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## Development in Practice

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### Editorial

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# Editorial

*Deborah Eade*

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Latin America bears the unenviable reputation of being a region in which the likelihood of suffering systematic violence throughout one's lifetime, or of meeting a violent death, is one of the highest in the world. Paradoxically, this remains the case even in countries that have emerged from long periods of dictatorship and protracted civil wars, after which a 'peace dividend' might have been expected. The recorded homicide rate in El Salvador, for instance, more than doubled between 1991 (43.5 per 100,000 inhabitants), the year before the Chapultepec Peace Agreement, and 1994 (more than 100 per 100,000 inhabitants), two years after the formal cessation of hostilities (Hume 2004: 63). Dina Meza, the Honduran lawyer who received the 2007 Amnesty International Special Award for Human Rights Journalism Under Threat, contrasts the case of countries that are visibly at war with the situation in Latin America, where, she says, 'the war is different: it is one waged against poverty, hunger and a violence rooted in corruption which targets people who express their own ideas'. In an interview with the BBC (Jackson 2007), she continues,

*My colleagues and I created Revistazo because we could not publish our stories about human rights abuses anywhere else. . . . One area we have been investigating particularly is the private security companies which appeared in Honduras after the Cold War of the 1980s when our country was nicknamed the 'backyard of the USA'. They were mainly formed by landowners and people who had violated human rights during the war, and who suddenly found themselves without the protection of the army. There are more than 350 such companies in Honduras. They employ seven times more people than the whole of the national police force. They are overflowing with weapons and the state has little control over them.<sup>1</sup>*

Records of incidents of violence, even those resulting in death, are notoriously unreliable and characterised by under-reporting: the punishment of children, and partner abuse or 'correction' by means of chronic and sometimes extreme physical and sexual violence are widely regarded as part of everyday life (Hume 2004: 65), something to be stoically suffered, along with the many other privations and injuries inflicted on those unable to defend themselves, whether at work or at home.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there are the international trade in illegal drugs, human trafficking (for sexual prostitution and other forms of degrading work, the trade in human organs, and illegal adoption), the easy availability of weapons, and the gangs or *maras* allegedly introduced by undocumented Central American youths deported from the USA (see Mo Hume's article in this issue): all serve to fuel such violence, particularly (but not exclusively) among young men.

Latin America is also characterised by extreme disparities in wealth, in access to land and other means of securing a decent living, and in access to social resources. Spectacular wealth cohabits with profound and extensive poverty. For instance, as of July 2007 the world's

richest man is the Mexican Carlos Slim Helú, owning 90 per cent of the country's telephone lines following the privatisation of Telmex in 1990; his other companies own 80 per cent of Mexico's mobile phones. Slim's US\$ 68.8 billion fortune represents the equivalent of 8 per cent of Mexico's GDP (Walsh 2007). In a section of its Mexico Country Brief somewhat curiously entitled 'Development Progress', the World Bank estimated that (according to its 2005 figures) 45 per cent of Mexicans were 'moderately poor', and 18 per cent extremely so. With a population of 107 million, these figures represent more than 48 million Mexican citizens living precariously near or below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup>

Many argue that this polarisation has worsened rather than improved with the pursuit of neo-liberal policies, which has added millions of new poor to the ranks of the already poor as social expenditure has been slashed, state enterprises sold off, and public workers retrenched:

*The Latin American region continues to have the highest level of income inequality in the world, a situation that has seen virtually no improvement in most countries and has deteriorated even further in some. Despite average annual growth rates of 3.2 percent since 1990, the richest 10 percent of households maintained or increased income levels, while the poorest 40 percent held steady or experienced decreased income. In other words, the modest and even, in some cases, exceptional economic growth rates of the 1990s have not led either to fewer people living in poverty or to a more equitable distribution of income. (Youngers 1999)*

Not surprisingly, then, concepts such as 'structural violence' (Galtung 1991) and what Ulrich Oslender in this issue calls 'violence in development' find widespread resonance throughout the region and over time. During the wars of the 1980s and early 1990s, rural Central Americans would refer to their resistance methods as 'development for survival', their own grassroots alternative to the forced victimhood of long-term displacement. In response to such raw inequality, the region has also produced an immensely rich and influential range of contributions to critical thinking on issues of social and economic justice. This variety ranges from dependency theory (Prebisch 1981; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Furtado, see Carlos Mallorquín's contribution to this issue) to liberation theology (Gutiérrez 1973) and includes also issues of gender and reproductive rights (for example, Lamas 1995); globalisation and the rights of indigenous populations (Subcomandante Marcos 2002, 2004); popular feminism (of the dozens of outstanding authors, we cite Alvarez 1999); new social movements (Alvarez *et al.* 1998); human rights, mental health, and liberation psychology (Martín-Baró 1986); the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire 1970); the theatre of the oppressed (Boal 1979); the disempowering nature of 'total institutions' (Illich 1983); culture and globalisation (Arizpe 1996); and post-development (Escobar 1994; Esteva 1992; Esteva and Prakash 1998)—to say nothing of a long tradition in political imaginative literature and poetry, including a string of Nobel Laureates: Miguel Angel Asturias, Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz. The list could go on and on.

