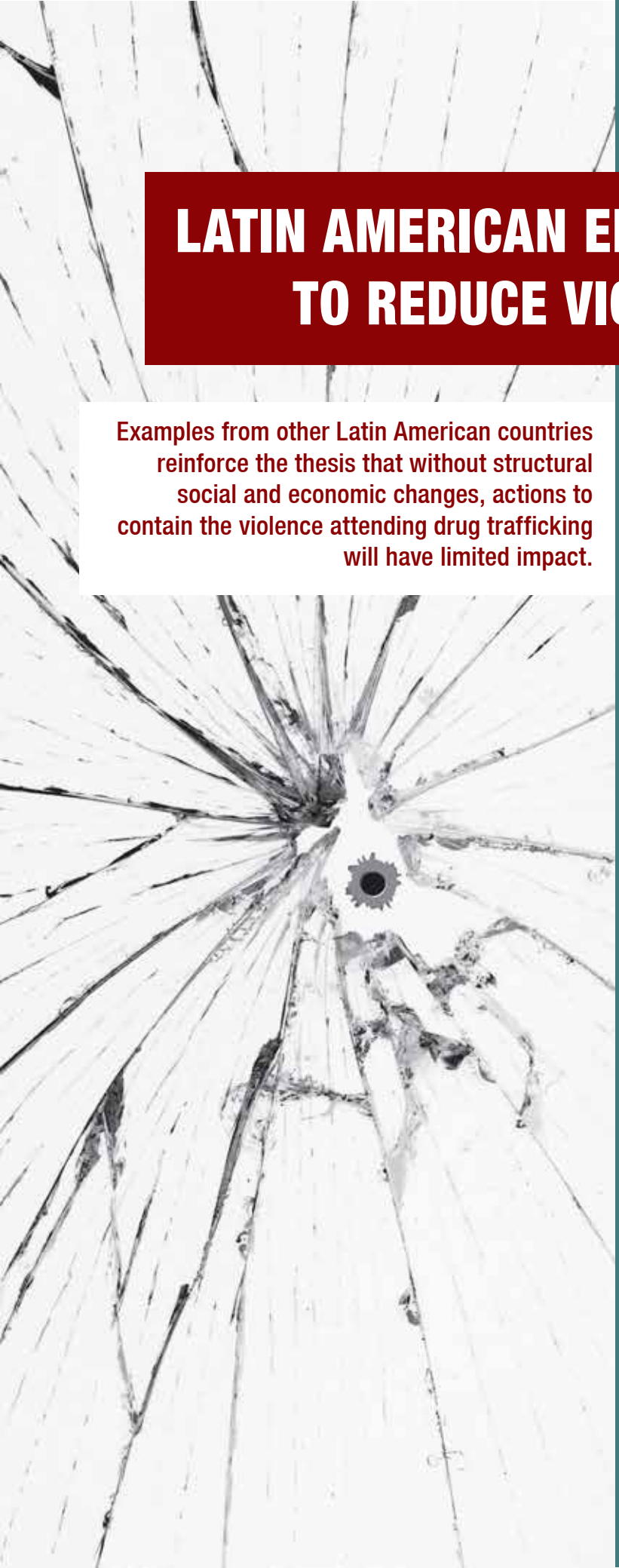

LATIN AMERICAN EFFORTS TO REDUCE VIOLENCE

Examples from other Latin American countries reinforce the thesis that without structural social and economic changes, actions to contain the violence attending drug trafficking will have limited impact.

Solange Monteiro

IN THE LAST DECADE, Latin America has significantly improved its socioeconomic indicators. Average growth was above that of the U.S. and European countries, and there was a significant reduction in inequality. These achievements, however, were not sufficient to contain a nefarious mark of the continent: violence.

The latest Human Development Report from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports an average of 100,000 homicides a year in Latin America and in 2009 the excess of deaths resulting from violence represented a loss of 331 million life-years.

Without the excessive deaths from homicides, which reduce the workforce and divert investments from productive sectors to security spending, the report estimates that GDP could have been a full half a percentage point higher in 2009, amounting to US$24 billion. "In Colombia, GDP could have been 2 percentage points higher," says Jorge Restrepo of the Resource Center for Conflict Analysis (Cerac) in Bogota. Most violent deaths are related to organized crime and drug trafficking. The Colombia Plan and the Police Pacification Units (UPPs) in Rio de Janeiro, both completing 10 years, are efforts to suppress trafficking-related activities that have achieved significant results.

