# Gangs and Development: The Difficulties of Transformational Development in Gang-Controlled Communities in El Salvador

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Gangs' ability to exert territorial control in El Salvador is changing the social dynamics in marginal communities, and Pentecostal churches are one of a few remaining social institutions surviving in this context. In the past ten years, gangs have transitioned from local criminal cliques to an influential social phenomenon. Pentecostals' familiarity and access to gangs has many development practitioners looking to faith-based empowerment initiatives to solve broad social issues influencing gang expansion. At the same time, gang entanglement poses a distinct threat to the security and stability required to achieve sustainable development. As a practitioner of transformational development in El Salvador for over thirty years, I have recently observed the increasing isolation gang control is having on marginal communities. This article takes a closer look at the effects gang entanglement has on sustainable transformational development approaches in El Salvador, specifically examining three programs in the community of San Martín. The challenge is to identify transformational development policies, advocacy approaches, and support resources that best suit gang-entangled communities. To accomplish this, a larger discussion on transformational development in gang-entangled communities is critical.

## Introduction

Marginal communities in El Salvador have experienced the growth of evangelical churches (primarily Pentecostal), community associations (including nongovernmental organizations/NGOs), and gangs. As a practitioner of transformational development engaged in El Salvador over the past thirty years, I have recently witnessed a troubling shift in the social dynamics in marginal communities. Gangs have transitioned from local criminal cliques to an influential social phenomenon. Previous efforts to diminish gang influence, whether *Mano Dura* (law enforcement) or *Mano Suave* (structural reforms), have had limited success in reducing the growth of gangs and decreasing violence. Gangs' ability to exert territorial control is leaving many marginal communities isolated from external support systems, and Pentecostal churches are one of the few remaining social institutions surviving in this context. The hope is that transformational development can bring sustainable results in gang-affected communities.

This article takes a close look at the effects of gang entanglement on transformational development, specifically examining three faith-based programs in the community of San Martín. San Martín is a community with a substantial gang presence and a long history of church and parachurch engagement in transformational development. My research is primarily empirical, and based on in-depth conversations with community members, development practitioners, and church leaders working in transformational development. The programs in question are focused on achieving transformational development at the individual or community level. While these programs have been successful, in terms of positively affecting the lives of many young people and families, they have had little impact on broad structural issues that perpetuate the expansion of gangs. Sonja Wolf, after researching gang prevention programs, concludes that the necessary societal change will be difficult without the cooperation of the most powerful strata of Salvadoran society (Wolf 2017, 223). At the moment, however, transformational development practitioners working in gang-entangled communities cannot count on such cooperation. In light of these limitations, achieving sustainable transformational development is severely hindered by

gang-created insecurity and instability. The challenge is to discover how transformational development can best be achieved in gang-entangled communities.

## Transformational Development in Gang-Entangled Communities in El Salvador

The challenge for many community initiatives is that gang control makes the long-term prognosis of a better future untenable. Sustainable socio-economic development requires a base level of security and stability. Paul Collier suggests creating a policy environment at the international level that encourages economic growth and good governance. If these measures fail, then the use of external force may be required to ensure stability (Collier 2007, 124). Unfortunately, both these measures have been applied to no avail in El Salvador. Both heavy-handed police tactics and subsequent structural social adjustment strategies have not mitigated the growth of gangs (Wolf 2017). Desperate for results, many are turning for answers to local churches.

The connections between gangs and Pentecostals have been well-documented in Brenneman's book, *Homies + Hermanos*. For example, he explains how one of the only ways gang members are allowed to leave the gang is through religious conversion. Brenneman explains how ex-gang member converts found Pentecostal evangicalism to be both advantageous and effective (Brenneman 2012, 16). Despite the power of these conversions, the prospect of leveraging these relationships to achieve greater societal change is improbable. The current dynamics between gangs and faith-based communities expose the practical limitations to achieving sustainable transformational development. Practitioners of transformational development in these environments are experiencing a regression toward addressing basic needs, and long-term community objectives are threatened by the insecurity.

In gang-controlled communities, common-good initiatives require gang consent, or minimally, gang indifference. Independent of what community leaders determine, the gangs' need for control overrides common good objectives. For example, in the community of San Martin the community water system is on the verge of collapsing. Technicians and water committee members are unable to access certain communities controlled by the gangs. Yet collaborating with gangs to sustain the village water system is problematic on many fronts. Any arrangements with the gangs come without guarantees, and further legitimize their authority. It also begs the question of who is transforming whom? Church and community members face the difficult reality that gang control creates an environment unsuitable for their vision of the future.

## Evolving Gang Dynamics

The degree of influence by local gangs in the marginal communities of El Salvador has been a major development over the past ten years. Something is changing in the way gangs operate, and it is altering the power structures in marginal communities. Gangs are evolving from Los Angeles-style neighborhood cliques to a broader national phenomenon. The common narrative that gang members are disenfranchised young people motivated by criminal enterprise has been challenged by criminologist Steve Dudley. Dudley's years of research on MS13 gangs lead him to suggest that the biggest motivator for gang affiliation in El Salvador is not criminal enterprise or money, but rather social connectivity and a sense of belonging. Dudley argues that as criminal enterprises, gangs are relatively unsophisticated (Dudley 2019). Yet despite their relatively small budget, they have grown in size and influence throughout the country. Dudley also points out that no matter how hard previous governments have tried to undermine gangs' financial support systems, the gangs keep multiplying. Dudley concludes that gang issues in El Salvador are not going to be solved with law enforcement tactics; they must instead be addressed at a societal level.

