

CASE STUDY OF “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”

Descriptive title of the case:

The high level of armed urban violence asked for the coordinated mobilisation of all the social actors, including the churches.

Location:

Rio de Janeiro (Brasil): the second largest city of the country and the third biggest metropolitan area and agglomeration in South America. With significant disparities between the rich and the poor, one fifth of its inhabitants live in neighbourhoods known as favelas, where housing is not regulated and the living conditions are very difficult. Rio has high crime rates, especially homicide, in poor areas controlled by drug dealers. 60% of the population is Catholic and 18% Protestant.

Approximate starting and end dates (if applicable) of the mediation process:

October 2004 – July 2005.

Actors involved:

Actors directly involved:

- The private owners of small arms, especially youngsters and all those who are an obvious threat to human security.
- The two biggest local religious communities: the Catholic and the Protestant (the Historical and the Pentecostal churches).
- Two ecumenical networks: the National Council of Churches and the Latin American Council of Churches.

Other implicated actors:

- Secular NGOs.
- Human Rights Movements.
- Ministry of Justice.
- Civil Police, the police force responsible for criminal investigations.
- The project sponsors: the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Swedish Church.

Mediator actors:

Viva Rio (www.vivario.org.br), a secular NGO based in Rio de Janeiro which does field work, research and lobbying aimed at social development, the establishment of a culture of peace and small arms control. Its outlook is primarily local, but many of its initiatives which are started on a micro level are later adopted by other institutions. More precisely, its staff of **the “Religion and Peace” project**, which works at a local, regional and national level, jointly with churches and Christian networks.

Key information related to the background and the context of the case (before the mediation process):

Brasil doesn't have interreligious conflicts. Of course, there are some interreligious tensions –mainly between Pentecostal churches Afro-Brazilian groups-, but the daily fight is against poverty and violence in the cities. It's the country with the worst record of deaths by small arms and of deaths of youngsters by small arms. The policemen kill more people here than anywhere else. The risk of a young and black person who lives in a marginalized neighborhood to be victim of the police violence is really high. To respond to this, the Disarmament Statute was passed in December 2003. The National Disarmament Campaign, created to promote voluntary weapons collection and led by the Ministry of Justice, was launched as part of this new statute. Viva Rio participated in the campaign committee. This way, this organization started intervening in collecting arms campaigns all around Rio State (focusing its work on churches) offering resources and educating other civil specialized organisations.

Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:

- To reduce the number of deaths by small arms and increase social security by removing small arms from private owners.
- To transmit to all the actors involved (religious leaders, police officers, secular activists, etc.) that the building of a more peaceful society is a matter for everybody.

Brief description of the development of the mediation carried out:

In October, 2004, the first state collection points in churches were opened in Rio de Janeiro. Viva Rio supervised the process and the police provided their support. The added value of these collection points was the destruction of the gun with a hammer by the priest or pastor with the person who had handed it in as witness. The primary results were positive and 45 new points were opened in Evangelical and Catholic churches all over the rest of Rio de Janeiro.

The decision to promote the churches as collection points during the campaign was based on various positive factors: spatial proximity (churches are found near workplaces and the homes of the majority of people); churches are both well known and neutral, they inspire trust, especially compared to the collection points located in police stations, they provide possibilities for dialogue and council, in the case that anyone wishes to explain anything to get it off their chest, pray or say a few words about peace (there is a subjacent culture of fear and violence present in the lives of many of those that handed in their weapons).

When the disarmament campaign reached the 23rd of June, 2005, the collection points received significant back up and support with the adhesion of the Episcopal Conference of Brasil and National Council of Churches (CONIC). CONIC emphasised the Brotherhood Campaign of 2005, an Ecumenical campaign whose main theme was solidarity and peace. World Vision and the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI-Brasil) also decided to participate.

The "Religion and Peace" team from Viva Rio forged new collaborative links between Christian institutions and networks in all of the states of Brasil who then carried out activities in favour of disarmament. The National Campaign for Arms Collection defied everyone's expectations regarding the number of collection points that were opened in Churches and the campaign was extended twice.

Viva Rio opened the arms collection points and elaborated theoretical and practical materials on disarmament designed especially for Christian churches. This information was distributed at no price and was copied by the Christian churches. Capacity building workshops were also carried out in 23 Brazilian states for a period of five weeks. This put the "Religion and Peace" team into contact with local and regional religious leaders, which is what gave the Disarmament Campaign a national character.

Between the 21st of May and the 31st of July, 2005, there were 240 open collection points in 216 cities. Around 5,000 firearms were handed in and destroyed.

Evaluation of the grade of success in obtaining initial objectives:

- 5.000 guns were destroyed.
- The important and unexpected number of churches (240 churches from 216 cities in 23 Brazilian States) were involved as collection points extended twice the National Disarmament Campaign.
- With time, the cooperation which had started between the Evangelical and Catholic churches grew to include Pentecostal churches and other religions as well as Secular NGOs and human rights movements.
- There was a very unusual collaboration between the police and the churches. Priests, ministers and religious leaders were in direct contact with the federal police and military and they maintained firm agreements, they facilitated a wide diffusion of the messages of the campaign and they established contacts within different churches and civil organisations. The various religious groups established a direct dialogue with each other and with political leaders and in doing so they were able to extend their mission to facilitate peace.

Mediator resources used (Human, spiritual, community, those of the involved actors, from the mediators, etc):

- The places of worship as neutral grounds to hand in the weapons.
- The moral force of the religious leaders for these places, and the principles they represent like, for example, the right everybody has to be listened to.
- The capacity of mobilisation and multiplication of the Christian networks.
- The principle of neutrality (between different churches) represented by a secular organisation like Viva Rio; its knowledge of the country.