursos Naturales), by Comités Tutelarias de los Derechos de la Niñéz, and by Juntas de Salud.

because these rates were, and continue to be low, it is absurd and counter-productive at the same time that repressive and vigilante methods can be used. In this regard, the formerly existent external control balance temporarily switched towards a surplus of citizen control in Costa Rica, which never experienced high levels of violence compared to its neighbouring countries.

Nicaragua

Like Costa Rica, Nicaragua also shows low homicide rates in comparison to the Central American countries in the North. This result, unlike in Costa Rica, is not attributed to a flourishing market economy or exemplary. Yet, in the absence of both, Nicaragua is –along with the three countries of the "Northern Triangle" –prone to violence, however, high levels of violence did not become a reality. However, surprisingly enough, this is not the case. Nicaragua is not affected by the maras though it does experience of youth gangs, known as pandillas, which are less brutal and hierarchically organized than the Maras (see Zinecker 2012; Footnote 2). For this special position, the security policy, including the (local) civil society in Nicaragua plays a crucial role.

Since 1999, the Nicaraguan security concept has been marked by a close relationship between the police and civil society, particularly on the municipal level (Cordero/Gurdián/López 2006: 34, 63 pp.). This relationship was part of a new strategy, which is oriented towards identifying and addressing the origins of violence and insecurity, and therefore followed a proactive, preventive, and community-based approach (ibid: 31 pp.). The system of seguridad pública, originally created for the protection of persons and goods, was replaced by the concept of seguridad cuidadana. In contrast to the countries of the "Northern Triangle", but also to Costa Rica, the Nicaraguan security strategy is preventive in nature (neither repressive like the strategies implemented in the northern countries, nor based on the conservative version of the broken windows-dogma,

Figure 6:
The canciller Ricardo Patiño from Ecuador meets the chief of Nicaraguan police, Ms. Aminta Granera, to learn about Nicaraguas security concept.
Foto: Wikimedia/Fernanda LeMarie

as in Costa Rica). In contrast to those reactive and repressive policies it can be interpreted as proactive. "What I recognised", mentioned Bishop Monseñor Hombach (27.09.06), "was that the police in Nicaragua had an extraordinary interest in getting into contact with the population." The police, furthermore, values and supports civil society's capabilities in tackling violence via proactive, community-oriented, as well as democratic, and certainly not vigilante methods.

The origins of cooperation between the police and civil society date back at least to 1990 when there existed a program called "Friends of Police". Since 2007, this relationship has been enhanced by the Policía Comunitaria Proactiva (Savenije 2010: 30), representing a citizen-friendly and progressive community policing approach. The level of civil society engagement serves as an indicator for the success of this policy.[16]

Innovative forms of security governance have been developed in cases where youth gangs send out signals of violence. In such an occasion, grandmothers, mothers, or respected individuals in the district approach gang members in the first instance and talk to them. These gang members perceive that they are being taken seriously, listen to the arguments of the community members, and will cooperate most of the time. This, of course, will not dismantle the pandilla. If trouble continues, members of the community will notify the police. The latter will visit the adolescents' families; eventually address their schools and churches. They approach the adolescents, listen to them, and try to offer professional and cultural alternatives. At the same time, they make note of complaints about administrative and economic deficits in the district and pass them on to the government. Eventually, conflict settling meetings in the presence of a local authority or the police are arranged between conflicting gangs, aiming at a cease fire or peace pact and voluntary disarmament. The handing over of guns proceeds with similar solemnity as during the demobilisation of guerrillas.[17]

All together, Nicaraguan inhibiting structures, both on the side of the state as well as from the side of civil society, can be seen as a testimony of well functioning external control balance. Neither the police nor civil society holds significant deficiencies or surpluses of social control.

The country's judiciary system is less impressive. Its flaws cannot be denied; it is by no means independent from the other two political powers and is also more prone to corruption and clientelism than the police (López, Cairo 25.09.06, and Serrano Caldera 29.09.06). But since the police plays the role of "frontman" within the public security sector; the judiciary only performs the last step in crime and violence prevention. As long as the preceding steps function well, the consequences of a malfunctioning judiciary system are much less severe.

The Nicaraguan case may be valued a 'best practice' in security oriented governance, and a rare example of Public-Private as well as Private-Private Security Partnerships. Since 2000, security governance functions as a well-organised interplay of:

- a community-based, preventive, proactive (instead of repressive and reactive) police force;

16.
Statement by Comisionada Mercedes Ampié (11/09/06). Cordero, Gurdián, and López (2006: 97) state that civil society is responsible for informal control mechanisms, whereas the state is in charge of formal social control. At the same time, these authors even make a special effort on "transfers of power to civil society organizations" (Ibid.).

