Chapter 2. Public Security in Central America

Laura Chinchilla Miranda

This chapter analyzes the problem of public security in Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—from 1980 to 2000. It begins by presenting the changes in the sub-region's security agenda, characterized by the discontinuance of the "national security" notion and the adoption of the concept of "public security" or "citizen security." Both concepts have significant implications for the definition of threats, the types of responses that threats trigger, and the institutional players that intervene.

The chapter goes on to describe the Central American security problem, characterized by increasing crime rates—especially for violent crimes—and an intensification of the population's feeling of insecurity. Next, it analyzes the institutional responses to crime and violence that the countries of the region have coordinated. During the past two decades, Central America encouraged a dynamic process of strengthening civilian police forces and establishing a criminal justice administration that would be more consistent with the democratic context and new social requirements. These internal reform processes have been matched by region-wide efforts seeking to improve the level of coordination among law-enforcement authorities in combating organized crime. However, the chapter points out that such efforts have not generated the anticipated public response, and this has resulted in dangerous trends toward a return to repressive reactions that threaten the still nascent democratic processes of the region.

The final section presents some alternative concepts that are gaining acceptance in the region's public security agendas, such as community security and democratic security. These concepts recover the notion of an integrated response vis-à-vis the security problem as addressed within the broader concept of human security. These new proposals, though still outside the mainstream, are nevertheless promising for purposes of advancing agendas that would ensure respect for the rule of law while generating effective responses to the problem of insecurity that affects most of the Central American population.

Central America: From "National Security" to "Public" and "Citizen" Security

Since the second half of the 1980s, Central America has been experiencing important changes in terms of security. The end of the East-West conflict, the consolidation of peace and democratization processes in the region, and the appearance of new threats against personal safety and the stability of institutions, led to significant changes in the security agendas. The agenda that focused on the concept of national security has evolved into another based on concepts such as public security or citizen security.

The difference between *national* and *public* security is more than semantic. It has implications concerning: a) what constitutes a threat, b) what assets are threatened, c) who or what generates threats, and d) who intervenes to counteract threats and through which means are these threats neutralized. An agenda that was concerned about political dissidence, social protest, and armed insurrection has evolved into one that focuses on crime and other expressions of social aggression, such as domestic violence. From an agenda primarily concerned with protecting political and institutional stability, we have gone to one giving priority to the protection of assets and persons. We have moved from an agenda that gave priority to the

intervention of the army by force to one that promotes the participation of law-enforcement agencies.

According to one scholar, the concept of national security that prevailed in the region during the Cold War "tended to regard the internal-enemy notion as being of the utmost importance; to place conflicts within the context of the East/West confrontation; and to apply the low-intensity-war doctrine, which—rather than merely granting priority to the military and security concept—made it the essential element."[1]

Thus, an assumption that internal security was simply a continuation of external security blurred the distinction between the two concepts. The formulation and implementation of "security" measures were in the hands of the armed forces, whose main concern was to control "dissident" political and social expressions that might threaten the "established order."

As a consequence of the militarized notion of internal security, police forces became a mere appendage of the region's armies, participating in the repression of civil liberties and the violation of human rights. In addition to being attached to the armed forces in organizational terms, the military characteristics of the police were reflected in its organization, functions, doctrine, and training. Thus, for instance, the police in Panama were for a long time part of the Defense Forces. Similarly, in 1963 a special security force attached to the Honduran Ministry of Defense—Fuerza de Seguridad Pública (FUSEP)—was put in charge of national police functions even though its members came from the various units of the armed forces. In Guatemala, the ambivalence between police and military functions was noteworthy in the 1965 creation of the Mobile Military Police, under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense. Until the beginning of 1990, the so-called Sandinista Police, under the Nicaraguan Ministry of the Interior, performed

---

[1] Translation of passage from Rodolfo Cerdas, "Seguridad en Centroamérica", in Francisco et al., eds., *La Nueva Agenda de Seguridad en Centroamérica* (Guatemala: FLACSO, 1998).

police functions, which gave the army significant influence in police operations. Finally, in August 1961, the Civic-Military Board in El Salvador issued a decree to integrate the three police bodies then in existence in the country—the National Guard, the National Police, and the Treasury Police—into the regular armed forces.[2] Not even the Costa Rican police escaped the military influence that affected its organization, training programs, logistics, and personnel deployment.[3]

Military rule also affected the judiciary. With the sole exception of Costa Rica, until the advent of democracy in Central America, the justice-administration system lacked independence, political importance, and resources to function effectively; it shared its scope of responsibility with military jurisdictions; and it had to remain silent as security forces perpetrated systematic human rights violations.

The end of the Cold War, along with national reconciliation and democratization in Central America in the second half of the 1980s, witnessed the emergence of new types of threats related to drug trafficking and organized crime, and growth in regular crime led to the discontinuance of the national security doctrine and opened the way for the concept of citizen security or public security.