Of course, exceptional achievements come from every quarter of the world. But what perhaps most powerfully characterises the contributions from Latin America and the Caribbean is the particular blend of scholarship and activism, the involvement of prominent intellectuals in politics that resulted, for instance, in the exile of Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire, and Celso Furtado under Brazil's military regime (and Furtado's subsequent rehabilitation in the government of José Sarney); or the assassination of Ignacio Martín-Baró, along with five other prominent Jesuits and their two domestic workers, at the Central American University in San Salvador on 16 November 1989.

The first part of this special issue on violence and development in Latin America and the Caribbean is introduced by guest editors **Mo Hume** and **Ulrich Oslender**, under the

co-ordination of **David Howard**, drawing on their seminar at the XXVI Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), held in Puerto Rico from 14 to 17 March 2006. They write respectively on gangs and democratic governance in El Salvador, on Afro-Colombian populations displaced by the intersections between war and financial interests, and on discrimination against the Haitian population in the Dominican Republic. **Dina Khorasanee** concludes this section with an account of the movement of unemployed people in Argentina.

The second part, including the book reviews section, expands on these themes with a contribution on street children in Brazil by **Michael Schwinger**, a critique by **Brian Pratt** of Northern NGO advocacy on environmental issues in the Amazonian region, and an account of an approach to promoting participatory governance in the area spanning Bolivia, Brazil, and Peru by **Elsa Mendoza**, **Stephen Perz**, **César Aguilar**, and colleagues. **Kate Maclean** draws on her work with Aymara-speaking Bolivian women to reflect on the multiple layers of translation inherent in the communication of such communities with outsiders, in this case Spanish-speakers, and the subsequent re-interpretation into other specialised languages, conceptual frameworks, and discourses, including those used by international development agencies or by academics. What does it mean if the original 'informants' or supposed 'partners' do not even recognise themselves in documents that purport in some way to 'represent' them and their interests?

We take this opportunity to remind readers that the summaries of all the articles published in *Development in Practice* are available on our website in English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. An increasing number of articles are also available in translation, or as pre-prints in the language in which they were originally submitted. We plan in the coming months to assemble either in book form or in CD-RoM format some of the many articles on Latin America and the Caribbean that have been published in *Development in Practice* over the years. We would welcome your responses to these plans, and any other suggestions that you might have for ways in which we can improve our service.

## Notes

1. Mejía (2006) also quotes the human-rights ombudsman as saying: 'Someone dies a violent death every two hours in Honduras. The majority of the murders are extrajudicial executions of minors suspected of belonging to gangs . . . Many of the murderers are *sicarios* (hired killers), paid in cash or with wages, who will kill for any amount'. The country's police commissioner added that 119 private security companies, with some 30,000 guards, operate legally in Honduras. But 'we have counted 150 companies that operate without a licence, employing another 30,000 men who no one oversees or regulates, and who thus represent a danger to the country'. However, the Unit for Crimes against Minors reported that only 158 of more than 3300 reported murders of children and youngsters had even been investigated. Police officers and *sicarios* were respectively found responsible for 50 per cent of these cases. The Unit has now been disbanded.
2. According to Human Rights Watch (2006), most governments in Latin America and the Caribbean have formally committed themselves to upholding the rights of women and children by ratifying various international treaties. However, an estimated 40 per cent of women suffer sexual and domestic violence at the hands of their employers and/or their male partners, though the courts still tend to treat the latter as a misdemeanour rather than a criminal offence.
3. According to Forbes, Latin America and the Caribbean region currently boast 36 billionaires, with 18 in Brazil (which has the tenth largest number in the world) and 10 in Mexico. While this total is still less than 10 per cent of US billionaires, and it should be emphasised that heads of state are excluded from the Forbes measure, by way of contrast the entire African continent has only eight individuals who are reported to have amassed such immense personal fortunes.

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