
How ASJ Integrates Work in Communities with Advocacy Efforts at the Macro-level to Pursue Transformational Development in Honduras: A Response to David Bueno

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In response to David Bueno's accurate description of how hard it is to work toward transformational development in gang-entangled communities (Bueno 2022), I would like to share with readers the innovative work of the *Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa* (ASJ - in English, Association for a More Just Society). ASJ is a Honduran non-profit organization that promotes sustainable development in communities controlled by gangs. ASJ's multidimensional work embodies the concept of transformational development to which Bueno aspires. According to its mission statement, ASJ's aim is to work "in alliance with civil society" toward "structural changes in the security, health and education sectors to achieve a more just society in favor of the most vulnerable" (Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa 2022). The work of ASJ brings to light ways in which the larger development community can support and work alongside those who live and work in gang-entangled communities.

ASJ was created in 1998 by a group of Christians. Originally, the organization started to engage in development work in Nueva Suyapa, a marginal, semi-urban neighborhood in Tegucigalpa that for years has suffered high levels of poverty and criminality. During its twenty-four years of service, ASJ has expanded into other communities that display similar characteristics. During these years, ASJ discovered that efforts at the community level to make progress toward sustainable development were not enough, due to the influence of corrupt policies, groups, and individuals, which and who promoted only the interests of a few, while negatively affecting the vast majority of the population (Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa 2022). Through experience and its own growth, ASJ has evolved to employ a methodology that effectively integrates programs and interventions in gang-entangled communities with its work at the macro level. At the macro level, ASJ pursues systemic and structural changes through research, advocacy, and even direct support of policy changes that guarantee effective public services for the most vulnerable.

Comunidades Fuertes (Strong Communities) and *Paz y Justicia* (Peace and Justice) are two specific examples of programs that ASJ manages in communities controlled by gangs. Both programs impact communities directly, while also providing input for national-level efforts directed at achieving structural change. Both programs are consistent with the strategies and goals of transformational development. This is evident in two ways. First, both work toward long-term sustainability by partnering with community members, leaders, and local churches to advocate for systemic change in such areas as health, education, and security. Second, ASJ's interventions through these programs, such as youth impact clubs, family guidance, and psychological assistance, foster an understanding of sustainability among community members that, as Bueno says, "include(s) the physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions" (Bueno 2022, 42). ASJ's work thus embodies active support for communities so that they can build their own capacities to pursue changes that ensure a better future.

The programs that ASJ organizes in these communities are quite different from each other. On the one hand, *Comunidades Fuertes*, focuses on strengthening "the protective and resiliency factors in children and teenagers through working with families and community leaders" (Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa 2019). *Comunidades Fuertes* works with both youth and families. *Paz y Justicia*, on the other hand, aims to assist crime victims in pursuing justice through legal and psychological assistance. This program helps victims navigate the justice system. ASJ manages this by collaborating with victims and witnesses in a confidential manner. Close collaboration with community members is key to the success of both programs.

The *Comunidades Fuertes* program employs three main interventions and activities: impact clubs, *Familias Fuertes* (*Strong Families*), and organization of local leadership. Impact clubs hold weekly meetings with at-risk youth (between 10 and 18 years old) through which

they are taught about healthy family relations, mental health care, skills for successful school performance, human rights awareness, gender equality, and self-risk protection. Furthermore, community leaders are trained on how to promote a culture of peace from the different arenas in which they participate. Through *Familias Fuertes*, the program employs psychoeducational family interventions with a biblical approach. One of the main objectives is to reduce levels of family conflicts and other behaviors that compromise the well-being of the kids. This intervention also contributes to further strengthening the practices promoted in impact clubs. Finally, through the organization of local leadership, *Comunidades Fuertes* brings community leaders together and trains them in the use of tools that promote community development.

Beyond the interventions in the communities and assistance given to vulnerable individuals and families, ASJ works to promote sustainability at regional and national levels. Through its work with families and children, for example, ASJ trains community leaders how to conduct careful evaluations of public institutions, like schools and medical centers. *Comunidades Fuertes'* coordinator says that "through these efforts, community members get empowered to pursue changes in their local communities that might lead to sustainable development" (Nuñez 2022). For a few years now, community medical centers have been periodically evaluated on the quality of service to users. These evaluations have led to the creation of improvement plans that have been adopted by the local centers. When these plans are implemented, the same community members monitor their progress. The data from these evaluations also feeds ASJ's macro efforts to pursue public policy changes. In these efforts, ASJ works directly with high-ranking government officials, joins national level advocacy coalitions, and participates in public forums that discuss challenges and solutions in key areas of the country's development.