The new governmental agendas, based on the notion of citizen security, focused on problems relative to common and organized crime and other expressions of violence, such as

---

[2] For more information on the characteristics of the Central American police institutions during this period, see José María Rico et al., *La justicia penal en Costa Rica* (San Jose: Educa, 1988), pp. 94-102; Luis Salas and José María Rico, *La justicia penal en Guatemala* (San Jose: Educa, 1989), pp. 55-75; Luis Salas and Jose María Rico, *La justicia penal en Honduras* (San Jose: Educa, YEAR?), pp. 67-78; and Luis G. Solís and Richard Wilson, *Political Transition and the Administration of Justice in Nicaragua* (Miami: The Center for the Administration of Justice, Florida International University, 1991).

[3] Laura Chinchilla**, "**Seguridad ciudadana: el caso de Costa Rica," *Proyecto Regional Gobernabilidad y Seguridad Ciudadana en Centroamérica* (San José: Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales **(**CRIES),in press).

domestic aggression. The most immediate consequence of the new security agenda was the demilitarization of internal security through reduction of the role of the armies in it,[4] the establishment of civilian police forces, and the strengthening of justice administration, especially in the realm of criminal justice.

As part of the new security agenda, the institution of the police has experienced a dynamic reform process. All Central American countries have passed specific laws on police work to affirm the civilian nature of the police forces and to establish principles that must govern the conduct of the police. As a result, these countries have separated their police forces from their armed forces. Thus in Panama, for instance, a 1990 executive decree dismantled the Defense Force and reorganized the National Police under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior and Justice. As part of the El Salvadoran peace agreements, a 1992 legislative decree created the National Civil Police. In Guatemala, the traditional security bodies attached to the army were dismantled and the new National Civil Police formed in 1997. Lastly, in 1995, the Honduran Congress approved the separation of the Public Security Force from the armed forces, which took effect in 1998 with the passage of its organic law. Changes in education and training programs to emphasize respect for civic and democratic values, as well as training in technical and legal aspects, have reinforced demilitarization and professionalization. Similarly, establishment of internal and external control mechanisms has allowed for greater supervision of security forces and for sanctioning any excesses they may commit.

---

[4] Budgetary reductions are the clearest evidence of the Central American armed forces' diminished role in internal security. Between 1989 and 1996, military expenditures as a percentage of GDP declined in El Salvador from 3.5% to 1.5%, in Guatemala from 2.6% to 1.4%, in Honduras from 8.4% to 1.3%, and in Nicaragua from 28.3% to 1.5%. United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report* (New York: United Nations Publications, 1992 and 1998).

The framework of the new security agenda has strengthened the rule of law and the administration of justice in the region. Criminal justice, in particular, has experienced changes at both the regulatory and administrative levels. The traditional inquisitorial model has evolved into a somewhat adversarial or mixed model,[5] and new legislation has been passed that reforms the codes of criminal law and procedures and creates special jurisdictions for juvenile offenders, following the guidelines of the International Covenant on Children's Rights. In parallel fashion, training programs have been implemented, judicial career civil services have been strengthened, and investments, mainly from international donors, have been made in the automation and equippment of judicial offices. As shown in Table X.1 the quantity of legislation adopted on these matters proves the dynamism that has characterized Central American police and criminal-justice reform over the past 15 years.

TABLE X.1

Passage of Criminal Justice and Police Legislation in Central America (by date of enactment)

Legislation	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Costa Rica	Nicaragua
Criminal Code	1973	1998	1984**	1970	1974
Criminal Procedural Code	1992	1998	1984	1996	1879
Juvenile Criminal Legislation	1996	1995	1996	1996	1998
Organic Law of the Police	1997	1992	1998	1994	1996

* partially amended in 1993

** substantially amended in 1996 and 1997

[5] The basic characteristics of the new model are a stronger role for the Ministerio Público during both the investigative procedure and the trial itself; greater respect for and protection of procedural guarantees; shorter trials; reduced assumptions for preventive custody; availability of alternatives to criminal prosecution; more active participation on the part of the victim during the trial; and the requirement that all stages in the process be of an oral and public nature. See José María Rico, *Justicia penal y transición democrática en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1997).

In addition to reforms at the national level, the current democratic affinity among the political systems prevailing in all Central American countries has made possible the energetic promotion of cooperation on security issues within the region. This is evidenced by the efforts made to promote regional instruments to combat organized crime, and the approval of a Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America that seeks to harmonize the Central American nations' security policies (See Table X.2.) Such instruments have not only strengthened security cooperation among countries, but have also reinforced a democratic and integrated notion of security, as discussed below.

