



The humanitarian impact of armed violence on communities – the Americas perspective: Interview with Sophie Orr

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Keywords: armed violence, access, armed groups, armed forces, security forces, essential services, partnerships.



What impact does organized crime and gang violence have on people's lives?

Recently, an International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] head of delegation summed up very well the impact of armed violence: “Violence is not only what we see immediately, but there is a whole series of longer-term consequences that really affect the lives of people forever.”

Worldwide, situations of armed violence linked to organized crime and gang violence can generate serious humanitarian consequences and are often synonymous with chronic insecurity. Millions of lives are affected, whether directly or indirectly. The consequences are both visible and invisible.

The most obvious visible harms are death and injury. As the global study on homicides that the United Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] published in 2019 showed, organized crime across the world kills as many people as all armed conflicts combined.¹ But these deaths are only the tip of the iceberg.

Given that much of the ICRC's work on responding to the humanitarian consequences of this type of armed violence is being carried out in the Americas region, allow me to zoom in on this continent. The human cost goes far beyond those wounded or killed in the violence. Hundreds of thousands are forced to abandon their homes and livelihoods, and others remain but have little or no access to essential public services such as health or education. There are also the hundreds of thousands of missing persons and their families.

Other humanitarian consequences, just as serious, are invisible. People live in fear and most remain silent about the violence because members of the armed groups, linked to organized crime, usually live in the same communities or neighbourhoods. After all, this is for the most part not a violence that comes from outside, but rather a violence that is embedded in the community and has somehow become “normality”. The territorial control of the armed groups generates the so-called “invisible borders” that prevent people from moving around freely. This impedes not only access to essential services but in many contexts even access to economic and employment opportunities, an impact that is particularly significant in urban environments.

Migration is another situation where organized crime has an impact, as hundreds of thousands of migrants have no choice but to pass through areas controlled by armed groups or where they are present, in particular remote rural regions or borders between countries. The risks that migrants have to take are

1 UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2019*, Vienna, 2019, Booklet 1, Executive Summary.

very high and the violations they suffer are appalling, such as extortion, being held hostage for money, sexual violence, injury and even death. And overall, it's also important to note that humanitarian consequences are not only caused by armed groups – in many cases the response of States to this type of armed violence can also have a massive impact. For example, there are a number of countries in the Americas that have the highest lethality rates for public security forces operations worldwide. And often, partly due to heavy-handed law enforcement operations and general stigmatization of the communities themselves, people end up having to leave to find safer environments for their families and better opportunities.

These issues greatly affect penitentiary systems as well, which are strained because they are not prepared to absorb the significant increases in the prison population due to organized crime or to manage the complexity of prisons with hostile gang members in the same facilities, which can lead to violence and riots.

What is the legal framework through which the ICRC emerges as a relevant actor in these contexts?

An important part of ICRC's operations worldwide takes place in situations of armed conflict. In those situations, the organization's mission and work derive from its specific and unique mandate under international humanitarian law [IHL], whether the conflict is an international armed conflict or a non-international armed conflict [NIAC]. In the case of a NIAC,² Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 explicitly grants the ICRC the right to offer its services to parties to a conflict.

Gang violence and organized crime do generally involve situations of collective violence that cause very serious humanitarian consequences. However, when these specific situations of violence are analyzed from a legal perspective, they tend to fall short of reaching the threshold to be classified as NIACs. Nevertheless, the ICRC cannot turn its back on the acute and long-term suffering of people affected by these situations. Since its creation, the ICRC has carried out humanitarian operations whenever and wherever its action could provide a meaningful response to the humanitarian consequences that people were suffering, regardless of whether the situation of collective violence was considered an armed conflict or not.

In addition to the ICRC's historical operational practice, the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement [the Movement], in Article 5.3, reflect the right of initiative of the ICRC in other situations of violence. The Statutes were adopted by consensus by all the States that are party to the Geneva Conventions as well as the other components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement during the 1986 International Conference.

And so, even when IHL does not apply, the ICRC may still offer its humanitarian services to governments without that offer constituting an

2 NIACs are conflicts between State armed forces and non-State armed groups, or between non-State armed groups.

interference in the internal affairs of the State concerned. It's important to underline here that it is neither the armed groups' motivation nor the causes of the violence that prompt the ICRC's involvement, but the gravity of the humanitarian impact.

