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Drugs, gangs and vigilantes: how to tackle the new breeds of Mexican armed violence

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Executive summary

Since 2007 Mexico has experienced a steady increase in lethal and non-lethal forms of violence, including kidnappings, extortion, extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances. This spiral of violence has been driven by the consolidation and expansion of non-conventional armed actors operating in an institutional and political climate characterised by pervasive levels of corruption, impunity and criminal collusion. Public indignation over this state of affairs reached a high after the disappearance of 43 trainee teachers in the town of Iguala in September 2014.

This report analyses the objectives, structures and impact of non-conventional armed actors in Mexico, focusing on drug-trafficking organisations, street gangs and so-called self-defence forces. It examines the pitfalls and lessons learned from the country's past and present security strategies, and lays out the basis for an alternative approach to understanding and tackling non-conventional armed violence. Based on a careful analysis of the dynamic and hybrid character of these groups, the report argues for an approach that prioritises the fight against corruption and the protection of embattled communities through localised prevention, geographic sequencing and knowledge-based policing.

Introduction

At the end of 2007 Mexico joined the list of Latin American countries that, despite being formal and relatively stable democracies, have experienced epidemic levels of lethal violence that either match or surpass the number of deaths associated with civil war and traditional political conflict.[1] Like Mexico is experiencing today, Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela and the countries of the northern triangle of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) have witnessed the emergence and consolidation of criminal networks that have profoundly weakened citizens' security and the state's capacity to uphold the rule of law. The results have included expressions of violence neither rooted in traditional armed conflicts nor driven by objectives that could be qualified as political in any conventional way (Adams, 2014: 1; Davis, 2010: 399-400).[2] Instead, they involve the participation of armed non-state actors, whose use of violence is generally motivated by the pursuit of profit, the need to acquire territorial control over trafficking and distribution routes, or the simple imperative to neutralise competing organisations.

Like other countries across the region, Mexico attempted to contain and counteract the presence of criminal organisations, particularly drug-trafficking organisations (DTOs), through a security strategy that privileged the use of repressive and militarised measures. Announced at the end of 2006 by Mexico's former president, Felipe Calderón (in power 2006-12), as an imminent all-out war against organised crime that the Mexican state had to undertake, this strategy also had several negative and unexpected consequences for the country's insecurity. Among these were a steady increase in lethal and non-lethal forms of violence, including kidnappings, extortion, extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances; an escalation in human rights violations by military and police personnel; and the fragmentation of DTOs, together with the emergence of smaller and more volatile criminal organisations

1 The country's homicide rate increased by more than 58% in 2008, and went from eight homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2007 to 24 per 100,000 in 2011 (Shirk et al., 2014). In 2011 more than 16,600 deaths were officially attributed to the actions of criminal organisations, a number that surpasses by far the 1,000-casualty threshold used to define a "civil war" (Schedler, 2014: 6-7).

2 A conventional definition of political violence includes only those acts whose aim is to uphold or subvert a given political system, ideology or movement (cf. Bourgois, 2001: 8).

(Guerrero, 2012). This has triggered the emergence of self-defence forces that, while claiming to defend the security of their communities, have pursued the strategy of taking justice into their own hands (Afura-Heim & Espach, 2013). Although Mexico's current president, Enrique Peña Nieto, has promised to revise the country' security strategy and move towards a more holistic approach that would prioritise protecting local communities, safeguarding the rights of victims and reducing the impact of violent crimes, evidence as to the effects of these changes has been mixed (Felbab-Brown, 2014). Furthermore, the recent disappearance and apparent mass killing of 43 students in Iguala, a city located in the Mexican state of Guerrero, has exposed the central role corruption and impunity play in explaining the country's current levels of violence.[3]

As a result there is a pressing need to consider alternative ways to confront the challenges posed by non-conventional forms of armed violence in Mexico. This report will argue that acknowledging the plural, dynamic, and hybrid character of non-conventional violence is central to the design and implementation of integral, sustainable, and effective responses. By the term "plural", this report refers to the manifold actors and groups that characterise Mexico's ever more fragmented and volatile insecurity context, and which call for the adoption of differentiated and context-specific policies. The term "dynamic" illustrates the capacity of non-conventional armed actors, such as DTOs, gangs, and other criminal networks, to adapt and transform their activities, modes of organisation, and geographical scope relatively quickly. The term "hybrid" points to the fact that non-conventional armed violence may involve the participation of both state actors (including public officials, and police and military personnel) and members of local communities. Recognising the hybridity of non-conventional violence illuminates the limits of those security policies designed in terms of an "us versus them" logic, in which state institutions and communities are regarded as incorruptible and impenetrable, while non-conventional armed actors are regarded as deviant elements or actors that lie on the margins of the country's institutional and social fabric.