TABLE 2

Central America: Regional Security Instruments

Instrument	Date of signature
Joint Declaration for the Establishment of the Central American Police Chiefs' Association	July 1992
Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty on Criminal Matters	October 1993
Agreement Establishing the Permanent Central American Commission for the Eradication of the Illegal Production, Traffic, Consumption, and Use of Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances	October 1993
Central American Treaty on the Recovery and Return of Stolen and Inappropriately Seized or Retained Vehicles	December 1995
Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America	December 1995
Agreement Establishing the Central American Institute for Higher Police Studies	July 1996
Central American Agreement for Prevention and Repression of Money and Asset Laundering Related to Illegal Drug Traffic and Related Offenses	July 1997

THE PUBLIC SECURITY PROBLEM IN CENTRAL AMERICA: CRIME AND FEAR OF CRIME

The citizen-security notion that has prevailed in Central America since the mid-1980s, leading governments to assign priority to problems of crime and violence, responds to an upsurge of these problems throughout the region.

Crime and violence

In the aftermath of decades of war, violence did not subside in Central America. Instead, it re-emerged as criminal violence. It is estimated that between 1994 and 1997, the annual homicide rate in El Salvador (130 per 100,000 inhabitants on average)[6] was higher than the annual average of violent deaths due to the armed conflict. Similarly, a serious crime wave continues to affect another post-conflict country—Guatemala—which has one of the highest kidnapping rates in the world, second only to Colombia.

This situation is not restricted to El Salvador and Guatemala. Although the security problem in other Central American countries is of lesser scale, it is increasing. In Nicaragua, crimes reported to law-enforcement agencies increased 113% between 1991 and 1998; in Costa Rica, 83% between 1990 and 1999; and in Honduras, 50% between 1994 and 1997.[7]

Indicators of criminal behavior, such as victimization surveys and homicide rates, confirm the critical state of citizen security in the region. According to surveys conducted at the

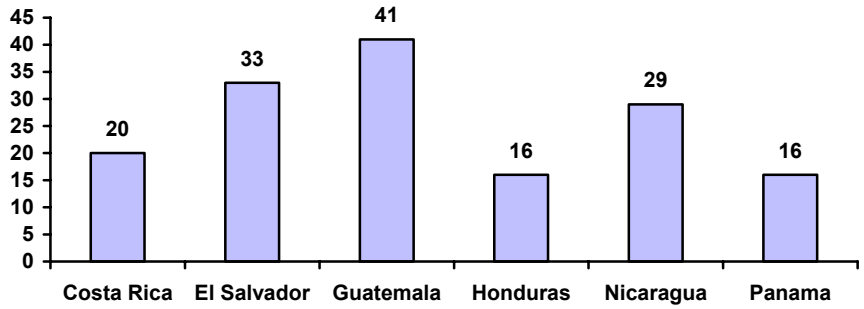
---

[6] José Miguel Cruz and Luis Armando González, "The magnitude of violence in El Salvador," in *La Cultura de la Violencia en El Salvador,, Estudios Centroamericanos*, Year LII (October 1997), pp. 954-66.

[7] Figures for Nicaragua from the Ministerio de Gobernación (Interior Ministry), Policía Nacional, *Compendio Estadístico 1991-1995* and *Anuario Estadístico 1997* (Managua); for Costa Rica, Poder Judicial, Departamento de Planificación (Judicial Branch Planning Department), *Anuario de Estadísticas Judiciales*, 1990 and 1999 (San José); and for Honduras, Fuerza de Seguridad Pública, *Anuario*, 1994 and 1997 (Tegucigalpa).

regional level, in some Central American countries, 30% or more of the population has been victims of crime.

GRAPH 1
Central America: victimization rates



Source: United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Central American Barometer. Public Opinion Survey 1997* (San Jose: UNDP, 1997).

The upward trend in violent crime qualifies Central America as the continent's most violent region. Data for 1997 confirm this: Two Central American countries, along with Colombia, had the highest homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants (El Salvador, 145, and Guatemala, 75). Honduras, at 41, also presented a high rate.[8]

Other phenomena that have become especially prominent are domestic violence and violence related to organized crime. Although lack of data severely limits the measurement of levels of domestic violence, evidence indicates that it also constitutes a large-scale problem. A survey conducted in 1996 in Costa Rica established that in 1 of every 3 homes in urban areas of the country, the man batters the woman; in 1 of every 5 homes, the man sexually harasses his

[8] Charles T. Call, *Sustainable Development in Central America: The Challenges of Violence, Injustice and Insecurity*, CA2020 Working Paper #8, Hamburg Institut fur Iberoamerika-Kunde (2000).

female companion; and in 2 of every 3 homes, the man exerts psychological violence against his female companion.[9]

