

***In war as in peace: youth violence –  
a challenge for international co-operation***

by

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## **In war as in peace: youth violence – a challenge for international co-operation<sup>1</sup>**

Drug crime in Rio, racist offences against immigrants, shootings at schools, harassment in Belfast's neighbourhoods, killing brothers and sisters in Ramallah, kids traumatized by war in Bosnia or in the Congo – the involvement of children and adolescents in political and criminal acts of violence in mega-cities, as well as in (post-) conflict zones of recent wars, is an increasingly disturbing phenomenon. But youth violence is neither a new phenomenon nor a specific problem of developing societies.<sup>2</sup> While traditionally-structured societies have been able to deal with and socially control the problems of youth violence in various ways in the past, it has come to be a major challenge in the wake of rapid social change, featuring urbanization, migration and alienation accelerated by globalization.

The many and diverse problems of societies undergoing processes of transition leave their mark on adolescents, in particular on the verge of adulthood, at the start of both their social and professional lives. The manner in which any young generation experiences life against the background of demographic structures determines to a large extent its political and societal socialization and ability to act. According to the World Bank (World Development Report 2007) some 1.5 bn individuals have currently reached the age of between 12 and 24 years, of whom some 1.2 bn are living in developing societies of the South. To tackle these problems of the youth and their future prospects is a challenge to the various actors of international cooperation in the fields of foreign, development and security policies. Priority needs to be given to workable analysis to be carried out with respect to the specific causes of violence in order to contribute to the prevention of physical force and to indicate a better way of dealing with it.

The question of how adolescents and youth become involved in the organization of political and criminal violence is being discussed with greater urgency in the context of the so-called „new wars“. The building-up of networks, milieus and sub-cultures with an inclination to use force, and the emerging macro and microstructures of vi-

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<sup>1</sup> This is the introduction to Loccum Protokolle 65/07, proceedings of the international conference “In War as in Peace: Youth Violence – A Challenge for International Co-operation”, held at the Evangelische Akademie Loccum from 14 to 16 November, 2007. The volume can be ordered via the book seller or the Academy's homepage, online shop: <http://www.loccum.de/protokoll/inhalt/inh0765.html>. It holds the ISBN 978-3-8172-6507-7, 420 pages, and costs 16,00 Euro €. Following the introduction, we are also reprinting the then conference programme.

<sup>2</sup> There is no ubiquitous definition of youth, as there are differences according to history, culture and context (e.g. in penal justice systems or citizenship). The United Nations General Assembly defines youth as the age cohort between 15 and 24 years, the World Development Report (World Bank 2006) includes young people between age 12 and 24. As basic status passages from childhood to adulthood differ according to historical and cultural patterns a definition based exclusively on age is of limited use.

olence play a key role in current inter-ethnic or inter-religious processes of radicalization; at the same time they draw attention to the general political conditions under which force is being used and which can be experienced collectively. However, political concepts for stabilization and peace-building in post-war societies have so far paid scant attention to the question of how to involve youth in these processes.

Social science research on youth violence in industrial centres of the North – with an emphasis on individual life experience – is increasingly being supplemented by comparative supra-regional and partly historical studies examining the causes of youth violence, its various forms of organization and how societies deal with this in the USA, Europe, Japan or Latin America and, more recently, in Africa. The academic discussion on youth violence is shaped by the specific contexts of academic disciplines (most of all psychology, sociology and criminology). The explanations for youth violence focus on the interrelation between societal contexts and the individual or collective perceptions and handling of these contexts. Three causal relations are being discussed:

1. Individual or personal experience of violence in the family or the immediate environment (school, neighborhoods, community);
2. Societal frameworks, such as inclusion into peer groups or other collective forms of organization, both civilian and (para)military
3. Political, economic and social developments that shape young peoples' perspectives for their personal future (e.g. availability of education, work and employment situation, social mobility etc.).

The mainstream of the discussion focuses either on the relation between individual experiences and collective organizations, or on individual experiences and perspectives for the future (see Daiute et al. 2006). Most of these debates look at developments in the big cities of the developed world, since the 1960s research in the US has been at the forefront. Recently these discussions have opened up to a more comparative approach and to the political, economic and, last but not least, the cultural aspects of globalization.<sup>3</sup>

Political science, peace and development research have only just begun to address the issue of youth and youth violence. Two perceptions are dominant here: During the last years the thesis of the youth bulge – formulated among others by Samuel Huntington in his book on the “Clash of Civilisations” – became prominent beyond academic discussions. The main argument is that societies with a large age cohort of young males that lack perspectives for the future are more conflict prone than others. While the lack of integration and perspective is an important factor for violence in general and youth violence in particular the thesis reduces the challenges that are caused by rapid social change to the demographic

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<sup>3</sup> See: Hagedorn 2001, 2005, 2006, 2008, Klein 2001, Klein/Maxson 2006, Watts 1998.

variable. Hence it is not surprising that quantitative studies testing the youth bulge theses have come to much more sophisticated results. (see Steffen Kröhnert in this book).