Three types of armed violence

Three main actors are behind Mexico's current state of insecurity and violence: DTOs street gangs and self-defence forces. While their interests and modes of organisation differ, the connections between the illicit markets driving their activities and the political and social forces legitimising their presence suggest that these actors operate as part of a continuum rather than in isolation.

For instance, evidence suggests that self-defence forces are at present partially funded by DTOs and are thus becoming a threat to the very communities they claimed to protect (CCSPJP, 2013). For their part, street gangs have developed a closer relationship with DTOs and have become instrumental in ensuring the trans-shipment of drugs and their distribution in the U.S. market. Moreover, many DTOs have diversified their activities, incorporating other violent crimes such as robbery, kidnapping, extortion and human trafficking. In so doing they have coerced, if not displaced, more autonomous and localised criminal cells that used to control these criminal markets. For the purposes of our discussion I will describe these actors separately in an effort to differentiate their relations with local communities and state authorities.

The first part of this report will examine the three above-mentioned actors – DTOs, street gangs and self-defence forces – by looking at their aims, levels of organisation, and connections with communities and state actors. The shortcomings of the past and present strategies that the Mexican government has adopted towards them and potential ways these might be remedied will also be highlighted. A second and final section will present five core elements that an alternative approach to non-conventional armed violence in Mexico should incorporate.

Drug-trafficking organisations

DTOs have played a prominent role in Mexico's recent escalation of violence, as well as in the emergence of more visible and spectacular forms of violence. According to recent estimations, organised-crime-style killings represent between 30% and 50% of the total number of intentional homicides in Mexico (Shirk at al., 2014: 24). Although the presence of DTOs in Mexico can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century (Astorga, 2005), the role of DTOs as one of the country's main drivers of violence is a more recent development. As argued by Snyder and Duran-Martinez (2009), illicit markets do not necessarily generate greater levels of violence, particularly when political elites are willing and able to offer state-sponsored protection deals to criminal organisations.[4] Until the 1990s and again at the beginning of the 2000s Mexican DTOs benefitted precisely from such protection rackets, thus privileging the use of bribery over violence in their transactions.

However, the relationship between DTOs and political elites fundamentally changed as a result of both the country's process of democratisation and the regional consolidation of Mexican DTOs, which emerged as the main suppliers of drugs to the U.S. market (Astorga & Shirk, 2010: 33). As a result DTOs increasingly turned to violence as a preferred means of securing dominance over their competitors.

3 On September 26th 2014, 43 student protesters went missing in the city of Iguala. According to recent investigations the students were kidnapped by a group of municipal police officers under the mandate of the then-mayor of the city, José Luis Abarca, and his wife, María de los Ángeles Pineda. The police officers then turned the students over to the criminal organisation Guerreros Unidos, which may have massacred them and burnt their bodies.

4 Snyder and Duran-Martinez (2009: 254) define a state-sponsored protection racket as "informal institutions through which public officials refrain from enforcing the law or, alternatively, enforce it selectively against the rivals of a criminal organization, in exchange for a share of the profits generated by the organization".

Moreover, as DTOs gained the upper hand in their relationship with political elites they began to use violence against public officials who did not comply or who did not deliver the expected protection.