What added value does the ICRC bring in contexts affected by violence generated by organized crime and gangs?

Responding to humanitarian needs in environments with dynamics of armed violence is extremely challenging. From context to context, the armed groups are very different, as are the forms of violence and the resulting humanitarian needs.

In the Americas specifically, the ICRC, together with its partners, including the National Red Cross Societies, works both to apply lessons learned from other Americas contexts and to gain experiences from new realities. We remain very much focused on affected people and communities, working directly with them; we concentrate on responses that contribute to improving their daily lives, alleviating their longer-term suffering, mitigating the risks of violence and promoting respect for applicable law.

In parallel, and drawing from this real practice on the ground and its proximity to the affected communities, the ICRC in the Americas aims to have sustained and bilateral dialogue with authorities and to influence policy and legislation related to the region's protection concerns.

How does the ICRC operationalize its response to address the humanitarian impacts of armed violence?

As in any other context, the ICRC in the Americas develops its strategies and objectives over a set period based on an analysis of the environment, the stakeholders, the humanitarian consequences and its capacity to respond to needs, in complementarity with other organizations.

Because of the presence of a variety of stakeholders – the affected communities themselves, authorities and civil society, including National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – the complementary roles and responses of these partners must obviously also be taken into account. This is key, as there are multiple layers of complexity to the humanitarian consequences, some of which we do not necessarily have the expertise or the mandate to respond to. For example, in this type of context, the violence exercised by armed groups is often mixed with other forms of violence, such as interpersonal violence, with problems clearly also rooted in poverty or even related to natural disasters, among other factors. So, the collective response of several stakeholders is crucial, as this can also contribute to implementing broader and more ambitious objectives such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

In practice, once all the stakeholders and our potential partners have been identified and we are convinced that the ICRC can bring added value, our multidisciplinary teams – professionals in protection matters, water and habitat,

health, legal advisers etc. – work together to find concrete solutions to mitigate the consequences of armed violence. The responses developed are always elaborated and implemented in consultation with, and with the direct participation of, the people affected by the violence in order to strengthen their self-protection mechanisms. The methodology follows a standard project cycle with analysis, planning, implementing and evaluation phases, the latter being key to ensuring that we are able to adapt our work to better respond to the fast-evolving needs and to measure the impact of our responses in order to replicate or scale up when it makes sense.

What concrete examples illustrate ICRC action in such contexts?

Amongst the various responses, I'd like to highlight two examples from the Americas that I believe reflect well how the ICRC responds to these situations.

The first is the Safer Access to Essential Public Services programme that the ICRC implements in Brazil together with the local authorities of several cities. The idea for this approach came when the ICRC started engaging some years ago with the communities in several *favelas* [slums] in Rio de Janeiro that were heavily affected by armed violence. The ICRC team noticed that both health and education services had often been suspended temporarily or closed down due to professionals' fear of the situation. Based on its experience in situations of armed conflict around the world, the ICRC, together with local authorities, developed a methodology to prevent and to mitigate the risks of armed violence incidents in and around public services structures.

The objective was to generate resilience in essential public services in order to enable them to continue operating despite these situations of violence. Amongst the results was a significant reduction in the number of closures of these public services. The ICRC then worked with the authorities to give them the necessary tools to ensure that they could replicate the methodology in other municipalities or areas affected by the same violence and ensure a scaling-up of the programme. Part of this involved creating a system of real-time notifications of the armed violence taking place in the communities – i.e., fighting between gangs, attacks on civilians, clashes with security forces – through phone applications for the professionals, as well as developing a software programme for the entire training process to be online in order to reach a greater number of public services and professionals. Finally, to ensure the sustainability of the programme, it was also necessary to help the authorities to make legislation changes. Today this programme is implemented in nine cities in Brazil and has an impact on over 4 million people.