The changes in gang behavior over the past few years are a bit of a paradox. At one level gangs are becoming more inclusive groups that have reduced entry barriers and offer more levels of affiliation. For instance, not all new recruits are required to submit to a thirteen-second beatdown to join the gang (Insight Crime 2021). These original requirements may still exist at higher levels of gang leadership, but new recruits can opt for less committed levels of engagement. Young people can fulfill entry-level functions, like being neighborhood sentries, without being full-fledged gang bangers. Many new recruits are also instructed to avoid getting tattoos or other gang markings, so as to be more inconspicuous. This broader approach seems to contradict the fact that gang control of the local community has become more exclusive. Access to their communities is closely monitored. Their internal organization has improved to the extent that gangs now manage national networks to vet outsiders. As gangs grow in number, become better organized, and gain territorial control, their influence increases.

The turf war between 18th Street gangs and Mara Salvatrucha (MS) is not simply about neighborhood pride, but about controlling strategic territory that ensures safety and creates opportunity. What role government, police, and organized crime play in this battle for territory is still unclear. There are indications that gangs leverage territorial control to create alliances at the highest levels of national authority. For example, a recent article in the Salvadoran newspaper *El Faro* describes how gangs manage to influence elections by

controlling access to heavily populated marginal communities (Martínez and Valencia 2018). There are also signs that gangs are leveraged by more sophisticated players. Dudley points to the fact that during the recent COVID-19 pandemic much of the government aid in many marginal communities was delivered through the gangs (Dudley 2019). Regardless of who is leveraging whom, gangs now boast of determining elections, having connections at every level of society, and operating as a parallel security force in marginal communities. In such a context, transformational development efforts cannot ignore gangs' growing influence.

## Local Pentecostal Churches and Gangs

The role of the local church in shaping a better future is a foundational aspect of transformational development, but in El Salvador's marginal communities, the church's relationship with gangs is complicated. Not surprisingly, these social groups overlap in many areas (*The Economist* 2018). Manuel Vásquez highlights how the same conditions that make joining a Pentecostal church appealing to the poor also make joining a gang appealing to disenfranchised young people (Vásquez 2003, 134). Stephen Offutt's application of social entanglement theories reveals the complicated environment in which church and gang members are connected by familial, economic, and social relationships (Offutt 2020). Both churches and gangs create patrimonial communities that help address feelings of isolation.

It is important to highlight that there are varying degrees of gang entanglement. Churches in marginalized communities most affected by gang control are typically small (100 members or fewer) neighborhood churches that belong to traditional denominations. The degree of entanglement is correlated to physical location and extended history in the community. For instance, churches in residential neighborhoods have to abide by strict gang protocols, such as driving with windows down or paying "renta" (protection fees). Emerging independent churches, however, are typically established in areas zoned for commercial use. Pastors and congregation members enter and leave these churches more freely. In tightly-controlled communities, gang consent is required for any non-local to enter.

Another important distinction is that the familiarity between Pentecostal churches and gang members does not imply that the relationship is of mutual consent. Pentecostal churches are also constrained by gangs' territorial controls. Luis Huezo Mixco has noted that Salvadoran Pentecostalism contributes to the "dynamism of the special," which creates a paradoxical similarity to the gangs, whose worlds overlap and place them in tension (Huezo Mixco 2020, 231). Pentecostals

are entangled with gangs, but are by no means co-conspirators in a new social order. They share an ecosystem that facilitates the growth of both Pentecostal churches and gangs, but their ability to coexist is precarious. Pastors must decide whether to accommodate gang authority or risk the consequences. This is a deviation from the past, when the margins of society provided less contested social space for Pentecostal churches.

In a previous article (Bueno 2001), I identified the margin as a place of refuge, an environment conducive to the development of alternative support structures critical for a local expression of faith and community. The Pentecostal movement's cacique style leadership, autonomous organizational structure, and Holy Spirit empowered moral authority have all been integral to building local capacity. Today, however, marginal communities are not conducive to building and sustaining alternative support systems. Pentecostal evangelicals who once sought independence from a restrictive macro social system are now looking for external support to help address the insecurity and violence that affect their communities. Pentecostal churches and gangs share an increasingly hostile margin, and surviving has required new methods of adaptation.

R.R. Reno (2019) describes the postmodern crisis that contributes to the emergence of nationalism, populism, and other strong loyalty-based affiliations. His work focuses primarily on the Global North, but has relevance on the emergence of both gangs and Pentecostalism in El Salvador. Reno describes society's current crisis as a disquietude born of homelessness. "We distrust the social system as ineffective, economies as volatile, and political institutions as self-serving. We climb without safety nets, there is no stability, no rest – no home" (Reno 2019, 103). Reno proposes that in an unstable society the emergence of what he calls "strong gods" is predictable. The perennial up-rootedness of the human condition – and the homelessness intensified by modernity – magnifies the craving for strong loyalties and conceptions of truth (Reno 2019, 105).

Strong beliefs and loyalties can be useful for restoring identity, but can also lead to distorted and destructive ideologies. Gangs view disenfranchisement as arising from the lack of money, power, and respect. All may contribute, but when the solution is loyalty rooted in fear, and control based on violence, these strong gods become oppressive. For Pentecostals, the crisis begins with the condition of the soul. "Cast out of Eden, we are always homeless" (Reno 2019, 105). Pentecostals look to restore their identity through a process of salvation and sanctification. Bryant Myers points out that a major reason why charismatic and Pentecostal Christians are the fastest growing

expression of the church today is that they have an answer for whose god is more powerful (Myers 2011, 10). Gangs and Pentecostals both yearn for strong gods that provide a sense of belonging, but their methods of operation could not be more different. Gangs' use of violence, drugs, and satanic imagery is suspiciously counter to Pentecostals' nonviolent, austere, and Spirit-filled ways. Still, gang preference for "genuine" converts does not suggest some simple form of youthful rebellion, but rather that the violence they embrace must be attributed to a more profound darkness born of fear, abuse, and neglect.