Similarly, where records were available, analysis of reports filed on various types of domestic violence reflected a substantial increase. For example, 344 cases of rape were reported in Nicaragua in 1990, but this figure rose to 1,249 cases in 1997. In Costa Rica 2,586 cases of violence within the family were processed in 1994 compared to only 563 cases in 1992.[10]

Concerning organized crime, most problems are associated with narcotics. Central America, located between the main drug-producing countries and the biggest drug-consumption markets, is a natural bridge for traffic in psychotropic substances. According to recent estimates, traffickers annually transport at least 50 metric tons of cocaine overland through Central America.[11]

Drug trafficking throughout the region has led to the establishment of local networks specializing in transport, storage, and packaging. Being paid with the drugs they transport, criminal groups have encouraged the expansion of drug consumption in Central American countries, accompanied by the development of criminal gangs in charge of sales that operate with violent methods. For example, it is believed that the emergence of organized gangs in Guatemala over the past 10 years is related to the local distribution of drugs left in the country stemming from the international traffic.[12]

In addition, drug traffic has encouraged other illegal activities, such as trafficking in firearms, car theft, and money laundering. This has led to the establishment of criminal structures

---

[9] Ana Isabel García, "Violencia intrafamiliar en Costa Rica: ¿Qué hace el Estado para prevenirla, atenderla y erradicarla?" in *Revista Parlamentaria*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (December 1996), pp. 823-55.
[10] National Woman and Family Development Center, *Plan Nacional para la atención y la prevención de la violencia intrafamiliar. Balance de ejecución 1994-1997* (San José: 1995), p. 7.
[11] Joint Interagency Task Force East, *Command Briefing*.
[12] Observatoire Géopolitique des Drogues, *Geopolítica* (1997), p. 230.

whose methods of operation tend to be more violent and sophisticated. One example occurs on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast, where a large stock of illegal weapons is for sale, and the increase in drug trafficking has stimulated the bartering of weapons for drugs.[13] In general, observers believe that several factors associated with the increase in drug consumption and distribution among the population, particularly among juveniles, has created a "new subculture of offenders" in Central America.[14]

Whether it originates in common crime, organized crime, or domestic aggression, violence has a tremendously negative impact on the region. In El Salvador, for example, estimates for 1996 place the loss of useful life years for its population due to violent death, at more than 178,000 years, and in Costa Rica, estimates for life expectancy for the population younger than 20 years of age have decreased by one third of a year because of violence.[15] Financial costs are also great as an analysis for El Salvador reveals: In 1995, more than 13% of GDP went to cover various costs of violence in the country.[16]

In sum, although there are other problems with direct impacts on the public security of the Central American countries, including corruption, border conflicts, and illegal immigration, the agendas of these nations' governments over the past 10 years have focused on the problems of common and organized crime and domestic violence.

---

[13] Ibid., p. 232.
[14] IDEC XVI, 1998.
[15] The Pan American Health Organization has encouraged this measuring approach concerning the magnitude of violence. See Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), *Actitudes y normas culturales sobre la violencia en el área metropolitana de San Salvador (ACTIVA)* (El Salvador: IUDOP, 1996); Guido Miranda and Luis del Valle, *La Violencia en Costa Rica: visión desde la salud pública* (San José: Serie de Aportes para el Analsís del Desarrollo Humano Sostenible para el Proyecto Estado de la Nación [Report for the State of the Nation Project], 2000).
[16] Luis Ernesto Romano, "Los costos de la violencia en El Salvador," *Estudios Centroamericanos* 52 or *Revista ECA,* no. 588 (October 1997), pp. 968-76.

Fear of Crime

One important component of citizen security is the fear of crime, understood as the perception that the citizens have concerning their personal situation, and that of their locality or of their country in relationship to crime. In this regard, based on surveys that attempt to measure the perception of insecurity, we find that the citizens of Central America feel that their situation and that of their countries is characterized by insecurity (see Table X.3). According to this perception, people consider crime one of the main problems their countries face. With the exception of Guatemala, where the population regards crime as the number one problem, Central Americans' concern with crime takes second place only to issues of unemployment or poverty.[17]

TABLE X.3

Perceptions of the Level of Insecurity in Central America, 1998

Country	Citizens who perceive their country to be insecure or very insecure (in %)
Guatemala	65.7
El Salvador	82.7
Honduras	72.1
Nicaragua	86.0
Costa Rica	66.1

Source: Prepared by the author based on results of surveys conducted in Villa Nueva (Guatemala), Ilobasco (El Salvador), Choluteca (Honduras), Masaya (Nicaragua), and Pavas (Costa Rica), which appear in José María Rico, *Seguridad ciudadana en Centroamérica: Aspectos teóricos y metodológicos***,** Inter-American Institute on Human Rights (San José, Costa Rica: 2000), p. 30.