The perception of youth as a security threat even reached the UN High Level Panel on Security of 2004 stating: “While it may not reach the level of war, the combination of a surging youth population, poverty, urbanization and unemployment has resulted in increased gang violence in many cities of the developing world” (UN 2004:24). The security related discussion mainly refers to wars in Western Africa, the threat of terrorism and violent Islamic groups as well as the phenomenon of violent youth gangs and organised crime (the Balkans, Central America).<sup>4</sup> (see Nick Idoko, José Luis Rocha in this book).

A rather different notion of youth dominates the discourse in the field of human rights where youth are perceived as victims of conflict and violence. This perception is presented in the UN Reports of the UN General Secretary’s expert Graça Machel (1996, 2001) and other reports on the effects of violence from national and international NGOs. This discussion is closely linked to the discussion on children and armed violence and tends to focus on the age cohort under the age of 18 which is the threshold between children and adults for most international treaties and conventions for the protection of children.<sup>5</sup>

Only recently a new approach which aims at overcoming the dichotomy of youth as being either victims or perpetrators has emerged in the debate. Here youth are seen as autonomous actors whose behavior is shaped by differing context variables. A series of qualitative studies on youth and violent conflict have shown that young people dispose over a relatively high level of resilience towards conflict and violence and that they have a high capacity of adaptability and resistance (see UNDP 2006, Sommers 2006). War and violence change existing structures of power, access to resources and hierarchy; and thus may ironically offer opportunities for youth (as well as for women) not available during peace times. This has consequences not only for the analysis of youth in armed conflict but for peace-building strategies, as well. The mainstream of peace-building literature and peace-building initiatives have only begun to address these questions and to include youth as an important actor.<sup>6</sup> (see Siobhan McEvoy-Levy). But this discourse is rarely linked to the debate on youth gangs and youth violence.

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<sup>4</sup> See UN (2004), Mainwaring 2005 among others.

<sup>5</sup> At the same time youth in conflict is a gendered issue. While young males are seen mostly as perpetrators, girls and young women are mostly perceived in their role as victims. This is a quite fractured view of reality where young males are the main perpetrators as well as the main victims of youth violence.

<sup>6</sup> See McEvoy-Levy 2006, UNDP 2006, Sommers 2006, Daiute 2006, Kemper (2005). On youth in war Ab-bink/van Kessel (2005), Brett/Specht (2004), Dowdney (2005) addresses the issue of the participation of children and youth in organized armed violence, recently the World Bank (2005) has begun to do some research on youth in post-conflict contexts.

Trying to avoid any form of scandalization it appears sensible to carry out an in-depth analysis of the various existing – and possibly comparable – societal contexts and forms of youth violence, in war, post-war and non-war situations. We may find common structural features resulting from the following general factors: poverty, educational deprivation and marginalization forming the background for the willingness to act violently; group formation and incentives to enrich oneself at the expense of others through illicit economic activities; previous experience of violence in social, private-familial or political-public environments as offers and options for young people to form their identities.

It appears imperative to us to distinguish between the different contexts because context is a key determinant for the manner in which both society and international actors deal with youth violence (see Kurtenbach). While measures of demobilization, re-integration and social, mental and economic rehabilitation are the first choice in war and post-war times, violence used in non-war situations is largely addressed by criminological or social-educational measures. Yet, in the last few years numerous phenomena related to youth violence have increasingly emerged in a „grey“ area in which neither war nor peace prevail, thus contributing not only to the scandalization of youth violence, but in parts to the development of new enemy stereotypes in the form of „urban rebel movements“. Young people are increasingly being perceived as a threat.

In this realm the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) and the Evangelische Akademie Loccum, from 14 - 16 November 2007, organized an international conference to discuss the problems of youth violence in the different contexts of war, post-war and non-war situations, and the strategies of dealing with youth violence in these contexts, accordingly. For both, the context analysis and the strategic issues, the conference offered a cross-regional comparative approach.

Presenting analysis of case studies from Central America, West Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the US – Brazil, Nicaragua, Nigeria, DR Congo, Afghanistan, Palestine, the Balkans, Northern Ireland, France, Germany and US cities – the conference discussed, systematically and typologically, the causes, forms and structures of violence, to assess their significance in society and to develop exit strategies.

