Places of refuge and risk: lessons from San Pedro Sula

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The outcome of interventions in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, provides lessons for working in high-risk urban neighbourhoods and communities.

The actions of gangs and organised crime linked to international drug trafficking, in addtion to the harsh response of State security forces, have driven the surge in violence in Honduras and San Pedro Sula's identification a few years ago as the most violent city in the world (because of its high rate of homicides). Just over half of the population of Honduras is concentrated in urban areas, including San Pedro Sula whose metropolitan area has a population of approximately 2.5 million people. In 2015, it was estimated that gang members were present in more than 50 neighbourhoods in San Pedro Sula, mainly those that are poorest and most marginalised.[1] Today, in addition to the two main gangs (the Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18), the influence of other local gangs and organised criminal groups is also evident. For example, in Rivera Hernández, a marginalised area of the city with an estimated population of 120,000, invisible borders divide the territory into streets and neighbourhoods that are controlled by more than six groups.

Between 2004 and 2014, the metropolitan area of San Pedro Sula hosted more than 40% of the country's internally displaced people (IDPs), with the city itself hosting 21.5%.[2] Data reveal the intra-urban nature of forced displacement, showing that 81% of San Pedro Sula's IDPs had been displaced from elsewhere in the city. Although displacement affects many communities and neighbourhoods, most places to which people are displaced are those where gangs exercise social and territorial control and/or have some level of influence. Although in this context displacement is not as visible because individuals or families may be forced to take precautionary measures and abandon their homes in silence, and few look to the authorities for protection, evidence shows that these neighbourhoods are generally in the most marginalised or lower-middle class areas of the city and are characterised by limited access to basic rights and public services, and by high levels of violence, including homicide.[3]

The city offers a certain anonymity and the possibility to maintain family and personal networks and access services and employment. Seeking protection in

neighbourhoods affected by many types of violence (including restrictions on mobility, extortion, forced involvement of children and youth in criminal organisations, homicides and sexual violence) may seem contradictory but it is the reality faced by families and individuals here and in other cities. These communities are at the same time places of refuge and places of risk. In them, collective action, social cohesion and community organisation are fractured by violence, mistrust and widespread fear. Although certain groups (such as business owners, transport workers, teachers, women, children and young people, and people from the LGBTI community) face higher risks,[4] most residents in these neighbourhoods risk experiencing some degree of violence and displacement.

UNHCR/Daniel Dreifuss

This young Honduran woman witnessed the homicide of one of her colleagues. As a result of the event, she was shot four times and lost her leg.

UNHCR's work in San Pedro Sula
The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) opened an office in this city at the end of 2016. Since then, as part of work to support Honduras in the commitments it has made through the MIRPS process (the regional application of the Global Compact on Refugees), UNHCR has been providing technical assistance to municipal authorities and communities for the development of displacement prevention and protection mechanisms. This assistance includes working with municipal authorities to design methodologies and strategies that promote rapprochement and dialogue with high-risk communities and neighbourhoods. This has included jointly developing protocols

and mechanisms for carrying out risk analysis and ensuring safe access; designing and using participatory methodologies for consultation processes; and implementing community programmes and initiatives that are grounded in protection principles. The field office has also supported the municipal authorities in the design of a mechanism to identify, assist and refer IDPs and/or those at risk of displacement within the framework of existing municipal programmes and services. A number of lessons have been learned from these activities:

Time is a necessary investment: It takes time to study the context of a community, develop relationships of trust and understanding, identify risks and develop protection plans. In contexts of urban violence, the time required can be doubled or even tripled by the security risks associated with the presence of organised criminal groups, the invisible nature of displacement and the normalisation of violence. Having knowledge of the context makes it possible to understand both how the forms of violence that can cause displacement intersect, and the visible and invisible impacts they have on neighbourhood and community life.