17.
This assessment is based on the author's own observations during her fieldwork in Managua and Estelí in September 2006.

- a democratically self-organising civil society at the community level (and on the national level);

- and a business sector collaborating with institutions of the security sector.

In summary, the Nicaraguan experience provides conclusive evidence for the validity of the theoretical proposal outlined at the beginning of the paper. The key explanation for the new puzzle of violence in Central America can be found in Nicaragua: although being the poorest country in Central America and without having established either a strong market economy or democracy before, Nicaragua managed to install effective inhibiting structures against criminal violence.

With a relatively well organised civil society in Nicaragua, there is furthermore no "need" for pandillas to provide an alternative or substitute a sense of belonging for the youth without a realistic future, and who would otherwise fall prey to the maras. In the current democratic society configuration of Nicaragua, cooperation and social engagement provides a better alternative to violence-prone adolescents than the short and painful life in a youth gang. While maras in the countries of the "Northern Triangle" the maras present a common nightmare, even the less violent pandillas can offer an attractive alternative to the rewards of a productive and contributing position in civil society.

However, there is no paradise without snakes. in Nicaragua too, the borders between vigilante and democratic social practice is narrow. The controversy surrounding the Consejos del Poder Ciudadano under the Ortega government[18] illustrates this issue in detail. Yet, it is certainly a democratically-committed civil society that has been predominant.

18.
These consejos are led by President Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo, and should ensure direct democracy at the community level. The opposition critizises these consejos because, essentially, they function vertically, are dominated by the FSLN, and they are a non-pluralistic, parallel political structure.

Conclusions

The empirical findings largely support the theoretical proposals presented at the beginning. On the whole, the state security sector has not been able to stop the cycle of violence in Honduras, El Salvador, or Guatemala. Different as in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, violence remains a

constant threat. The empirically most obvious correlation between negative indicators of security such as a bad state performance (i.e. security strategies, police, judiciary, penal system) and a vigilante civil society on the one hand, and on the other hand notoriously high levels of violence (measured in numbers of homicides) can be found in Honduras. Even if El Salvador ranks best among the three northern countries in terms of a functioning police and judiciary, its security performance is worse than in both Southern countries. This finds its explanation in the Salvadoran security strategy, in its reliance on the mano dura-policies, the militarisation of the security sector, the particularly weak cooperation between the police and the less vigilante but inactive civil society. The result is the elevated homicide rates.

Furthermore, democratic engagement of civil society at the community level is low in all of the countries of the "Northern Triangle". Democratic civil society engagement was comparatively strong in Honduras until the coup against Zelaya, but the state security sector was weak and civil society engagement in security issues had to be limited by the lack of support from the state security sector. Salvadoran democratic civil society indicators are weak and also atomised – the local civil society remains democratically inactive there – which coincides with a failed strategy of community policing and exhibits a lesser degree of vigilantism (contrary to Guatemala). Guatemala represents a weaker and less repressive state strategy in terms of mano dura – in comparison to Honduras and El Salvador – but is accompanied by a civil society profoundly entangled with vigilantism. In none of these three countries does a balance of external control exist – neither within the state security sector nor civil society – which would present, according to the theory communicated at the beginning of this work, an inhibiting environment to violence.

In Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, civil society's part in security strategies has to be characterised as vigilante and at least (in El Salvador), democratically inactive. Together with weak state performance, it contributes to deficiencies of external social control. This confirms the above mentioned hypothesis of Peter Wallersteen saying that not alone an under consolidated state but equally an overextended state is marked by control deficits (over the development of crime and violence in this case). This cannot be compensated through excessive repressive control but such an attempt would rather make things worse. Finally, compensating these deficiencies, both parts of the security sector, the state and civil society, produce surpluses of control. Thus, civil society's predominant surplus of external control corresponds to the state's surplus of control. Consequently, well-functioning inhibiting structures are nonexistent and therefore the stream of violence produced by enabling structures cannot be stopped by it, neither in general or at the community level.

In comparison to the three countries of the "Northern Triangle", in Nicaragua and Costa Rica violence is much less predominant as Error: Reference source not found clearly illustrates. In contrast to Nicaragua, however, homicides slightly increased in Costa Rica between 1990 and 2010. It may be true that police performance waned to a certain extent, but this did hardly justify the political reaction expressed by the

introduction of harsh 'securitization' politics that partly replaced the previous welfare state model. These new politics cannot be justified rationally through the recorded homicide rate in the country, but may be better understood as part of a manoeuvre to by stabilize political power (and in itself generated more violence).