The second example comes from Honduras and the ICRC response to forced displacement due to the armed violence taking place there. A significant number of individuals and families are threatened by armed groups and are forced to abandon their homes and livelihoods, then make the difficult decision to leave the country altogether. Often, they have no other option because of the

lack of assistance and protection mechanisms inside the country. The ICRC, together with the Honduran Red Cross, launched a programme a few years ago to support people forcibly displaced with immediate assistance, as well as a few months' further support, to enable them to rebuild their lives elsewhere in the country. This programme not only covered a need where there was a gap, but also enabled the ICRC to influence the authorities and to contribute to the adoption, in December 2022, of a landmark legislation to address the internal displacement phenomenon. The field experience of the ICRC and other partners of the Movement and the partnership with other organizations such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees have been key in the creation of this proposal to the government of Honduras.

What challenges do the ICRC and other humanitarian actors face in these contexts?

The primary challenge arises from the nature of the context itself: the multiplicity of armed groups, the fact that this type of violence is difficult to predict and the reality that the violence often moves from one area to another with relative frequency. Along the same lines, the invisibility of the victims makes it difficult to identify them. They are often afraid to come forward, and it must always be kept in mind that the armed groups are in direct contact with the communities and often live in the same communities as the victims. In addition, given the invisibility of the victims, the humanitarian consequences of this violence, and the breadth and deep-rootedness of the issues involved, the authorities do not always have the capacity to address the problems, which creates a challenge for humanitarian action.

Secondly, the way humanitarian situations are often defined does not always allow the issues and needs of these contexts to be addressed in the right way or to attract the attention they deserve. Distinctions made between armed conflict that is regulated by IHL, on the one hand, and other extremely violent contexts that do not reach the threshold of armed conflict, on the other, can lead to the neglect of populations at risk. War attracts attention, funding and response, even though in several Americas countries, the levels of armed violence and the humanitarian consequences are often even higher than those of certain armed conflicts. Despite the very serious impact of violence in these settings, the resources allocated to the humanitarian response and donor funding are very limited.

These factors also make scaling-up of impactful responses and the mid- to long-term sustainability of humanitarian or development programmes in these contexts very challenging.

Do you establish dialogue with armed groups linked to organized crime and gang violence?

Worldwide, whether areas are affected by armed conflict or high levels of armed violence, the ICRC approach is similar: in order to have access to the communities

and to be accepted, we try to have dialogue with all weapons bearers, whether they belong to armed groups or State armed forces and police, and we work according to the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. In the case of areas affected by organized crime and gang violence, we aim to reduce the impact of the violence on people in the communities through contact with all weapons bearers.

What would you highlight in terms of the operational response after several years of working in these contexts?

As an institution, over the years we have learned and adapted our way of working to have a greater impact in contexts where violence is produced by armed groups linked to organized crime, and where a State can also generate negative consequences due to the excessive or arbitrary use of force in its response.

In the Americas, through our different experiences and approaches in a variety of contexts, there have been a number of results at both the community level, supporting victims directly, and at the more systemic level. There have been changes in legislation and the creation of response mechanisms in favour of internally displaced persons, migrants and missing persons, as well as an increase in the resilience of public services and communities.

Today the ICRC and the Movement on the continent are better equipped to work in these areas and know how high levels of armed violence can impact communities in a multitude of ways. We now have experience in how to address the different needs of individuals, of communities, of systems. We've learned how best to improve access to public services in areas with the presence of armed groups, or how to help a hospital to manage emergencies in places where there are significant numbers of wounded due to the armed violence, and so on. There are concrete and visible results, not to mention plenty of positive impacts that are less visible.

Another important outcome in the Americas – and one that has had an impact on our humanitarian response – is the process of working together with others, either implementing together in a concrete partnership or working in parallel with other organizations and thereby having a collective impact. As I mentioned earlier, organized crime and gang violence are at the root of multiple needs and therefore responses and results are much more effective when carried out by various stakeholders and with mixed tools of both humanitarian and development action.

The results we see today, such as in the example of Brazil, are not immediate, coming after quite a long process. Armed violence linked to organized crime usually spreads and becomes chronic, and therefore the humanitarian response needs to go through a number of adaptations to ensure that it continues to be effective over time.

The positive outcomes of today are the result of efforts that began years ago, and I am sure that as the responses evolve and we continue to learn together with others, we will increase the impact and bring learning to future institutional approaches in the Americas and beyond.