The security policies promoted by former president Felipe Calderón against DTOs further intensified levels of violence. Anchored in a three-pronged strategy – the use of militarised operations, the imprisonment and elimination of DTOs' main leaders or kingpins, and the seizure of drugs – Calderón's policies directly contributed to rising levels of violence both within and across these organisations. DTOs increased their arsenals of weaponry; directed attacks against public officials, journalists and civil society activists; and diversified their illicit activities by turning to kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking, and gas and oil theft (Magaloni et al., 2011). Furthermore, the imprisonment and killing of several DTOs' most influential kingpins led to the fragmentation and atomisation of these organisations and to the subsequent emergence of smaller and more independent criminal cells (Felbab-Brown, 2014: 16). Moreover, the presence of these organisations became more widespread, as did the geographic distribution of intentional homicides (Shirk et al., 2014: 26). Lastly, many DTOs started to promote the forced recruitment of members in order to make up for manpower losses. Mexican children and youth from marginalised areas, as well as Central American immigrants in transit to the U.S., have been particularly affected by this new development (Meyer, 2010).

Although President Peña Nieto has tried to demarcate his security strategy from that of the previous government, in practice his most important strategies resemble those of Calderón's government. These include the arrest of influential drug lords, such as Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, and the deployment of federal and military forces in towns that had fallen under DTO control. Moreover, although levels of lethal violence decreased by 12.5% in 2013, falling from 22 to 19 homicides per 100,000 (INEGI, 2014), violent crimes such as extortion and kidnapping have actually increased since last year, while DTOs' use of violence has continued to feature ever more brutal and spectacular forms of expression (ENVIPE-INEGI, 2014: 7).

Furthermore, corruption and impunity have remained at the heart of Mexico's security crisis, as demonstrated by the various cases implicating state governors, mayors, police officers and military personnel in illicit activities. As such, DTOs' actions have had a clear impact on the political stability of the country. Among other things, DTOs have contributed to undermining the transparency and legitimacy of state institutions by controlling electoral processes, penetrating the security and justice systems at more than one level, and creating a climate of fear and insecurity that has helped weaken support for procedural justice and the rule of law (Schedler, 2014).

Although the use of violence by DTOs has become more widespread, there are still considerable differences between the types of tactics employed by these criminal organisations. For instance, two of the most influential DTOs in Mexico today – the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas – differ significantly in terms of their strategies and operations. The Sinaloa cartel favours corruption over violence, and is characterised by a relatively stable hierarchy and membership. It is known for its capacity to bribe high-level officials, including politicians and police personnel, as well as for using more "discreet" forms of violence, such as forced disappearances (Radden Keefe, 2012). In addition to developing strong ties with political and economic elites, the Sinaloa cartel often operates with the acquiescence of local communities who regard its leaders as social benefactors and patrons (Hernández, 2013: 3-6). Furthermore, its main criminal activity continues to be the production and trans-shipment of drugs.

In contrast, the Zetas are known for their conspicuous and highly publicised methods of violence. Created by former members of the Mexican army special forces, the Zetas operate as a loose network of criminal cells that have developed an extractive and highly diversified criminal model (Dudley, 2012b). They have managed to exert control over more localised criminal organisations involved in human, sexual and drug trafficking, and operate in the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Veracruz, and Chiapas, and along the borders and in the inner cities of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Evidence shows that the absorption of independent and local criminal groups by regional DTOs – a process known as "cartelisation" – might led to the weakening of local forms of social control exercised over these organisations and to the adoption of more predatory and violent behaviours (Mendoza Rockwell, 2012).

Understanding DTOs' various modes of organisation is central to thinking about more effective ways to reduce the harm and violence that these organisations generate. For instance, whereas DTOs that privilege bribery might be persuaded more easily to stop using violence, those that regard violence as a fundamental means to retain their dominion can hardly be expected to change their tactics. The Zetas exemplify the latter, the Sinaloa cartel the former. As a matter of fact, analysts have suggested that Mexico's former president Calderón decided at the end of his presidency to direct most of the government's militarised operations against those DTOs that, like the Zetas, were seen as responsible for producing the disturbing expressions of crime in the country (Felbab-Brown, 2013: 7). However, this strategy – known as "focused deterrence" – generated mixed results at best. Although it facilitated the arrest of some of the Zetas' main leaders, the organisation's highly dynamic, decentralised, and fluid nature enabled its ongoing reproduction through newer and increasingly fragmented cells.