Pentecostal churches cannot individually address and/or manage all the social ills fomenting gang proliferation, and coexisting with gangs is increasingly difficult as gangs gain greater control. Most pastors and church members strive to maintain cordial relationships with gang members, and do their best to avoid direct confrontations. While community-based churches, comprised of the poor and marginalized, have the potential to influence gang members, they are also the most affected by the gangs. Pentecostal churches in these communities have the daunting challenge of being a refuge from and for gang members. The recent killing of an Elim church pastor by gang members underscores the volatile nature of these environments (Alfaro and Marroquín 2021). Despite a growing realization that coexistence with gangs is hardly sustainable, most churches still instinctively embrace a cautious approach to social engagement.

## Pentecostal Churches and Social Engagement

As communities become more affected by gangs, will Pentecostals move beyond their traditional focus on individual salvation to begin addressing structural social issues? The general perception is that Pentecostal churches' influence in public discourse is still not representational. Some large independent churches take a somewhat active role in voicing concerns about current conditions, and many Pentecostals participate individually within broader social institutions. Yet a collective approach to social action is still limited. Pentecostal churches' social engagement is mostly private and local.

A recent thesis by my brother, Ron Bueno, cofounder of ENLACE, raises the question of whether social action among Pentecostal churches in El Salvador is a "contested ritual" (Bueno 2019). His work, primarily among rural and semi-rural Pentecostal churches, reveals resistance to social engagement at many levels. He notes a general hesitation when it comes to getting involved with issues that seem political or embrace the broader community. For example, joining the local ADESCO (government sanctioned community association) is contested by traditional Pentecostal churches. R. Bueno describes the current

process that pastors use to ritualize, like adding prayer or evangelism, to justify social action. This approach creates "contested rituals" by reticent church members who are trying to avoid secular entanglement.

In the early 1930s, evangelical churches (predominantly rural) had few options other than to build suitable socio-religious structures in the less contested margins of society. David Martin describes this tendency as a "haven" from society (Martin 1990). By creating alternative social structures on the periphery, they were able to avoid the contentious public square dominated at the time by a triad of power; a military state, the Catholic Church, and wealthy landowners. The goal of being a separate and holy people with a strict code of behavior was not intended to have a broad appeal. "True Christians" chose the narrow path, which, by definition, made the rise of a popular movement unlikely. Pentecostals, however, understood how empowering a direct experience with God is for those who feel forsaken. What was not foreseen, even by most Pentecostals, was how many people felt marginalized. For Pentecostals in El Salvador, isolation would not be a long-term strategy. By the 1950s, Pentecostals had begun to adopt more evangelistic social outreach strategies aimed at church growth.

In the 1980s, a division between urban and rural social perspectives became more evident. As the economy transitioned from agrarian to industrial, urban areas began to grow. In the urban context, Pentecostal churches gained traction with working and professional middle classes. Pentecostals began to develop schools, universities, and clinics that provided alternatives for underserved communities. At the same time, most churches in El Salvador's rural and marginal communities remained relatively poor and small. Recent estimates indicate that 33% of Salvadorans live in conditions of extreme poverty, of which the majority are found in rural areas (World Bank Group 2021). In contexts with limited resources, Pentecostal churches tend to favor internal approaches to holistic ministries. It stands to reason that communities directly affected by crime, poverty, and marginalization would prioritize the needs of the congregation instead of broad social issues.

By the 1990s large independent neo-Pentecostal churches began to emerge and exhibit greater economic and social influence. Concurrently, international aid and evangelical parachurch organizations also began to proliferate. Social programs that emphasized community engagement received support from external parachurch organizations. Many Pentecostal churches independently established partnerships with aid organizations to implement social programs directed at the broader community. Many schools, clinics, and childcare initiatives were established in marginal

communities with the support of international aid organizations.

In the 2000s, gangs began to appear in marginal communities heavily populated by Pentecostal churches. Gangs were initially viewed by church members as a public nuisance that could be mitigated with a strong police presence, but by 2010 it had become evident that larger social forces were at work. Managing the social effects gangs have on their communities is a challenge most pastors and church members are not equipped to confront. Instead, pastors and church members in gang-dominated communities apply their theology in a format akin to moral triage, negotiating principles of holiness and righteousness under conditions of extreme duress. One youth pastor I interviewed expressed how conflicted he is by the gang situation in his community. "It is hard not to feel compassion for young gang members who have routinely been left exposed by their families, society, and even their own gangs. Yet the gangs' use of violence and fear to control the community is a direct threat to the church and its members" (Youth Pastor, September 24, 2021).

On the margins of Salvadoran society, law and order are no longer provided by the public authorities. In heavily entangled communities, gangs and community members are left to negotiate their own rules of engagement. The police and military are viewed with distrust, and stories of gang infiltration become more common. Without a clear understanding of who is in control, especially in marginal communities, churches are even more reluctant to develop strategies that rely on government support. Not knowing whom to trust makes broad social collaboration problematic. At present, the moral imperative for churches is to survive rather than thrive.

## Pentecostal Churches as the Solution for Gang Domination

In scenarios typical of the Bible's David and Goliath story, small, poor, and increasingly isolated Pentecostal churches are asked to solve the growing social problems that perpetuate the growth of gangs. We seem to be at the end of a development cycle in which macro-level structural adjustment policies turn their attention back to local empowerment strategies. This is not an ideological shift, but rather a pragmatic attempt to pivot toward more effective ways of addressing the growing gang problem. As described previously, *Mano Dura* (law enforcement) approaches have not been effective in reducing the expansion of gangs. In the wake of these failures, government and international organizations began to focus more resources on structural social change policies.

Based on World Bank data, Stephen Offutt points out that from 2013-2021 El Salvador received well over

$1 billion in foreign aid (Offutt, Forthcoming, 240). While not all the funds specifically targeted the reduction of gangs, it was the express belief of the government and international aid organizations that changing the structural conditions of society, by creating a thriving economy and good governance, would mitigate gang membership. Offutt describes "a crowded field of actors involved in gang prevention efforts in El Salvador. Multilateral organizations, national governments, and humanitarian organizations, all seeking, and willing to fund, solutions" (Offutt, Forthcoming, 239). And yet, local and international macro structural efforts to improve El Salvador's political economy have not stemmed the growth of gang influence in El Salvador. Many Christians are not surprised.