[17] José María Rico, *Seguridad ciudadana en Centroamérica: aspectos teóricos y metodológicos* (San José: Inter-American Institute on Human Rights, 2000).

Despite the difficulty of establishing the causality that might explain the increase in crime and violence in a given society, certain factors are commonly associated with crime in Central America: a) the deterioration of the population's social and economic conditions, leading to great inequality in income distribution, which particularly affects the region's younger population; b) consequences of armed conflict, such as the difficulties in reintegrating former combatants, the massive number of firearms in the hands of civilians, and a trend toward using violence to solve conflict; c) the increasing presence of organized crime in association with drug trafficking; and d) the relative newness of the police and other social-control institutions, most of which appeared only during the second half of the 1980s.[18]

THE PUBLIC SECURITY AGENDA: SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Crime levels in Central America have skyrocketed during the period when the most significant reforms have occurred in social-control institutions, undermining public credibility vis-à-vis the rule of law and democratic institutions. As illustrated in Table X.4, the inhabitants of the region show little trust in the judicial branch and the police.

[18] Laura Chinchilla, "Citizen participation experiences in crime prevention in Central America" (in Spanish), in *Seguridad Ciudadana y Consolidación Democrática en Améric* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center, 1998).

TABLE X.4

Level of trust in the judicial branch and the police in Central America, 1997

Country	Citizens who reported having "no confidence" in the institution (in %)	
	Judicial Branch	**Police**
Guatemala	50.6	59.5
El Salvador	31.0	33.0
Honduras	50.0	48.6
Nicaragua	50.5	45.9
Costa Rica	26.9	37.3
Panama	60.3	41.8

Source: United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Democratic Governability in Central America Project. *Central American Barometer: 1997 Public Opinion Poll*. [Add publisher? See Graph 1, which does not contain "Democratic Governability…"]

Over the past five years, this situation led governments to promote other types of social-control measures that tend to contradict the principles of the criminal-justice and police reforms discussed above. They also threaten to bring back the authoritarian elements of the old military rule. Most common in this context are proposals for reforms to the criminal codes: and whether to introduce new offenses, to increase prison terms, or to encourage judges to apply maximum penalties. For instance, in Costa Rica, the maximum sentence was increased from 25 to 50 years, and in El Salvador, from 30 to 75 years. In Honduras, Congress is discussing a proposal to introduce life imprisonment. For its part, Guatemala has recently applied the death penalty with great publicity.

Another recurring tendency has been the intervention of the armed forces into police functions. The most frequent form of military meddling consists of patrol missions, as

exemplified by El Salvador's 1995 "Guardian Plan," Guatemala's 1997 "Mountain Range Plan,"[19] and joint patrolling missions in Honduras throughout 1998.

In addition, through raids, police operations in Costa Rica are implementing "social cleansing,"[20] and in Honduras, curfew is a measure implemented to "neutralize juvenile gangs."[21] In Guatemala, extreme measures—such as extralegal executions of juvenile gang members, pickpockets, and street children—have allegedly involved self-defense groups that, according to human rights organizations and the media, work in complicity with some members of the security forces.[22]

The population's mistrust of the social-control institutions is also visible in its unwillingness to seek their assistance in resolving its conflicts. A 1999 Costa Rican survey revealed that 79% of the victims of theft or assault in a public place and 53% of the victims of household burglary did not report the offense to the authorities.[23]

Additionally, a trend towards vigilantism and the use of force and violence for solving crime problems is noticeable among the population. The clearest evidence of this is the increasing frequency of raids by private citizens to punish alleged offenders, for instance, by lynching them. Although accounts about such actions come from most Central American

---

[19] The Guardian Plan was initially designed to allow the army to patrol rural areas, while the newly-created National Civil Police proceeded to broaden its jurisdiction. However, the patrols began covering urban areas, and, at present, actions of this type are recurrent. The Mountain Range Plan was designed to allow joint army and police patrols to cover certain roads. See *La seguridad…*, in Siglo XXI, 1997, p. 5.

[20] Although this type of practice was declared unconstitutional in June 1998, the local media have reported raids made on various occasions since then.

[21] In September 1998, the Tegucigalpa Court issued an order prohibiting youths under 18 to be in public places after 11 p.m. under threat of a fine or even arrest.

[22] Abundant information on this subject appears in Amnesty International's 1997 report.