Nicaragua has achieved a good balance of control – despite high susceptibility to violence – through a proactive-preventive security strategy, in which the police and civil society have built a strong relationship with each other.

These comparisons furthermore show that civil society cannot be more efficient in preventing violence than the state and, in particular, the police. This is especially true if civil society disregards the rule of law and intervenes on its own in sanctioning violence. External control balances are not able to do without both components. Moreover, it should be clear that very low as well as exaggerated external social control (excreted by the state and civil society), cause imbalances of control – which is necessary to regulate the reaction of the security apparatus and at the same time to deter potential offenders.

It is evident that the civil society sector tends to resort to self-help justice (vigilantism) if the state fails to provide the needed protection against crime and violence. In the countries of the "Northern Triangle", lacking performances of the state's security sector are evident: the state itself remedies its deficiencies with surpluses of control. The same can be said about civil society as by turning towards vigilantism intents not only to resolve its own control deficiencies but those denied by the state as well.

All points elaborated above, taken together, produce in the countries of the "Northern Triangle" a "double" and therefore extreme external control imbalance. Regarding the state, this imbalance is caused by a number of factors:

a) the lacking conceptualisation of a logical, compact, as well as democratically intended security strategy;

b) the systematic priority of sanctions over (primary) prevention and rehabilitation (sanction thereby is understood merely as physically repressive than oriented towards the rule of law);

c) the militarisation of the police and the penal system (sometimes even the whole security sector);

d) and finally a dysfunctional judiciary system, fully dependent on the other two political powers, all contribute to this imbalance.

Concerning civil society, vigilantism as an expression of self-defence is a consequence of lacking cooperation between the police and civil society at the community level. In no way have surpluses of control were compensating deficiencies of control, neither on the part of the state nor in civil society. In contrast, these deficiencies of control have even been reinforced. These findings are summarized Table 1.

High susceptibility to violence and a high reality of violence			
	Honduras	**El Salvador**	**Guatemala**
Performance of the state security sector	low: control deficit and surplus	low: control deficit and surplus	low: control deficit and surplus
	control deficit within the police, judiciary, and penitentiary systems	control deficit specifically within the Policía Comunitaria and penitentiary system	control deficit specifically within the police and judiciary
	control surplus through mano dura policies	control surplus through mano dura policies	control surplus through (attenuated) mano dura policies
Performance of civil society in the security sector	low: control deficit and surplus	low: control deficit and surplus	low: control deficit and surplus
	control deficit due to the suppression of a democratically active civil society	control deficit due to an inactive civil society	control deficit due to the substantial absence of a democratic civil society
	control surplus through a vigilante civil society	control surplus of the state cannot be prevented by civil society	particularly strong control surplus through an extremely vigilante civil society

	Low reality of violence despite high susceptibility to violence	Low reality of violence due to low susceptibility to violence
	Nicaragua	**Costa Rica**
Performance of the state security sector	high: control balance in police and penitentiary system (slight imbalance in the control of the judiciary)	high: but a little damage to the control balance by the control surplus and shortcomings of the police
	control balance through proactive and preventive security policy	slight damage to the control balance due to conservative and "securitizing" variant of the broken-windows theory
Performance of civil society in the security sector	high; control balance	medium; control equilibrium, but with a slight control surplus
	control equilibrium through a democratically engaged (and not vigilante) civil society	slight damage to the control balance by a temporarily vigilante civil society

Table 1: External social control and performance in the security sector. Source: Author's own elaboration.

*Figure 10:
Rehabilitation
measures for
young people "in
social risk" in
Nicaragua.
Source: Infosur
hoy. 2012-12-21.
Photo: Abigail
Hernández López.*

Afterthoughts

The Nicaraguan case allows some interesting additional observations. It shows that violence can be reduced even without overcoming poverty and inequality (even if that is highly desirable). Neither political science nor critical peace and violence research have been able to explain this fact., There can be no doubt that a democratically engaged civil society therein, is of central importance. But which choice has the civil society in those countries of the "Northern Triangle", which suffers high levels of violence and where the not willing or capable to protecting the civil society? Should, under these conditions, civil society not has a right to self-defence and to vigilantism? From a legalistic perspective, the answer is a clear no! Yet, as long as the rule of law is not secured, the rule is the law of the jungle. The story of Nicaragua, which could not guarantee the rule of law itself due to its weak judiciary, opens a perspective.