Bryant Myers asserts that modern worldviews – materialistic, technocratic, and technology-reliant – do not include spiritual elements that can help the poor (Myers 2011, 45). This view seems to ring true in El Salvador. The experience with gangs has exposed the limitation of materialistic approaches. There are signs that international aid organizations are increasingly open to faith-based solutions. For example, the Moody Foundation received a glowing endorsement from Marcy Sanchez (director of narcotics and legal compliance for the US embassy) at the inauguration of "Vida Libre," a faith-based gang rehabilitation program. Kenton Moody (Pentecostal missionary and founder of Moody Foundation) echoes Myers' sentiment that the challenge is for Christians to come out of our self-imposed exile and contribute our faith material to the conversation (Myers 2011, 45). The local church as a key player in transformational development is currently based on its familiarity and access to gang-entangled communities. The challenge is to determine if local churches have the capacity to free their communities from gang control.

## Defining Transformational Development

For many Christians engaged in social work, transformational development approaches have guided our efforts. And yet, understanding how transformational development can help marginal communities disentangle from gangs is unclear, partly because there is no definitive path to social transformation. Wayne Bragg argues that transformation is the best biblical term to describe a Christian view of development. Bragg's paper is not a development theory per se, but a list of characteristics of transformation, each a transformational frontier (Myers 2011, 153). With his path-breaking book, *Walking with the Poor* (1999, 2011), Bryant Myers builds on Bragg's seminal ideas by consolidating and expanding the principles and best practices of transformational development that have now guided

many Christian NGOs since the turn of the millennium. This includes the NGOs I have worked with in El Salvador. Myers uses the term "transformational development" to distinguish it from a purely material connotation common to development. Transformational development addresses the whole of human life: material, social, psychological, and spiritual (Myers 2011, 3). For Myers there are several critical contributions to transformational development that only the Church can provide, especially the restoration of spiritual wholeness. The goal is to achieve a process of change (transformation) that restores our identity and vocation. A process that is achieved when we establish right relationships with God, humanity, and creation.

One big question emerging from gang-entangled communities, therefore, is what role local churches and parachurch organizations can play in achieving sustainable change. Myers defines sustainability in two ways: First, transformational development should end in a transition to sustainability, moving from dependence to independence. Second, the community's understanding of sustainability must include the physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions (Myers 2011, 193). This multi-dimensional approach to defining sustainability means we must evaluate the effectiveness of transformational development at both a structural level and a community project/program level. Achieving lasting results is contingent on developing support systems that enable communities continuously to build toward a better future; and on building the local churches' capacity to be trusted, continuing sources of moral influence that challenge the community's social values toward healthy and productive relationships.

The local church as a partner for transformational development is both a principle and a practical decision. Leslie Newbigin states: "It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind was not a book or a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community" (Quoted by Myers 2011, 191). Research by Gerard Clarke also calls attention to the practical fact that faith-based civil society organizations are major, if not the largest, contributors to social welfare in much of the Global South (Clarke 2006, 837). Poignantly, in gang-entangled communities, the local church is one of the few remaining options to solving the gang crisis. Unfortunately, it is no small task, especially considering that local government and international aid organizations, with all their resources and expertise, have failed to resolve it. How the local church can fulfill this role is a concern for many practitioners engaged in transformational development.

Myers' framework for transformational development does not propose a one-size-fits-all formulaic approach, but rather suggests that if we take each frontier seriously, we can take another step toward a more comprehensive, holistic view of transformation. Building on Abhijit Banerjee's and Esther Duflo's work, Myers suggests that by avoiding simplistic diagnoses and listening more carefully to affected communities, we may understand the logic of their choices and possibly develop more effective policies to support their development efforts (Myers 2011, 40). By applying a suitable social learning approach to our specific fields of engagement, we can discover the best human future, which for Myers is the Kingdom of God. Myers concludes that, at the most fundamental level, the cause of poverty is relationships that do not work for human well-being, that do not allow everyone to flourish (Myers 2011, 295). This framework has guided church and parachurch initiatives in El Salvador, yet the recent increase in gang influence has left many development practitioners wondering if current transformational development strategies are enough to restore healthy community relationships.

Understanding how Pentecostal churches can address gang entanglement is more than academic research. It is an attempt to shed light on a critical conversation presently taking place among church leaders, development workers, and community members committed to being agents of transformation in their communities. Reflecting on how gangs have flourished in the shadows of the Church is a soul-searching exercise. In one such conversation, a pastor shared with tears how his son had been recruited by the gangs, and how devastating it was for him (Care Worker 2017). It is in such settings that a fuller, more authentic understanding of transformational development must materialize.

Gang-controlled communities in El Salvador pose a unique challenge to Pentecostal churches implementing transformational development strategies. There are two common and conflicting assumptions about the role Pentecostal churches can and should play in addressing gangs. First is the notion that because Pentecostals are present in gang-entangled communities they are ideally suited to be agents of transformation. Second, however, is the question of whether typically small, poor, and socially cautious Pentecostal churches in gang-entangled communities have the capacity or desire to address broad social issues. Required is an understanding of how gang control is affecting transformational development and vice versa. In the community of San Martín, both Pentecostals and gangs are active and have a strong presence. As Myers states: "It is hard to talk about how to continue the journey to where we want to go if we do not know where we are" (Myers 2011, 290). Right now, communities in El Salvador are increasingly controlled by gangs, so this is where the churches and parachurch organizations are and where we begin.