[23] Laura Chinchilla, *Seguridad ciudadana y justicia penal: perspectiva de la sociedad civil* (San José: UNDP), 1999.

countries, Guatemala is the worst case, having reported 167 lynching raids, occurring primarily in rural areas, between March 1996 and December 1998.[24]

The most important and frequently cited reasons that explain the limitations and failures of institutional intervention are:

- The lack of an integrated approach to the crime problem has meant a failure to ensure the involvement of various institutions in the areas of crime prevention, crime control, punishment, and rehabilitation. Social-control institutions, such as the police, prosecutorial offices, and judicial departments, have assumed the brunt of the responsibility for State action concerning security. Disproportionate expectations have been generated for the problem to be solved by these newly reformed institutions, whose mission is merely to ease the manifestations of the problem but not to act on the root causes of crime.
- "Quick-fix mania," lead to measures to contain crime designed to generate public opinion about the administration in office, and this has overshadowed the formulation of a long-term, sustained security strategy. Consequently, security agendas are highly vulnerable to social pressure from public opinion, in general, and from certain pressure groups, such as crime victims, the business community, the media, and so forth.
- Criminal-justice and police reforms implemented over the past 15 years have stressed concern for human rights and for the observance of the rule of law, an indispensable development given the level of abuse by security agencies during the military rule. However, these reforms neglected aspects relating to the efficiency of those institutions. The backwardness of the region's police forces is more than evident in terms of administrative and operational management, strategic planning, and the use of technology. Concerning criminal justice, the problems stem basically from deficient criminal investigations and excessively lengthy judicial procedures.
- A lack of coherence and coordination has characterized the reform of social-control institutions. For instance, the reform of criminal legislation in most of the countries

[24] Hugh Byrne, William Stanley, and Rachel Garst, p. 15.

did not take into account police institutions, and this has generated reluctance on the part of the police forces to abide by the new rules and to work as a team with key players, such as the prosecutors and judges, in the criminal investigation.

TOWARD A NEW SECURITY AGENDA FOR THE REGION: THE NOTION OF HUMAN SECURITY

In the past few years, a number of proposals to broaden the concept of public security have appeared, suggesting the need to revise the current agendas in this field and to encourage new strategies and activities. Some of those concepts seem to draw their inspiration from the concept of human security.

Human security, as proposed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP),[25] leaves behind the traditional focus on sovereignty and protection of territories, emphasizing instead the security of individuals rather than states. It proposes to move from a notion of security guaranteed by force and armaments to one guaranteed through sustainable human development. It also emphasizes preventive approaches over reactive measures.

The holistic conception of human security has important implications for the conceptualization and design of public security reforms. First, the close interdependence between human development and human security leads to the design of strategies that simultaneously combat the various factors impeding the adequate development of individuals and the creation of a secure environment. Thus, reform of the security sector becomes part of a broader institutional-reform strategy that attacks the root causes of violence and crime. Secondly, the emphasis that this concept places on the individual creates a strong interconnection among human rights, the rule of law, and democratic governance. Further, community security and democratic security—

---

[25] United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Development* (New York: United Nations Publications, 1995).

two notions that appear in some of the postulates of the human security concept—have emerged on the agendas of certain players in Central America.

Community security and community policing

These two notions emphasize the citizen as beneficiary of and participant in the design, implementation, and control of security policies. From this perspective, both the objective behavior of crime and citizens' fear of crime are matters of concern, and balanced actions are proposed not only with respect to the offenders but also with respect to the victims. Also, the reestablishment of the community as the ultimate purpose of the security policy determines new perspectives on institutional intervention. Thus, proposals exist for crime prevention and control, such as community-oriented police work, community sanctions, alternative conflict resolution, and so forth.[26]

Community security has inspired several regional cooperation programs to work jointly with municipal officials in municipal governments to recover the civic dimension in the design and application of security policies. Among these, the Citizen Security Project of the Inter-American Institute on Human Rights has the broadest scope.[27] This project, launched in early 1998, covers Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Its objectives are to encourage pilot initiatives in predetermined geographic areas in those countries, as well as actions intended to contribute sustainable solutions to the problem of crime and insecurity. Its most salient specific objectives are to: a) reduce the most serious and frequent

---

[26] See Laura Chinchilla, *La prevención comunitaria del delito: perspectivas para América Latina* (Miami, Center for the Administration of Justice, Florida International University, 1997).

[27] José María Rico et al., *Seguridad ciudadana en Centroamérica: aspectos teóricos y metodológicos* (1999), *Diagnósticos sobre la situación* (San José: Inter-American Institute on Human Rights [IIHR], 2000), and *Informe final de evaluación* (San José: Inter-American Institute on Human Rights [IIHR], 2000).

forms of crime and public perceptions of insecurity with respect thereto; b) improve the image of the police and the criminal-justice system; c) facilitate and promote the active participation of communities in the resolution of the insecurity problem; and d) contribute to inter-institutional coordination in this field.[28]

Among the activities promoted by the Citizen Security Project , we should take note of the following in particular: the establishment of local citizen security councils; education and awareness-raising programs on the crime problem; sports and cultural programs for juveniles at social risk; regular meetings among citizens, local government officials, and justice-administration and police representatives; programs of assistance to victims of crime; and alternative mechanisms for conflict-resolution.