Might Nicaragua thus be an exemplary case for the countries of the "Northern Triangle"? Are the propositions generated out of the discussion on Nicaragua transferable? Or does Nicaragua represent an exceptional case due to its revolutionary past that possibly sowed the seeds for today's democratic engagement of civil society? And furthermore, is the transfer of the insights gained from the case of Nicaragua desirable in the first place?

I assume that it does not need a revolution in order to control criminal violence today. But due to its structural configuration, apart from its revolutionary past, Nicaragua provides many features that are ready to be transferred. Out of this case, lessons can be learned and best practices can be drawn:

The methodological and practical problem, namely that Nicaragua's revolutionary history is unrepeatable and that lessons drawn from it are not transferable, can be overcome by comparing Nicaragua with other – local – cases enjoying low levels of violence. In this way, common features might be discovered finally explaining low levels of violence without the interference of revolutions, such as:

19.
This applies, for example, to the Sololá, Quiché, and Totonicapán (see: Prensa Libre 18.12.12).

- the ongoing democratic experiences of indigenous communities in Guatemala (in the areas populated by indigenous people, the homicide rate is especially low[19]) and certain advantages of their customary law, as well as

- (Non-indigenous) municipalities with successful state-led, as well as civil society-led security governance. The examples of Santa Lucía de Cotzumalguapa[20] in Guatemala and Santa Tecla in El Salvador are cases in point in this regard.

Together with the Nicaraguan model, all these cases share the following features: first, the community level is strong enough and the meaning of "community" has a high status, leading to the second point that particularly local civil society in the security sector is acting on a democratic and non-vigilante basis. Third, therefore, a rather (primary) preventive approach in containing violence prevails.

However, there still exists at least one reservation against relying on this model: in the Nicaraguan case, (primary) prevention is a standalone feature which is not supported by the secondary elements, namely criminal prosecution, deterrence, and protection of victims. This transmits the impression of a police that confines itself to (primary) preventive strategies, hence mutating into a "club of social workers".

The Nicaraguan success story, however, directly or indirectly conceals two important issues:

- the incorrect perspective (as it implies to the dichotomy) on sanctions and (primary) prevention, in the sense that sanctions (founded on the rule of law) are assumed to be less important; but also

- the problematic view that in spaces where violence is already present primary prevention does not make sense.

Both perspectives are obviously wrong, as I showed in detail above. Thereby, and related to development cooperation, essential conclusion can be drawn: Regarding the three countries of the "Northern Triangle", there is a much-needed development cooperation which requires the implementation – besides primary prevention – of sanctions into the security sector within the framework of the rule of law. This becomes even more important as an attempt to strengthen the framework eventually de-legitimises counteracting discourses, which denigrate the rule of law as a "*sistema ultra-garantista*"[21].

The approach by no means simply intents to replace the weak state's part of the security sector by civil society – not only in the case of civil society being prone to vigilantism but also if civil society is democratic in nature. In contrast, this is because security policy always needs both pillars: civil society and the state. Civil society cannot be any better and more democratic in matters of security than the state, and vice versa. As malfunctioning security sectors are currently integral parts of the political reality in Central America's "Northern Triangle", the concept serving to overcome these restrictions has also to be integral and include equally all four components I discussed in this chapter: the police, the judiciary, the penal system, and civil society, particularly at the community level.

20.
In Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa – which once, like Villa Nueva, belonged the Guatemalan municipalities with the highest homicide rates – the mayor managed not only to reduce the previously high rate of violence, but to keep it low. This required close and democratic cooperation with the civil society, in other words, without the favoritism of political affinities, and with respect for local leaders (Live recording 22.03.06).

21.
At the time of the interview, Ulíces del Dios Guzmán, at the time (14.02.07), magistrate in the Supreme Court in El Salvador, stated that the rule of law would be for delinquents, not for the victims. He and like-minded persons call the present system a "sistema (ultra)garantista" that benefits delinquents and that is based too much on the rule of law.

22.
This originally much more detailed paper has been shortened by the volume editors, which implies a certain degree of simplification. They apologize for any misinterpretations that >> >> may have incurred in the process. For more accurate explanations and precise data please refer to Zinecker (2014).

Figure 9:
Girl in Managua.
Source
Wikimedia/ Feed
My Starving
Children 2011

This, however, only becomes feasible if not mutual compensation in the
security sector is anticipated or expected from the beginning but rather
autonomous strengthening of both the state and (local) civil society is
likewise realized.[22]

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