Access is best achieved through investments that benefit the entire community: Strategies of access and the preservation of humanitarian space in these neighbourhoods are context-dependent. However, actions aimed at strengthening the provision of basic
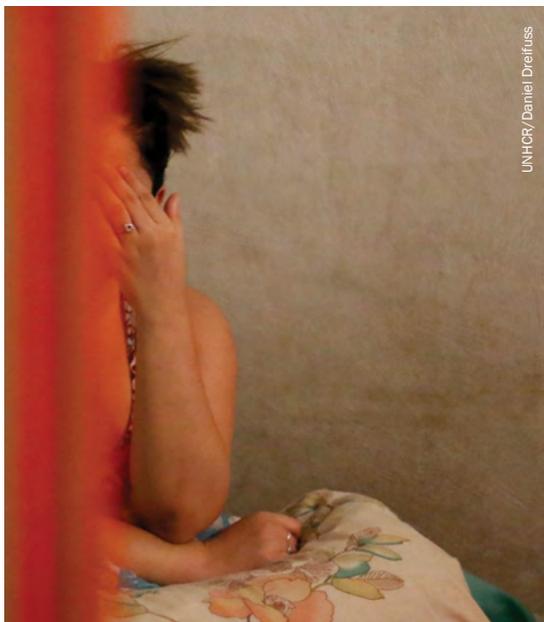
services for all members of the neighbourhood or area, and that privilege community development, facilitate access to these spaces because they are usually perceived as interventions that do not challenge the control of gangs. These actions include the improvement of or provision of increased access to: health and education, community infrastructure, recreation and sports, and vocational and technical training. For example, an intervention jointly implemented by UNHCR and the municipal authorities to promote the inclusion and protection of youth in a high-risk area through cultural and artistic workshops has both strengthened access to this area and improved the authorities' understanding of the challenges and risks faced by the young people.

Alliances with neutral actors need strengthening: Mapping and working with community actors who are not perceived as actively contesting the criminal structures and gangs – such as religious leaders, leaders of community development structures and social programme volunteers – is key to establishing and preserving access. In some communities these privileged actors enter into dialogue with members of gangs and reach agreements to facilitate access and the implementation of programmes that benefit the entire community. (However, routine risk analysis is essential to promptly identify any changes in the dynamics of violence and social and territorial control in these areas.)

Local networks and existing community capacities must be supported: Because of limited institutional presence, insufficient equipment and services (because of rapid growth and lack of planning), and distrust and difficulties around safe access, certain services in these neighbourhoods tend to be provided by community structures and civil society organisations. It is important to support these services – which include church medical clinics, support programmes for educational and youth community centres, nurseries and women's networks – and offer training to make them available to displaced persons or those at risk of

displacement. This support can strengthen the provision of basic services and contribute gradually to the protection environment by consolidating community networks through which people in high-risk situations or who have particular vulnerabilities can be identified and protected.

Links with municipal authorities around social development should be strengthened: Ensuring community interventions are integrated into local institutional processes and structures can help ensure greater sustainability. UNHCR and its implementing partner began working with communities to design community protection plans. As these progressed, the benefits of linking some of the specific actions and strategies (such as livelihoods promotion, youth training, childcare spaces, community awareness campaigns, community leadership and women's empowerment) with work being carried out by the municipal authorities became clear. Aligning the activities both promoted institutional presence and community accompaniment in these high-risk areas and emphasised the responsibility of municipal authorities for tackling key problems. Ultimately, some of these initiatives were formally integrated into the municipality's annual operational plan.

Dialogue between the humanitarian and development worlds is indispensable: Where the displaced and host communities share both protection risks and limited access to services, it is critical to use area-based approaches that allow the design of responses that consider the specific spatial context, the needs of the population, and coordination with other local actors, including private sector actors. A balance needs to be found between: a) supporting local actors involved in the provision of services, b) implementing responses that are focused on protecting the most vulnerable, and c) addressing structural problems associated with the challenges of urbanisation – including inequality and socioeconomic inclusion, and stigmatisation or discrimination on grounds of place of origin, age or gender.

In 2018, San Pedro Sula launched an ambitious 25-year Municipal Development Master Plan. By improving urban planning, infrastructure, public transportation and mobility systems, use of technology and so on, the ultimate goal is for San Pedro Sula to become a 'smart city'. This planned development offers an opportunity for humanitarian actors to work towards and advocate for greater inclusion of typically excluded geographical areas and sectors of the population. Investing in social, spatial and economic inclusion will help develop the city and strengthen the community

protection environment in these areas – and may well also help to prevent displacement.

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