## Transformational Development in Gang-Entangled Communities of San Martín

The following three examples in the communities of San Martín, a municipality in the capital city of San Salvador, highlight the conundrum of practicing transformational development in gang-controlled communities. San Martín has many characteristics of semi-urban contexts that are heavily entangled with gangs, like poverty, rapid growth, and crime. Its administration is divided into eight townships and thirty-seven hamlets. According to the government's projections, the population in 2020 was 92,027 (DIGESTYC 2021), a little fewer than 30% of whom are adolescents (ages 10-24). The gangs are already strong in San Martín, but this means that some 25,000 young people are at prime gang recruitment ages.

I have often heard it said, "Isn't it funny how day by day nothing changes, but when you look back, everything is different?" Initial conversations with community stakeholders regarding the influence of gangs echo this observation. My conversations with people who live and work in San Martín highlight one of the challenges with social learning approaches. It is difficult to take the time and resources needed to assess big picture issues when one is struggling to execute daily tasks. For instance, to the question of "How is the gang situation presently affecting your community?," the most common response was: "About the same as always." Residents in San Martín describe the gang situation with a degree of normalcy and accommodation. Yet, as the conversations progress, people begin to describe how gangs are increasingly gaining control and influence in their communities. They describe a context in which there are varying degrees of gang control, which dictates how much access and freedom they have in their communities. In some neighborhoods, gangs have complete authority, such that not even the police can enter. In most cases, the local inhabitants' movements are restricted and people have to adjust their behavior to coexist with the gangs. What they describe is not a static crime problem, but a community negotiating unstable social arrangements.

Communities are awakening to the realization that they belong to gang-controlled territories. The gangs have divided the country into territories controlled by numbers or letters. Numbers are areas controlled by 18th Street gang (18), and letters belong to Mara Salvatrucha (MS). Any unknown person entering a gang-controlled territory can be stopped and required to show their ID. If the address on the ID is from a territory controlled by rival gangs, the bearer is either deterred from entering or heavily monitored. The level of control also affects where one can work. A teacher who applied for a position at a school in one of these communities was persuaded to look elsewhere, because she lived in a neighborhood controlled by rival gangs. Community members instinctively appreciate the realities of gang entanglement, but struggle to articulate a clear definition of their relationship with the gangs. Consider the example of a local Christian school.

### Christian Academy

The Christian school in San Martín has approximately four hundred students and was established in the 1980s by a traditional Pentecostal denomination. The director of the school is the son of a local pastor and a former student at the school. When asked about how gangs affect the school, he explained that in the initial stages of gang activity, the school was able to control gang incursion by screening out children involved in gangs. Parents chose to send their children to the school because it protected them from gang recruitment common in public schools. Now, as communities become more entangled, it is increasingly difficult to keep the gang element out of their schools.

Gang influence is no longer just about the students, but parents and neighborhood friends as well. There is now a second generation of gang members. A culture of fear permeates the whole community, because no one knows who can be trusted. "I have had students join gangs who are now in prison or have been killed, and I have also personally been affected by gangs" (School Director, September 9, 2021). Once, as a teacher, he was falsely accused of sexual harassment by a student who was dating a gang member. He asked the girl to stop talking on her cell phone during class. In retaliation, the student was instructed by the gang how to file a sexual harassment complaint. Three months later the charges were dropped due to insufficient evidence, but the message had been sent: do not challenge the gangs. Amazingly, he testifies of God's protection and faithfulness while awaiting sentencing in prison. He explains how he was protected by former students who had been imprisoned for gang crimes. His relationship with gang members in his community is complicated. He says it is an opportunity to influence, but it also comes with risks.

The school director cannot articulate clear protocols that guide his engagement with gang members, but he does point out that being known in the area is important. He describes how on one occasion the school milk supplier was detained at gunpoint by gang members. They were demanding an extortion fee. The director was informed of the situation and was able to negotiate his freedom. He explains that "when there is a conflict, I can sometimes approach the gang members if I know them or they know me. If I worked in a different community, I would not have the courage to confront gang members" (School Director, September 23, 2021). He explains

that local credibility and a humble demeanor can provide some sway with gang members, but their response is not predictable and one should approach them with wisdom.

The school director proceeds to explain how and when he feels at liberty to approach gang members. "You can confront them with sound advice, and even preach to them about the ills of a gang lifestyle. To some extent, they expect that from a Christian, but it must be done in the right spirit. If you are condescending or threatening, you might not make it out alive." He believes that young people know if you're for them or against them. But he also points out that there are no written rules of engagement, and when you approach a gang member "te la tienes que jugar" (you roll the dice). In San Martín, troubled young people have gone from being neglected and/or bullied, to being feared and given preference. Gang members have gained the upper hand using intimidation, and the school staff are adjusting by using relational persuasion to the best of their ability to resolve conflicts that affect the school and its students.

The school director once mustered the courage to ask a favor from the local gang leader, who had been a childhood friend. He asked if he could paint over the gang graffiti on the school walls, but the gang leader said "I can't give you permission, because the younger gang members are crazy and wouldn't understand" (School Director, October 29, 2021). Gang leadership is a tenuous position that requires one to constantly engender member loyalty. The personal relationship the director has with the gang leader gives him a degree of accessibility, but there is a collective system that overrides their personal relationship. Gang organization is local and fluid. From the outside, gang organization appears chaotic, but gangs have unwritten rules, codes, and tactical procedures that preserve and guide the collective. As a collective, gang members have power, but as individuals they are highly exposed.

The gangs' ability to control territory is foundational to their growth and safety. Their ability to control who can access the community significantly hinders the school's ability to operate efficiently. The director states that school enrollment and attendance are down. "A student from the Altavista neighborhood had to drop out because it was controlled by the rival gang." "It is also hard to recruit new teachers if they're not from the community. Outside suppliers hesitate to provide the school with delivery services. Our community is considered to be in the red zone by service providers" (School Director, October 29, 2021). Many basic services, like internet, water, and electricity can go weeks without being repaired, because repairs require security measures. The school is becoming increasingly isolated from external support systems. The school still receives external subsidies for scholarships, uniforms, and school lunches from charitable partners, but the ability to be self-sustaining is increasingly difficult in this environment.