Experts point out, however, that the effectiveness of such efforts is limited by government failures in the countries most affected by violence. The *Global Competitiveness Report*, published by the World Economic Forum, shows that even acknowledging improved business environment and macroeconomic conditions in countries like Colombia and Peru, for example, the main concern of businesspeople is the high level of corruption.

"Ten of the 20 countries with the highest homicide rates are Latin American and 5 of the 10 most unequal countries in the world are in the region. We still have much work to do."

Marta Lagos

Old-lasting corruption

"This is also true of Mexico, where the culture of corruption was not born with drug trafficking. It is much older," says Raúl Benitez Manaut, researcher at the Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Mexico is the largest opium producer in the region and accounts for half of global seizures of marijuana, besides being on the route for cocaine from countries like Colombia. Manaut indicates that, in Mexico, several institutional flaws feed the corruption that maintains the power of the drug cartels.

"Today, we have about 2,000 police corporations. Thus, we lose the strength to face criminal groups and coordinate intelligence, and that opens loopholes for corruption," says Jorge Chabat, international relations analyst, Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE). "What is needed is to improve security institutions and provide better working conditions for the police force as well as to ensure that laws are enforced."

Since the military offensive against drug trafficking was initiated in 2006 by President Felipe Calderón, the number of homicides in Mexico has more than doubled. "When there is a direct confrontation, many narcotics cells lose connection with their leaders and begin to extort, kidnap, and even kill people in a more direct confrontation," Manaut says.

Since 2011, however, the violence has stabilized. "Now we have successful outcomes in northern cities of Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez and Monterey," he says. The intervention in these regions, however, caused the drug trade to move. At present, the most critical situation is in the southwestern state of Michoacán, a center for the production of drugs that has attracted the interest and competition of several drug cartels. "President Enrique Peña Nieto has not changed the strategy for fighting the cartels of former President Calderón. He has concentrated efforts in Michoacán, but he is also seeking to develop new social policies for the most violent places, similar to Rio's UPPs," says Manaut.

Chabat believes it is unwise to expect immediate results from social policies: "It will take time for all young people who are now criminals to seek other opportunities, which will also depend on improving the economy, on reducing inequality, and on well-functioning institutions. Historically, the population has had a tolerant view of corruption, but this is also changing."

Culture of violence

In the case of Colombia, the Colombia Plan does not always address the country's culture

of violence. Even before the 1980s, when a flood of dollars arrived in the country from the activity of the drug cartels, regional and political differences between liberals and conservatives caused a distortion that encouraged use of violence to settle disputes. In this context there emerged leftist guerrilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and rightist paramilitary organizations that under a weak government facilitated the action of drug cartels.

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"Undoubtedly, we see a stronger government and a more integrated national economy. But structural obstacles to development persist," Restrepo says. "First is the continuing armed conflict, second is the absence of regional integrating infrastructure, and third is the low quality and the ineffectiveness of public services, in particular justice, safety, and education."

One of the most important results of the Colombia Plan was a 50% reduction in the area where cocaine is cultivated. Restrepo thinks, however, that technological improvements in planting cocaine, ensuring more productive acreage, as well as migration of part of the cultivation to Bolivia and Ecuador, have possibly reduced the effectiveness of the reduction in cultivation area: "This policy have been effective mainly in making the business less profitable for the drug dealers and the guerrillas, who benefitted from 'taxes' on drug cartels. To end drug trafficking, however, [the Colombia Plan] is insufficient."

Restrepo says that as in Mexico, the change of government from Álvaro Uribe to Juan Manuel Santos did not alter the security strategy. "Since 2004 we have registered gradual improvements that remain. President Santos has also promoted dialogue with the FARC, in search of a peace agreement, that has been well-accepted by the private sector," he says. Proof of this is the continuous flow of foreign direct investment into the country, which has diversified to other sectors beyond oil and mining. "We maintain a positive and optimistic view of the country," he says.

Perceptions

Regarding the lack of security for the population of countries affected by drug-trade-related violence, Marta Lagos, director of research institute Latinobarômetro, says that perceptions have changed significantly depending on how much violence people in each country were used to.

"Traditionally in the more violent countries population fear was not necessarily proportional to the degree of violence," she says. "In Colombia, which has one of the highest homicide rates in the region, the main problem residents identified in our study was job creation." Nevertheless, Latinobarômetro's 2012 Citizen Security survey shows that safety and crime were the problems most often mentioned in 11 of the 18 countries in the region.

Lagos notes that "Ten of the 20 countries with the highest homicide rates are Latin American and 5 of the 10 most unequal countries in the world are in the region. We still have much work to do."