Certain obstacles have hampered the implementation of these types of initiatives. Among the most important are:

- A weak tradition of collaboration between civil society and the police, a relationship that has, instead, been characterized by tension and confrontation. During the initial stages of projects, it is thus necessary to overcome considerable resistance from both sectors. This model is also problematic because some political actors are tempted to use the reform of the relationship for narrow political purposes rather than to improve the population's quality of life.
- Despite the important reforms undertaken in police work, a highly centralized and hierarchical organizational structure still prevails. This impedes the involvement of local governments in the functioning of police forces, and it hampers the work of police

[28] Since this was a pilot experiment designed essentially to assess police-community relations within the framework of the current police reform, the control of police activities was not regarded as an objective during this initial stage.

personnel posted in the communities. In response to this situation, a debate is underway in some countries about how to create new local-level police bodies, which could potentially assume the tasks now assigned to national-level police forces. In addition, the prevalence within police ranks of attitudes left over from the reactive-military model creates resistance to change among some of their cadres.

- Lack of continuity among the higher-ranking officials in police institutions, a high turnover rate for police personnel, and limitations in terms of material and financial resources, make it difficult to sustain these types of initiatives, both politically and financially.

Despite the many obstacles that complicate these kinds of projects, one should note that an effort has been made to ensure the involvement of all possible institutions, organizations, groups, and individuals both in the definition of the problem and in the search for workable solutions. It has also been possible, in some cases, to reduce the fear of crime, improve the relationship between citizens and law-enforcement agencies, and even constrain certain criminal offenses.

Democratic security

Introduced into the Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America, "democratic security" is another concept being proposed with respect to the current security agendas of Central American countries."[29] This treaty defines democratic security as a condition

[29] The reactivation of the Central American Security Commission, which undertook the task of defining a new security model for the region, was proposed in October 1994 at the International Conference on Peace and Development in Central America. The duties of this commission were finally established in the "Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America," signed in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, on the December 15, 1995.

for development, within which security results from the interaction among many factors such as: "the supremacy and the strengthening of civil power; the reasonable balance of forces; the security of persons and their assets; the elimination of poverty; the eradication of violence, corruption, impunity, terrorism, narco-activities, and the arms trade." [30]

The notion of democratic security makes a distinction between internal security (Chapter II) and external or regional security (Chapter III), whereby the duties assigned to the armed forces, which are limited to activities such as protection of territorial integrity, the reasonable balance of forces, control over weapons, and the collective security of the States of the region, are defined.

Regional security is understood as something more than collective security[31]—mutual assistance in case of aggression against a signatory state—and the notion of cooperative security is thus incorporated: "no state shall strengthen its own security to the detriment of the security of the other States."[32] Thus, security is not merely the sum total of the region's defense resources but something that results from the balance of those actions that each society undertakes within itself.

The Framework Treaty on Democratic Security distinguishes three areas of concern: the rule of law, the security of persons and their assets, and regional security. In terms of the rule of law, it stresses aspects such as legal security, the effective protection of human rights and civil liberties, the supremacy of civil over military power, and the struggle against corruption.

As to security of persons and their assets, the concept makes the recovery of economic, social, political, and environmental factors imperative, since these elements are necessary to

---

[30] Translation from the Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America, 1995.
[31] Francisco Rojas A., "Peace: the governing principle of relations in Central America" (in Spanish), in Francisco Rojas et al., eds., *La Nueva Agenda de Seguridad en Centroamérica* (Guatemala: FLACSO, 1998).
[32] Translation from ibid., art. 26 c).

generate the conditions needed for the establishment of security for the region's inhabitants. Concerning control mechanisms, the Treaty stresses the need to strengthen coordination among the different institutions in the region (police forces, judicial agencies, and prosecutors' offices), placing special emphasis on border security, in order to cope with threats to the security of the region's inhabitants. It also emphasizes the urgency to act against region-wide offenses that are characteristic of organized criminal groups, such as auto theft or illegal trafficking in drugs, people, goods, or weapons.

The regional security component covers Central America's "pending military agenda," incorporating aspects such as a prohibition on the use of the territory to attack other nations, encouragement of measures to promote trust among the countries, a reasonable balance of military forces, and the like. It also reinforces the role of diplomacy and the use of legal instruments in the prevention and management of conflicts among the States. Such measures include the establishment of early-warning systems, the peaceful solution of controversies, and encouraging the integrity of borders. The Treaty further proposes that the actions of the signatory states be guided and regulated not only according to its own rules but also according to a set of international rules, and it urges the signatory states to adopt a set of resolutions developed by the UN and other regional organizations.