For many observers, the Zetas' modus operandi represents the future of Mexican DTOs: dynamic, predatory, fragmented and detached from the communities where they operate. If this tendency is confirmed, a strategy of

focused deterrence might not be the most effective means to prevent the expansion of these organisations. In point of fact, it might accelerate their fragmentation and even trigger their territorial expansion, because organisations may splinter and seek to "transplant" their activities into different localities (Garay Salamanca & Salcedo-Albarán, 2012: 305). In addition, the strategy of focused deterrence, at least in the Mexican case, left untouched the challenge of state capture, with the consequence that networks of corruption linking DTOs and public officials persisted and deepened. The hybrid nature of non-conventional violence in Mexico demands anti-corruption efforts to be at the crux of any security strategy aimed at producing sustainable and positive results. These efforts need to start at the level of the police force, whose use of criminal violence has been identified as one of the main sources of citizens' fear and insecurity (Magaloni et al., 2011). Furthermore, given that DTOs are increasingly using extortion and kidnapping against common citizens, any effective policy must move from its emphasis on attacking DTOs by militarised strategies to one of protecting vulnerable areas through the strategic deployment of local police forces, the strengthening of police investigation capacities and the development of effective reporting mechanisms.

Street gangs

Street gangs have undergone fundamental changes in Mexico over the past five to seven years. In 2006 a subregional study comparing the presence and dynamics of gangs in Mexico, Central America, and the U.S. concluded that in Mexico gangs were considerably less violent, less organised and possessed weaker ties with organised crime when compared to their counterparts in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Barnes, 2006). Other comparative and national studies reached similar conclusions, characterising Mexican gangs as groups formed mostly by young men from marginalised areas, whose criminal activities were limited to minor robberies and selling drugs at the local level (Perea, 2008; Santamaría, 2007). Their use of violence, these studies argued, remained at relatively low levels due to the social bonds that kept gang members connected to the communities where they operated.

Today, street gangs' modus operandi has changed significantly. While smaller and more localised gangs continue to exist in Mexico's central and southern states, the country's northern states have seen the emergence and consolidation of gangs characterised by greater levels of violence, deeper connections to organised crime and a more hierarchical structure with established transnational ties to the U.S. (Cawley, 2014). Salient among these gangs are Barrio Azteca, Mexicles and Mexican Mafia; many of the members of each of these originate from among Mexican nationals incarcerated in the Texan and Californian prison systems. With a strong presence in cities such as Monterrey, Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, these gangs gained a foothold on Mexican territory as a result of massive deportations carried out by the U.S. government during the 1990s and 2000s.

Evidence suggests that these gangs have created alliances with the Sinaloa cartel, the Juárez cartel, the Gulf cartel and the Zetas. They work as DTOs' *sicarios* or hired assassins, as well as distributors or intermediaries for the trans-shipment of drugs to the U.S. market (Jones, 2013: 97). Their role has become more instrumental to these businesses as DTOs have transitioned into more fragmented organisations that depend on subcontractors or temporary alliances with other criminal groups. However, it should be noted here that, contrary to what some newspapers have suggested, none of these alliances involves the Central American gangs known as *maras*. In fact, according to various studies, the viability of an alliance between Mexican DTOs and *maras* is at best questionable. Among other things, this is due to the more local character of *maras*'s criminal activities, which involve extortion, robbery and the local distribution of drugs (Dudley, 2012a; Santamaría, 2013). Nonetheless, Mexican DTOs have indeed built alliances with other Central American criminal organisations, such as groups of *transportistas*, or transporters – i.e. groups that facilitate DTOs' trans-shipment of drugs and offer access to local markets to distribute and sell drugs (Garay Salamanca & Salcedo-Albarán, 2012: 305).

The transition of Mexico's street gangs towards more hierarchical and violent organisations with established connections with DTOs has clear consequences for the types of policies that can be implemented to prevent or control them. Given that they operate as transnational organisations and DTOs' subcontractors with little or no attachment to local communities, these gangs lack the type of social or community controls that more traditional gangs observed. Moreover, driven as they are by more predatory criminal interests, their use of violence cannot be prevented through the type of social interventions that have proved effective in the case of more localised juvenile gangs (Jones, 2013: 98-99).