The Director's concern for the young people in his community is evidenced by the risks he takes to serve his students and community. As a transformational development practitioner, his heart and capacity are what have allowed him to keep the school doors open. At times, he has been able to leverage his good reputation in the community to negotiate small concessions. His relationship with individual gang members is a local currency in San Martín, but it has its limitations. The school, as an institution, cannot negotiate general agreements with the gangs. There are certain gang principles they will not violate for anyone, and the volatile dynamics of gang organizations makes establishing formal negotiations impossible. For example, when the school tried to get permission from the gangs for the student who lived in Altavista to attend the school, they could not even determine who within the gang had the authority to approve it. Therefore, trying to establish common-good agreements with the gangs is challenging.

Despite the growing limitations experienced by gang entanglement, the positive effects the school, and especially by the director and school staff, have on young people is evident. The community's situation would surely deteriorate if the school had to close down. Without the school's positive presence in the community and the acknowledged benefits of education, the gang situation would certainly be worse. The real challenge arises when looking to the future. It is hard for the director of the Christian school and community leaders to envision a way out of gang-entanglement on their own. The transformational development framework acknowledges the importance of structural and macro level approaches critical for creating sustainable conditions. What is not clear is how the director and the school can capitalize on their local knowledge and positive history to strengthen a more collective response to gang control. What is conceivable to them is a transformational development strategy that continues to shape the future by changing young people's outlook, while changing the broader social conditions affecting their community seems improbable.

### Community Water Project

Another arena in which local development practitioners experience the challenges of gang entanglement in San Martín is the community water project. I interviewed the Program Coordinator of a Christian NGO that oversees the water project. The water system serves three townships in San Martín. The project originally served 1,200 residents, but is currently serving 750. At the moment, the project is limping

along, and the future sustainability of the project is in jeopardy because of gang dynamics.

This water project was started in 2012 with the help of a Christian NGO. The project is called "El Milagro" (The Miracle), because for many years the national water authority had told community members that potable water in the area was not feasible. After years of desperately seeking to access water, the community finally attained the support of a Christian NGO and local mayor to sponsor the water project. The project's goal was to serve eleven communities in the area. It was completed in 2018, at a cost of $1.8 million USD. The quota for each household is currently $10/month, much less than the $40/month people used to pay when the water was supplied by trucks. A water association was legally registered and trained to operate and manage the water system. The project brought clean potable water to approximately 250 families.

Unfortunately, the water association now has to deal with the effects of increased gang influence. Three of the eleven communities refuse to pay their water quotas. The program coordinator explains that "In El Rincon most families are gang-related and do not pay their water quotas. Water association staff no longer enter or visit the community. The gang also demands free water for their soccer field. "Solo conocidos pueden llegar" (Only known people can enter). We (external aid workers) cannot enter these communities or exert any pressure for payment because of the gangs" (Program Coordinator, August 18, 2021). Economic conditions in San Martín are also affected by local businesses and services that are forced to pay "renta" (protection money) to the gangs. This puts an additional financial burden on community members already struggling to make ends meet. About 30% of families that use the water system are not up to date on their payments. "The water project is collapsing because they cannot pay their bills" (Program Coordinator, September 24, 2021). If this trend continues, the sustainability of the project will be compromised.

The program coordinator believes that they must raise water quotas to $15/month to keep the system afloat. The committee president expressed his concern that current leadership cannot get people to agree on raising rates. The water committee has financial problems and there are not enough funds to maintain and operate the system. When the water committee association was confronted with the growing reality that the system was going bankrupt, they tried to solicit external assistance from government and international aid organizations. Unfortunately, there is no external assistance on the horizon. The territorial control by the gangs and the government's inability or unwillingness to address it, make it very difficult to convince external entities to invest in a project that has a low probability of being sustainable. Any immediate solutions to the community's water challenges will thus have to be internal.

The program coordinator recently spoke with water association members to explain that no external funding was imminent, and that if they cannot agree to raise rates and devise methods to reduce delinquent payments the system would collapse. In light of this reality, two board members gathered the courage to approach the gangs in one of the delinquent communities. The outcome of this effort is not yet known, but the future of the water project hangs in the balance (Program Coordinator, December 23, 2021).

The program coordinator says most communities in San Martín now have a limited vision of the future because of the insecurity caused by gangs. The communities focus primarily on immediate needs, like houses and latrines. They have no vision of the future for their community (Program Coordinator, October 29, 2021). Their only dream is to escape, preferably to the United States. They have resigned themselves to the reality that they will not improve their economic well-being in their current environment. Unlike the Christian school that receives some external support, the water project depends completely on community support. Initially, many resources were invested in capacity building to ensure the maintenance and operation of the water system. No one anticipated a context in which gangs would gain so much control they could put a stranglehold on community initiatives.

### Church and Parachurch After-School Program

The final example is an after-school program connected with the Good Shepherd Pentecostal Church. The church is located on the border of two rival gangs. This church has a long history of serving the broader community. In 2005, it began hosting an after-school program (Centro Desarrollo Infantil - CDI) funded by an international NGO. The child sponsorship program serves approximately three hundred children, from 0–18 years of age. The focus is primarily on tutoring, but they also sponsor vocational workshops and a soccer program. The CDI program has also invested in three micro-enterprises that aim to create employment and generate internal revenue.