More specifically, the conference centered around the following questions:

- I. What are the causes and objectives of youth violence in different societal, cultural and historical contexts? What are the regional differences?
  - in global metropolitan areas (migration, extremism, racism)
  - in connection with conflicts over resources (for example, Africa, Latin America)
  - in contexts marked by religion (for example, Middle East)

- in connection with ethnicity (for example, Africa)
  - in processes of social exclusion (Latin America, Europe).
- II. How can a line be drawn between different forms of violence – political violence, social violence, personal enrichment, ritualized violence, situational violence? What is youth-specific about these forms of violence?
- III. How do societies deal with youth or young people who are inclined to use violence? What are the alternative options? What can and should be done through international cooperation? At what levels does it take place?
- youth as addressees of peacebuilding (demobilization, re-integration, economic prospects)
  - role of school and general education
  - youth projects against violence/youth exchanges
  - youth as part of international peace missions
  - specific transnational features (USA-Latin America; Europe-Africa.)
  - cooperation in research and policy-making

After two days of intensive and fruitful discussions among experts from various disciplines and backgrounds no concluding results could be stated, however, numerous interesting findings were elaborated of which we want to highlight the following:

First: The topic of youth and youth violence is a central topic independent of the differing contexts. It touches on interrelated dimensions and „grey areas“ concerning the development perspective, the issues of peace and conflict resolution as well as social and welfare policies. Youth are not just victims or perpetrators but “key connectors” that shape the future of their societies. Social exclusion, marginalisation or stigmatization of young people is thus not only politically short sighted and morally condemnable but can also become dangerous.

Second: The specific context is highly relevant for the mechanisms and processes in which youth violence and its organisational features may occur. In this field a lot of comparative research and systematization still needs to be done, especially on the significance of cultural and historical contexts as well as on the influence of political regimes and economic orders.

Third: Political strategies towards youth and youth violence need to find an, at least, twofold balance. On the one hand cultural sensitive approaches must be adapted to needs for change and transformation which is often at the core of youth organisations. On the other hand, synergies are to be developed between top-down, middle level and bottom-up approaches. In doing so strategies should not be limited to solely working with the youth, but moreover it is about bringing change to the affected societies as

a whole in a way which allows to acknowledge youth as a key potential rather than a source of irritation.

The conference indicated important and fascinating fields for further research and practice. The different areas of academic analysis and political practice hold a huge potential for follow-up conferences but also for future networking and co-operation.

The authors of the book have based their contributions on the many excellent presentations of the Loccum conference. The structure of the conference has been maintained for the outline of the book. The first chapter introduces the topic of youth violence in the globalized world addressing, the different contexts (Kurtenbach) and the social circumstances of young people living in crises and conflicts. (Blumör). This is complemented with a discussion of demographic developments (Kröhnert) and an overview on the main topics of research on youth violence in developing countries (Imbusch).

The chapter "Causes and Contexts of Youth Violence" deals with the relevance of processes of urbanization, social change and exclusion for youth violence in different contexts. Subchapter I documents the results on these issues in non-war situations with a reconsideration of gangs (Hagedorn), the possibilities to integrate youth at the communal level (Huguet), a case study on the complex situations youth face in Nigeria (Idoko) and urban riots in France (Keller). Subchapter II addresses the related problems for war and post-war contexts: The problems of ethnicity and identity are addressed with respect to Israel and Palestine (Clauss), the transformation process from war to post-war contexts with a focus on Northern Ireland (Jarman) and Afghanistan (Hayes).

The chapter "Strategies for Dealing with Youth Violence" is directed to state and non-state approaches addressing and coping with youth violence in different contexts. Subchapter I on non-war constellations discusses the possibilities of development co-operation (Sohr), strategies departing from a public health approach (Concha-Eastman), intercultural youth exchanges (Kimmich) and street work (Balzer). In subchapter II on war and post-war contexts the linkages of development and peace-building programs are addressed with a focus on Bosnia-Herzegovina (Fischer), and a detailed overview on youth related peace-building needs (McEvoy-Levy). Challenges for the demobilization of child soldiers and young people are explained with a focus on Eastern Congo (Koch), and the different experiences with strategies addressing post-war youth violence in Central America (Rocha).

Each chapter concludes with a summary of the major findings by the rapporteurs of the conference (Imbusch, Lock, Grimm, Kurtenbach).

Globalization of culture and its relations with youth violence (such as featured in Hip Hop and Rap, music and film) is the theme of Katrin Lock's paper.

The two final papers reflect and summarize the challenges for international co-operation from an EU practitioners' perspective (Däuble, Lyamouri-Bajja).

With this book, we again want to thank all paper givers and panellists, as well as the participants for contributing to a highly stimulating conference. We ask the readers for understanding that due to scarce financial resources we had to decide on an editing mode which included both English and German papers in parallel.

We are very grateful to the German Development Agency, GTZ, (Sector Project Youth and Education) and Swiss Development Cooperation (DEZA) for their generous funding of the conference.

We hope that this volume will foster the insights in the issues of the conference with those who attended, and beyond.

Loccum, September 2008

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