Nevertheless, other policies could be implemented. For instance, the 2012 truce between the two most powerful *maras* in El Salvador, which was mediated by the government and led to a significant decrease in homicides, might offer some important lessons for Mexico's equally violent and well-organised gangs. If gang members from Barrio Azteca, Mexicles and Mexican Mafia continue to owe their allegiance mostly to their gang leadership, then it might be possible for the government to negotiate a halt to violence in exchange for improvements in the living conditions of gang members in Mexican prisons. However, as in El Salvador's case, the effectiveness of this initiative would depend on the capacity of the gang leadership to implement the truce and discipline its members; this discipline might have been weakened by these gangs' commitments to DTOs. Moreover, in order for such a truce to work in Mexico there should be sufficient checks and balances to ensure that the negotiations do not feed corruption or create further incentives for state capture.

A less controversial intervention would involve focusing on protecting children and youth in Mexico's border and

northern cities from being recruited by these gangs and by DTOs themselves. Evidence from programmes working directly with at-risk youth in Mexico, but also in countries like Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, demonstrate that effective interventions are based on an integral approach to juvenile violence (Muggah & Aguirre, 2013), i.e. an approach that is able to highlight the connections linking intra-family violence, violence at school, and the dynamics of social and economic exclusion affecting this particular group.

Self-defence forces

Over the last five years self-defence forces have emerged in at least ten out of Mexico's 32 states. Organised as a reaction to increasing levels of violence and crime generated by DTOs in their communities, these groups, comprising mostly young and adult men, have decided to arm themselves and take matters into their own hands. Although DTOs' presence in these communities is not new, the use of violence in communities and against unarmed civilians, and DTOs' incursion into criminal activities beyond the cultivation and smuggling of drugs are more recent trends. Guerrero and Michoacán, for instance, two of the Mexican states where self-defence forces have developed a stronger presence, have for decades been home to various DTOs. However, it was only when DTOs became more predatory, and started to diversify their activities by kidnapping and extorting small farmers and their families, that members of the community decided to organise groups of vigilantes or self-defence forces (Asfura-Heim & Espach, 2013).

In principle, self-defence forces differ significantly from DTOs and street gangs inasmuch as their use of violence is driven by an interest in defending their communities rather than pursuing economic gain. However, the lack of transparency regarding these groups' sources of funding and recent accusations about their potential collaboration with DTOs have raised fundamental questions about self-defence forces' underlying motivations.[5] Accusations of this kind abound, as do testimonies from members of these communities claiming that, as self-defence forces grow in numbers and weaponry, they are themselves becoming a threat to their communities. These allegations are not to be taken lightly. After all, self-defence forces have proven capable of fighting powerful DTOs and ousting some of these organisations' criminal cells, demonstrating an effective and well-organised use of force that in many ways surpasses the capacity of local police. Given that communities do not have the means – institutional or otherwise – to hold these groups accountable,[6] and given that many continue to operate in a grey zone between legality and illegality, it is plausible to think that these groups may at some point turn against locals. In this sense, as in the case of DTOs and street gangs, experience indicates that the more detached a non-conventional armed group is from the community where it operates the greater the chances are that it becomes threatening or adopts more predatory behaviour.

Mexican authorities have attempted to control self-defence forces by legalising and integrating them into the state structure. Announced in May 2014, this initiative promoted the provision of arms and uniforms to some of these groups, as well as their assimilation into a new rural police force that would fight DTOs hand in hand with the armed forces. By institutionalising their existence and promoting their collaboration with Mexican security forces, the government sought to stop the proliferation of these groups and prevent their further penetration by criminal interests. However, not all of these self-defence forces have been willing to collaborate with the government. This stance follows from their distrust of state authorities and a prevailing view that holds the government responsible for the country's spiral of violence. Moreover, the institutionalisation of self-defence forces has so far not translated into concrete mechanisms that would enable communities to gain control over these groups. In other words, it has increased their collaboration with police or military personnel, while it has not brought them closer to their communities. In addition, the government has not yet presented a plan for the eventual demobilisation and disarmament of these groups, nor has it clarified what their functions will be once the objective of ousting DTOs' criminal cells has been achieved. A more desirable approach to self-defence forces would entail establishing a clear timeline to demobilise them, making them groups accountable to the communities they claim to protect, and taking concrete steps to create an increasingly professional and effective local police force to prevent the spread of vigilantism in the country.