For example, through the oversight of local medical center in Nueva Suyapa, community leaders noted that nurses and doctors were consistently not showing up during the time that they were expected to give service. This led community leaders to include the installation of punch clocks in their improvement plans for the centers. Doctors and nurses were thus carefully monitored on their compliance with established work hours. Community leaders have continued their monitoring, which has led to improvement in medical attention at the center. One example of how community monitoring led to systemic change was in the vaccination program against COVID-19. Community leaders organized to monitor the process and highlight any irregularities. One irregularity they found at the beginning of the process (when access to vaccines was more limited) was that protocols on

prioritization by vulnerability were not followed. Responding to ASJ's advocacy, the Ministry of Health provided clearer guidelines on the order of vaccination, making sure those at higher risk were vaccinated first.

In the same way, through *Paz y Justicia*, which supports crime victims in gang-entangled neighborhoods, ASJ gathers data that show shortcomings and flaws in the Honduran justice system. Through the *acompañamiento (accompaniment)* of crime victims through the entire judicial process until justice is finally served, ASJ experiences firsthand how the justice system operates, especially when serving individuals from these communities. The coordinator of *Paz y Justicia* states that while "other organizations only hear about shortcomings of the system, in a way, ASJ has lived them." This, he also says, "gives ASJ authority to ask for changes to the government" (Varela 2022). From these ASJ experiences in the communities, two new management models emerged that the government is now adopting and ASJ continues to support. One strengthens the methodology used by public prosecutors, specifically the way they gather and analyze information. The other improves the performance and effectiveness of the model used by judges. ASJ's work at the structural level would be less effective and less well-informed if it were not so present within communities where vulnerable Hondurans live.

One factor contributing to ASJ's success at a community level is its Christian identity and the way this facilitates their partnerships with local churches. For example, for the *Comunidades Fuertes* program, which focuses on strengthening the protective and resiliency factors in children and teenagers, ASJ partners with local churches to carry out activities like impact clubs and meetings with families. Bueno is correct in stating that "...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" (Bueno 2022, 40). Yet ASJ has, up to now, managed to pursue transformational development in gang-controlled communities through partnership with local churches.

On the other hand, the evolution of the role of gangs in these communities has increased the challenges to pursue transformational development. The evolution of gangs in Honduras has shown similar trends as those discussed by Bueno in El Salvador. Gangs in Honduras have likewise made the leap from criminal groups that focused mostly on identity and status, and whose membership was hard to access, to organizations with the capability to employ thousands of young men and women (ASJ; PNPRRS; PNUD 2019). One of the main elements that has defined the evolution of gangs in Honduras is their expansion of territorial control. This seems to be one of their primary concerns as it allows them to protect

themselves from rivals or state security forces (ASJ; PNPRRS; PNUD, 2019). This impacts most activities and transactions that involve gang-entangled communities.

The threat of violence and high surveillance that gangs exercise has had implications in the protocols and considerations that ASJ has had to adopt to work in these communities. *Comunidades Fuertes*, the program that is more publicly known in the communities, has had to operate completely independent from ASJ. This way they are seen only as an intervention aimed to support families in the communities and not as a potential threat for criminal groups. Additionally, staff and volunteers for *Comunidades Fuertes* that enter the communities use vests that identify them with the program. Similarly, cars that enter the communities to aid the program have stamps that show their association with the project. *Paz y Justicia*, on the other hand, because of the nature of its work maintains a low profile and works confidentially in these communities. They collaborate closely with victims and witnesses from the communities who find in the program an ally to help them pursue justice. The participation of community members as staff and volunteers in *Comunidades Fuertes*, and as collaborators with *Paz y Justicia*, has been helpful in defining the protocols and considerations that contribute to everyone's safety and security in these communities.

Amid the limited access that the presence of criminal gangs creates in some communities in Honduras, ASJ has found a way to keep working toward transformational development. Four specific elements of that work can be highlighted. First, ASJ's ability to actively carry its mission for twenty-four years has been enabled by its close collaboration with members of those communities who keep ASJ staff informed and connected to the communities. Second, the support and partnership with local churches has provided a necessary standing and respect in the community. Third, ASJ supports communities in a way that empowers community members to advocate for their rights so that the government guarantees them. And finally, ASJ has been effective at using data and input gathered from its engagement in the communities to advocate for changes at the structural level. Not wishing to argue that any of this is easy or straightforward, I do want to say that these elements nevertheless shed a bright light on how the international development community can continue to work toward the transformation of gang-entangled communities.

References

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