Lastly, the Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America establishes an institutional structure based on three civil entities: the Presidents' Summit, a higher political forum that deals with regional and international security matters; the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the main Central America Integration System (SICA) coordination body; and the Security Commission, a "subsidiary entity for the implementation, coordination, evaluation,

and monitoring of proposal formulation."[33] The latter body is chaired by the vice ministers of Foreign Affairs, and includes the vice ministers of Defense and Public Security. The SICA General Secretariat acts as the Security Commission's technical and administrative secretariat.

The Treaty's most significant effects concern the promotion of a new security doctrine based on democratic principles and the strengthening of the role in the regional security agenda of new players, such as law-enforcement and judicial entities. However, its scope has been limited because of:

- A weakening of Central American regional institutions, apparent since 1998, affecting mainly political and security issues.[34] Thus, not all countries have ratified the approved instruments, including the treaty itself. Although the Security Commission meets regularly and adopts resolutions, some countries feel that they are not obliged to comply.
- Despite the distinctions drawn between internal and external security areas, some aspects require further definition, particularly regarding the scope of responsibility of the armed forces. The broad notion of security contained in the treaty makes it necessary to restrict more explicitly the realm of action of the armed forces within such a security scheme. Section II, which addresses "persons and their assets," specifically suggests the possible participation of the armed forces in the protection of individuals and their property."[35] Concern for this has led the participants in the Security Commission meeting held in El Salvador on April 4, 2001 to agree to the establishment of a working group to analyze the treaty and propose changes to it.
- The armed forces continue to be reluctant to comply with agreements included in the treaty, which weakens and discredits this instrument. On the one hand, the military reform—the establishment of a reasonable balance of military forces, effective arms control, and submission of armies to regional civil entities—has come to a standstill. On

---

[33] Translation from ibid., art. 50.
[34] Important causes of this weakening have included border conflicts between some countries in the region, and the request of certain heads of State for a review of political-integration entities, such as the Central American Parliament.
[35] Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America, art. 11 b).

the other hand, an entity dealing with defense matters, known as the Council of Defense Ministers of Central America, has been created parallel to the Security Council.

- The weak social legitimacy of regional processes causes governments to sacrifice, at little political cost, regional-level agreements in favor of national-level processes. In the end, state security agendas are not subject to decisions adopted by the regional organizations but to the pressure exerted by groups at the national level.

CONCLUSION

Since the latter 1980s, Central America has been experiencing important changes in terms of security. An agenda focused on the concept of national security has been replaced by one based on such concepts as citizen security, community security, and democratic security. Such changes have implied significant progress, with respect to the past, regarding the rule of law and the strengthening of an institutional security framework of more civilian and democratic characteristics.

Despite the significant progress made, however, the current security agendas—at national and regional levels—show limitations that, together with social unrest from the continuous increase in crime, could threaten the still nascent democratic institutions. What seems more apparent within the security agenda are repressive measures restricted to the realm of criminal justice, the police, and even the army, that show little effectiveness in containing the problem.

It is now necessary to revise the security agenda and to encourage, on the basis of the concepts discussed here—community security, democratic security, and human security—an integrated approach that should take into consideration the following premises:

- The ultimate objective of a security policy is to ensure full enjoyment of the rights and guarantees of the citizens, for which reason these rights and guarantees must be protected in strict observance of the rule of law.

- The causes of citizen insecurity are many and complex, requiring a duly coordinated inter-institutional intervention, based on the identification of common objectives.
- The causes of citizen insecurity take many stages and forms. Consequently, policy intervention must be encouraged along different fronts, ranging from crime prevention of a social, situational, and community nature to the control, punishment, and rehabilitation of criminals.
- Citizen insecurity expresses itself in many concrete ways, depending upon the specific context. Thus, it is advisable to take advantage of the momentum of decentralization in the design and implementation of measures, while encouraging the participation of local power structures and organized communities.

It will be necessary to encourage a variety of actions in order to revise the security agenda on the basis of the premises discussed here. Better inputs must be encouraged for decision-making and policy design (programs for the design and implementation of reliable systems of information on crime, victimization, insecurity, as well as the preparation of social- and natural-risk maps. Similarly, we should focus applied research on the behavior of several variables related to citizen security, and on the impact of policies on this subject.

In the area of consciousness-raising, workshops, public meetings, and communication campaigns aimed at the relevant authorities and civil society must be organized. It is also advisable to design pilot projects which may make it possible to evaluate the results of alternative policies and to generate demonstration effects for purposes of supporting reforms of broader scope. Finally, we should design and implement mechanisms to ensure joint action and coordination among the different institutions and social sectors involved in combating crime. The national and local councils for crime prevention created in some European countries may become a model that could be adapted to our reality.

These steps will require the mobilization of those players that have been encouraging the new security concepts, that is, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, sensitized judicial and police officials, scholars, and media representatives, at both the national and regional levels.