When I asked the pastor what results the after-school program is having in the community he stated: "The program benefits many children, and it has been useful in preventing kids from joining gangs. For example, one child in the program began to hang out with gang members, and by working with his parents we were able to rescue him from the gangs" (Pastor, November 3, 2021). He also believes that parent workshops are beneficial for gang prevention. He laments that the program has not had the desired spiritual results. Despite the program emphasizing Christian formation, he calculates that less than 3% of

the children who have gone through the program are actively attending a church. I followed-up on why the spiritual aspects are missing, if the parachurch organization encourages the church to engage in it? He initially attributed the spiritual deficit to a lack of prayer (spiritual commitment), but he also admitted that the church did not always support the program as it should. Church and CDI program activities are not completely integrated and operate semi-autonomously. To illustrate his point, he gave the following example: "The CDI has a vocational training program for music, yet the church itself does not have a worship group." The Good Shepherd Church had once been a "leader church" in the community of San Martín. But today the pastor's vision of the church's role in the community is more cautious.

In 2020, the national director of after-school programs informed the church that they would no longer be expanding operations in El Salvador. According to a statistical report, the community was no longer considered to be in conditions of extreme poverty. After more than fifteen years of operating in the community, the program is beginning a process of transition toward self-reliance. I asked the pastor if the church and established micro-enterprises could sustain the current program. "The program has a monthly budget of $6,000 USD," he said, "and the micro-enterprises are currently generating about $250 per month. With a 50-member church it would be difficult to sustain the program without external support" (Pastor, December 22, 2021). The priority is to get currently enrolled children through the program.

The after-school program in San Martín is part of a direct partnership between the local church and the international parachurch organization. There is no formal agreement with the national church organization. Pentecostal churches' autonomous associational structure lends itself to these hub-and-spoke alliances with parachurch organizations. Whether direct partnerships are done for expediency or principle, the net result is that local churches' ecclesiastical support systems are often unaware of their activities or unable to support them. From an institutional perspective, the national church plays a limited role in sustaining these programs.

In addition, the fact that the local congregation cannot sustain the children's after-school program without parachurch sponsorship is concerning in a local economy controlled by gangs. One of the hallmarks of transformational development strategies is that they connect projects with a local church. It becomes a major challenge when local churches (primarily in low-income communities) do not have the support systems to sustain initiatives. Much like the Christian school, the benefit of this program for the three hundred plus children is undeniable, and it is especially critical for keeping more children from joining gangs. The challenge is keeping programs operational when current indicators used to determine need do not take into account the effects of gangs. This program is critically important for gang prevention, but because this is not the primary focus of the program it may lose its financial support. The type of poverty inflicted by gangs cannot always be measured by traditional standard of living metrics.

Overall, church and parachurch organizations' transformational development projects and programs in San Martín have been effective in addressing individual needs of children and families. Their presence in the community also provides a glimmer of hope that there is a way out of gang entanglement. Unfortunately, without major macro/structural change the gangs will continue to deprive these communities of the stability that makes sustainable development possible. The need for a more collective response is thus critical. Churches and parachurch organizations have unique access to gang entangled-communities, but they cannot be expected to transform them alone.

## Analysis

Pentecostals and gangs in El Salvador share space, family ties, and cosmology, but their contrasting responses to marginalization put them in tension. There is no common vision of the future and their methods of influence are diametrically opposed. Yet in spite of the volatile environment, local Pentecostal churches and parachurch organizations have managed to survive by taking a cautious approach to social engagement. As a result, they are among the few remaining social organizations in increasingly isolated, gang-controlled communities. Their presence and local empowerment programs provide valuable assistance to many vulnerable families. At the same time, the increase in gang influence exposes the limitations of these approaches. As gangs expand their networks of influence, sustainable transformational development initiatives are increasingly stifled. The need to address gang issues is paramount for the well-being of these communities. Unfortunately, there is no gang specific transformational development approach to guide churches and parachurch organizations to achieve sustainable change.

Before considering transformational development strategies for gang-entangled communities, it is important to situate the analysis within the day-to-day environment. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs are clearly part of a comprehensive gang mitigation strategy, but they have little effect on gang control and violence. For this reason, the focus of this research is on the effects gang entanglement has on the sustainability of transformational development efforts in the community. As witnessed in the community of

San Martín, most established transformational development programs are currently following program strategies and procedures that were developed prior to, or independent of, gang entanglement. Program criteria and methods did not anticipate how increased gang control would affect their long-term goals. At present, local churches and parachurch organizations are in tension with gang influence, and there are few, if any, ongoing sustainable transformational development approaches that address gang entanglement.

A review of different gang mitigation strategies applied to date can be disheartening. Aggressive police tactics, macro-level structural adjustment polices, and gang rehabilitation initiatives have all proven largely ineffective (Wolf 2017, 208). Gang-entangled communities are in development limbo. There is no immediate solution to the structural concerns feeding gang growth, and increasing gang control in marginal communities affects the stability required for sustainable development. For transformational development practitioners it is hard to find right-fitting strategies. The community water project in San Martin provides an example of an NGO that, in the absence of a suitable strategy, simply stays the course. The water project continues to pursue a standard programmatic progression from dependence to independence. Yet increased gang control affects the stability required to achieve sustainability objectives. Ignoring these social dynamics can create misaligned goals and strategies, and put added strain on local stakeholders.

Considering the organizations that adjust or initiate new programs in gang-entangled communities, the vast majority focus on addressing immediate needs. In San Martín, the instability caused by gang control caused the Christian NGO to instinctively focus new efforts on addressing basic needs, such as latrines. Development organizations commonly adjust their programs when a major disaster strikes a community. In cases where wars break out or natural disasters strike, policies and procedures shift toward disaster relief and/or refugee assistance. Similarly with gang entanglement, in the absence of stability, many development practitioners gravitate toward providing direct assistance. After all, violent social crises caused by terrorism or crime are typically classified as disasters (Wisner 2015). Unfortunately, in the case of gang entanglement, the social crisis has no clear ending point. In many communities, gang entanglement has become the new norm. Also, in cases where emergency relief methods are employed, they do not create any kind of systemic and permanent change in the social conditions that can help stabilize the community. Church and parachurch organizations that utilize emergency relief tactics must be mindful that the situation may not improve any time soon.