Up until now self-defence forces have neither embraced a political ideology nor presented any political demands to the state beyond their demand for public safety. Their main goal continues to be – at least in principle – to protect their communities and expel so-called drug traffickers. However, the recent disappearance and probable mass killing of trainee teachers in Iguala, Guerrero, has served as a catalyst to mobilise various social and political forces that are willing to join self-defence forces or create new ones. Besides the teachers' unions and the student movement, members of the guerrilla group Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR) have blamed the government for the students' disappearance. The EPR has called for the organisation of "justice brigades" and for the creation of armed units to fight the Mexican "narco-state" (Olmos, 2014). This development could jeopardise the state's current arrangement with self-defence forces. It could also radicalise these groups and

5 For instance, a self-defence group created in a small town in Michoacán to counteract the presence of the Knights Templar was allegedly linked to the Jalisco cartel, a rival criminal organisation (Cawley, 2013).

6 These groups' lack of accountability contrasts with other experiences of so-called vigilantes that have existed in indigenous communities in Mexico for many years, such as the *ronda comunitaria* of Cherán in Michoacán.

distance them even further from their initial commitment to ensuring their communities' public safety. Most importantly, it could contribute to the transformation of self-defence forces into a more conventional form of insurgency.

Addressing non-conventional violence in Mexico: an alternative framework

Mexico's current levels of violence are underpinned by the presence of highly dynamic armed groups that have experienced a major process of expansion and fragmentation over the last decade. DTOs in particular have splintered into smaller criminal cells and are now subcontracting street gangs and coercing children, young people, and immigrants into their ranks. Although DTOs and street gangs are mostly driven by an interest in profiting from illicit and criminal activities, self-defence forces are being galvanised and becoming politicised as citizens' discontent over the state's incapacity to deliver security and justice continues to rise. Moreover, the hybrid character of these groups, which involves the direct participation or collaboration of public officials and security personnel, raises important questions regarding the political underpinnings of non-conventional armed violence. In particular, it calls into question the idea that non-conventional armed groups are to be considered completely external to Mexico's institutional and political structures.

Non-conventional armed actors have become more detached from the communities in which they operate. DTOs and street gangs, for instance, have transitioned to more fluid and fragmented organisations that operate through transnational criminal networks. Self-defence forces continue to act on behalf of given communities, yet they seem increasingly inclined to collaborate with DTOs, in spite of their formal incorporation into rural police units. The distancing of non-conventional armed actors from local communities weakens the latter's capacity to hold these actors accountable, and enables the emergence of more violent forms of behaviour within and against these communities.

Meanwhile, the war on drugs, with its emphasis on repression and its focus on dismantling and destroying DTOs, has contributed to the fragmentation and geographical diffusion of these criminal organisations. It has also added to the diversification of these organisations' criminal activities and their adoption of ever more violent means to secure their profits. Furthermore, the war on drugs has done little to remedy the institutional roots of drug-related violence, i.e. corruption and the criminal cooption of public officials. Today, DTOs continue to be the main actors behind the high levels of violence in the country. Street gangs have, however, become more instrumental for DTOs and self-defence forces are experiencing rapid expansion. The potential or actual conflation of self-defence forces and DTOs, on the one hand, and the radicalisation or politicisation of self-defence forces, on the other, may lead to a deepening of Mexico's insecurity crisis and initiate a new spiral of insurgent and criminal violence.

In light of this complex and volatile scenario, the following five policy recommendations seek to provide an alternative framework to non-conventional armed violence in Mexico.

(1) *The state should recognise the hybrid character of non-conventional armed violence and prioritise the fight against corruption.* The first step to tackle non-conventional armed violence in Mexico is to recognise that it is not limited to non-state actors. The influence attained by DTOs cannot be fully understood without taking into account the ongoing collaboration and participation of public officials and security personnel in criminal activities, including extortion, kidnapping and extrajudicial killings. The war on drug's original sin was to attempt to counteract DTOs as if they were purely external to the state structure. They are not. Particularly at the municipal and state levels DTOs have managed to coopt decision-making processes and infiltrate police and military personnel. The emergence of self-defence forces is itself a result of the deterioration of security institutions and of citizens' distrust in the state's capacity and willingness to protect citizens. One of President Peña Nieto's original promises was to launch a National Commission against Corruption. Almost two years have passed since he was inaugurated, but the initiative is still under revision by the Mexican Congress. It is critical to fast-track this initiative and adopt other concrete measures to fight corruption, both within the police and military forces, and in political and electoral processes throughout the country.