Finally, let us consider conflict theory approaches to addressing gang violence. There is ethnographic research in other parts of Latin America that reveals that residents in conflictive communities can and do stand up to violence by state and non-state actors. But in El Salvador, open confrontation of the gangs is rare (Wolf 2017, 229). What makes some forms of civil resistance possible in some contexts and not in El Salvador is unknown. But what is clear is that anyone confronting gangs without government support is likely vulnerable to both legal prosecution and/or gang reprisal. Similarly, non-confrontational structural strategies also seem destined to fail. Alex de Waal suggests that "people need to develop a sense that, as part of a larger political community, they have rights on which they should insist – to development, to a sustainable livelihood, to respect for civil and political rights" (Quoted in Myers 2011, 196). Still, these rights are irrelevant to gangs, because gang members do not belong to formal international systems in which they can be held accountable. At present, transformational development practitioners in San Martín and elsewhere continue to apply grassroots empowerment initiatives without a clear long-term strategy.

## Going Forward: How the International Development Community Can Support Gang-Entangled Communities.

In marginal communities, the churches' capacity to affect broad change correlates with their external alliances with international development organizations. Yet in gang-controlled communities current partnership models are hindered by hostile conditions, contested rituals, and limited capacity, all of which make the employment of formal development strategies impractical. One surmises that achieving sustainable transformational development will take time, that outside support will be essential, and that stakeholders, including even small Pentecostal churches, will have to work together. Along these lines, I believe there is a way forward if we can commit to finding better ways to support local initiatives when there is limited access. Ignoring or applying existing protocols will not achieve desired results. The challenge is to define transformational development policies, advocacy, and support resources that specifically suit gang-entangled communities.

The first decision transformational development practitioners face when confronted with gang-entangled communities is whether to engage. The trend has been that as gang control and violence increase, external development agencies withdraw. Gang-entangled communities thus become progressively more isolated from external support systems. For example, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) temporarily suspended its operations in El Salvador after one of its teams came

under attack from armed gangs (Rentería 2021). As evidenced by this incident, when organizations are affected by gangs, they are left to consider their policies and procedures on their own, without the benefit of any gang-specific strategy. Decisions by international organizations to engage in El Salvador are being made in offices isolated from gang-affected communities. At the moment each organization must negotiate its own gang-entanglement strategy.

The magnitude of the gang problem in many communities of El Salvador also affects how NGOs operate. For example, Homies Unidos (a peer-based NGO) had its funding suspended because formal evaluations could not be carried out by independent observers (Wolf 2017, 236). Gang suspicion of outsiders hinders many formal funding protocols. Whether it is the gangs that restrict access, or the staff of donor agencies who decline to visit gang-controlled communities, the net effect is increasing isolation. Increasingly, only local institutions remain active in these communities, but it seems unreasonable to expect them to address gang issues on their own. Development specialist Alan Fowler points out that micro-level development empowerment approaches must be combined with macro-level institutional support. Myers reinforces this point by stating: "Every community is part of a family of social systems that are regional, national, and finally global" (Myers 2011, 189). Local church leaders, community members, and transformational practitioners need support from the international development community. Identifying better ways to support local initiatives that are inaccessible because of gangs is a critical first step.

The next step in identifying a better way to address gang-entangled communities is adjust the lenses through which we assess the problem. By applying Offutt's social entanglement theory, we can better understand who we are engaging and what the challenges are. In the case of the after-school program in San Martín we see how development practitioners use a generic standard of living index to determine if the program meets their criteria. Based on these criteria, the program has begun a phase-out process, despite the fact that the program is very valuable in preventing young people from joining the gangs. Appropriate transformational development strategies in El Salvador's marginal communities require us to view gangs as a form of poverty. Communities entangled by gangs may not always appear to be materially poor, but they lack freedom, peace, and employment prospects. Also, the economy in marginal communities in El Salvador is heavily reliant on remittances from family members who have migrated. This can skew the perception of need, because those resources are externally generated; migrating parents may solve their immediate financial needs, but may also expose their

children to gang recruitment and does not create prospects for future employment. The effects of poverty in gang-entangled communities go beyond the financial. Transformational development assessment criteria must integrate physical, social, psychological, and spiritual effects of gang entanglement.

Finally, with a degree of optimism, we can attest to the importance the local church plays in any long-term transformational strategy. But how churches go about identifying kingdom principles in gang-entangled communities is critical. The moral question of when to engage or disengage from gang members is complex. For example, Polígono (a Catholic development agency) terminated its micro-enterprise program directed at gang members. The program was controversial because some believed it incentivized joining the gangs. Young people witnessed how much support and resources were directed at gang members. Building healthy relationships is a challenge in the best of circumstances. Determining when to engage or disengage from gang demands is an ethical matrix only the truly vested can decipher. It brings me back to the words of the school director in San Martín: "They know when you are on their side." This statement is not about being pro-gang or anti-gang. It is about an awareness of the person and context one addresses. Any moral or ethical guide for navigating gang entanglement must emerge through the diligent pursuit of truth from kingdom-minded stakeholders. A kingdom mindset for San Martín must be fleshed out by those who live and work there. The international development community can help facilitate this process, but local participants must be centrally involved.

The gang situation in El Salvador foreshadows the prophetic vision of children turning on their parents. Many aspects of transformational development work are tested by the social reality of gangs. The experiences in San Martín highlight the importance of long-term relationships, support systems, and right-fitting strategies. Insular empowerment strategies are not enough to mitigate gang influence. A more robust and collective approach is necessary. The larger development community has the unique challenge of increasing support in less accessible communities. These are just a few of the important elements to consider in gang-entangled communities. Many other macro-level transformational development policies and procedures need to be examined in light of this social phenomenon. The hope is that by integrating the broad development community into the conversation of those who live and work in gang-entangled communities, we will find the best ways forward.

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