(2) *The state should focus on the protection of affected communities, not on dismantling criminal organisations*. In the last ten years Mexican governments have consistently made the fight against DTOs the cornerstone of security policy. The focus on repression and the elimination of DTOs' kingpins has only contributed to their further proliferation and geographical diffusion. Given the failure of these past policies, and the plural and dynamic nature of these organisations, the focus should decisively shift from attacking DTOs to protecting local communities. President Peña Nieto has certainly included this shift as a central goal of his new security strategy, but so far no concrete initiative or programme has been developed to achieve this. The protection of local communities needs to go beyond the intermittent presence of the military in areas considered to be under the control of DTOs. It must involve the implementation of sustainable and long-term projects, and should be focused on the recovery of public spaces, the restitution of citizens' trust, and the creation of real economic opportunities for young people. This has to be done at the local level, and through the creation of strategic alliances with business owners, civil society organisations, schools, and community leaders.

(3) *The state should work at the local level, followed by a strategy of geographic sequencing that starts with the most affected areas and recognises each area's particular needs*. Although Mexico's geographic distribution of violence has become more widespread, it is still possible to identify

those municipalities where levels of insecurity demand immediate attention. In order to be effective, the Mexican government needs to allocate its resources selectively and strategically by intervening first in those cities or municipalities that face higher levels of violence (Felbab-Brown, 2013; Guerrero, 2012). In Mexico's current context these localities are concentrated in the central and south-western states of Michoacán, Guerrero and Estado de México, and in the northern states of Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Baja California Norte and Tamaulipas. In Michoacán and Guerrero violence is driven mostly by DTOs, but also by self-defence forces, as well as by social unrest and insurgent groups such as the EPR, while in the northern states of Chihuahua and Baja California violence is driven by the collusion of DTOs and street gangs. Each of these localities demands different interventions, depending on the set of armed actors that operate in each of them, but also on the strength of civil society organisations and the levels of state capture. In places where civil society organisations are stronger, the government can build local alliances and work with prevention or rehabilitation programmes already in place. If certain branches of the local government have been coopted by DTOs, then the central government needs to oversee the functioning of local institutions and try to rebuild the legitimacy of and citizens' trust in local institutions, while remaining in collaboration and dialogue with local communities.

(4) *The state should prevent the forced recruitment of children, youth and immigrants by organised crime*. Specific programmes can be promoted to protect children and young men from being forcibly recruited by DTOs. After-school programmes can be important, particularly in contexts where children are left alone for long periods. Interventions should focus on prevention and rehabilitation, and should recognise the connections among intra-family violence, juvenile violence and violence at school. In the case of immigrants, it is urgent to create a safety corridor that includes the formation of more shelters for immigrants and promotes collaboration among the Mexican authorities, civil society organisations, churches, and the consulates of Central American countries in Mexico. Mexican authorities should also facilitate the reporting of extortion and other crimes affecting immigrants, and guarantee the safety and human rights of immigrants.

(5) *The state should promote a culture of legality in both state institutions and local communities*. This report has insisted on the hybrid character of non-conventional armed violence in Mexico. DTOs have operated in Mexican towns and communities for many decades. Before these organisations became violent and predatory, local communities were in many ways complicit with the presence of DTOs, either by turning a blind eye to their illicit activities or by receiving economic benefits from them. Local businesses and local politicians in particular benefitted from DTOs, thereby blurring the lines between licit and illicit activities. Those participating in self-defence forces have openly admitted that they did not perceive the presence of DTOs as a problem, at least until these organisations started to exercise violence against them. On the other hand, the networks of complicity and corruption between public officials and DTOs have been part of Mexico's political landscape for many decades. In both cases so-called criminal actors were able to develop their influence through the passive and active complicity of both local communities and state institutions. Promoting a culture of legality is certainly not an easy task, and can only be realised through long-term programmes that re-establish citizens' trust in state institutions and raise awareness about the costs that illegality and criminality have in terms of citizens' security and well-being. It is, nonetheless, a necessary task if citizens and policymakers are to address the social and political roots of non-conventional armed violence in Mexico.

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