

Mediation and Gangs: Is this possible?

A brief report that looks at this possibility in the context of Trinidad and Tobago

by Hedy Tenia

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This report looks at existing discussions and interventions to address the issue of gangs within the country of Trinidad and Tobago. The hope is that your feedback on the use of mediation, if possible in the gang context, can throw light on the best approach for its implementation and use.

Country Background

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin island independent state, having attained its independence from Great Britain in 1962 and became a Republic in 1974. The country has a history of slavery and indentureship and is multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi- ethnic and has a population of over 1.3m personsⁱ living within a 1,981square mile radius.

Within the context of Trinidad and Tobago, programs have been developed to address social ills within the society and offer redress. However, our country has seen a steady increase in violent activity with results that have a profound impact upon some of the most vulnerable in our society. Peace is seen, depending on the community, as nebulous and this has resulted in some communities being declared 'hot spots.'

Definition and treatment of gangs in the Trinidad and Tobago context

In understanding gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, we confine the definition to the law applicable to gangs within the country context.

Gangs are unlawful in Trinidad and Tobago and there is the relevant legislation, the Anti- Gang Act,ⁱⁱ in relation to its unlawful nature. A gang, according to the Act, means "a combination of two or more persons, whether formally or informally organized, that, through its membership or through an agent, engages in any gang related activity."⁽³⁾ The range of gang related activityⁱⁱⁱ refers specifically to criminal activity in this context. (12)

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According to the Act a person commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment if that person is a member of a gang or who for “unlawful benefit” profess to be a member of a gang or suggest to someone they are a member of a gang when they are not and where a gang leader, if convicted, can be imprisoned for up to twenty five years.

Some current interventions and existing discussions on gangs in Trinidad and Tobago

Ann Marie Bissesar in looking at structural adjustment and gangs^{iv} argues that “...the triggering factor leading to the formation of gangs in this country was the introduction of structural adjustment conditions during the 1980’s.” (143) During this time: higher levels of inflation, increasing poverty levels, family structure breakup, rise in the level of employment amongst others have been cited by her as predisposing factors for gang formation because of the austerity measures or “belt tightening exercise” adopted by the government of Trinidad and Tobago. According to her “... a major re-modification of its entire stratification structure” occurred.

In a study to examine the nature and extent of the gang problem in Trinidad and Tobago^v inter alia, criminologist Randy Seepersad pointed out that previous research would have identified an association between gangs, drugs, illegal drugs and illegal activities. He found that in Trinidad and Tobago “suppressive and law enforcement strategy takes priority over preventative measures” and have met with little success. Placed also on the table of discussions by Seepersad is a cautionary view with mediated truce in Trinidad and Tobago where he pointed out that “empirical evidence” suggest increased potency of rival gangs when relationships develop and increased rivalry escalation when truces fail. To complement preventative intervention in the long term, one strategy articulated by Seepersad is “addressing the proximate causes of gang violence.”

Trinidad and Tobago has seen an increase in violent activities amongst its citizens and according to Charles Katz and Edward Maguire in a study diagnosing gang violence in Trinidad and Tobago^{vi}, they pointed out that the “outbreak of violence” in Trinidad and Tobago began around the year 2000. They put forth the observation that this outbreak had more to do with “sudden changes occurring among gangs,” with certain key elements increasing conflict between them and prompting a retaliation cycle when addressing new incidents between the gangs.

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The findings, though limited, of Wendell C. Wallace in his exploratory study on female gangs and female gang membership in Trinidad^{vii}, suggest that “ ... females are operating in quasi gangs as well as engaging in illegal economic pursuits in partnership with other gang members” (195) Additionally, according to him notice should be taken of communities that are dysfunctional, the marginalization of some females, the issue of “extreme parenting” and the reality that some communities, because of location, have few expectations for success. Further, the sharing of insights by those interviewed, that police officers are “far more trusting” of females in groups than their males counterparts when they are in a vehicle, the need for money and protection, desire for affection and the ease of acquiring a gun are some of the factors or main motivators in Trinidad for a seemingly “radical evolution in female gang activity”. These are considerations for policy makers and practitioners in intervention and collaborative efforts.

Kathy Ann Felix-John and Dianne Williams in their discussion on rival gangs of East Port-of-Spain^{viii} opinioned “ ... by its very nature, a gang becomes a conflict group by virtue merely of its membership and the experience of its members.” (268) They highlighted attempts made by a former Prime Minister and Minister of National Security to have peace talks and a “mediated agreement on truce” between rival gangs from the Port-of-Spain and East-West corridor communities in 2002 and 2006. Truce was agreed however it was eventually broken and violence re-occurred and increased, with most leaders who attended the talks eventually being killed. This seems to lend support to Seepersad ‘s cautionary view mentioned above. They also made mention of a community based initiative in 2009, that was breached after three hundred days, called the Tecia Henry Order after the killing of a ten year old girl. Community members were already speaking to gang members in an attempt to curb the violence however the community believed that other stakeholders such as the Police needed to take up their responsibilities.

An InterAgencyTask Force (IATF) initiative under the Ministry of National Security, in their focus on more proactive policing, resulted in the Hearts and Mind program. It is a social intervention program used to: address the mistrust between police and the community in the communities of Laventille, unite said communities and stem the gang recruitment of easily available young persons from those communities. As a program, it has a social focus in areas such as community meetings and outreach, with talks in school also being hosted while “aggressively pursuing the goal of crime reduction.” (49)^{ix}

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In recognition of the value of using violence interruptors to address violence within communities plagued by gang activity, the Project Reason programme is currently being used with gangs of East Port-of-Spain. Project Reason is based on the CURE violence model in use in the United States of America with approved adjustments for local conditions. The programme uses former low level gang members or persons who had criminal records as Interruptors. These persons would have been vetted by the Police, have acceptance from the gangs and living within the community to bring about change of possibly negative outcomes such as retaliatory murders due to gang activity. In conversation with persons associated with the Programme varying views on mediation use has been put forth. One view is that 'gangs don't mediate, they go through them', another view is that it should not be discounted however train the community in the necessary skills to allow them to mediate.

In acknowledgement of the problems associated with gangs a Gang and Intelligence Unit was formed by Departmental Order under the Ministry of National Security of Trinidad and Tobago and has been in operation since 2012. The mandate of this Unit is to investigate, provide intelligence and social interventions specifically focusing on gangs.

According to their records there are currently one hundred and sixteen (116) gangs operating within Trinidad and Tobago: twenty seven (27) in Tobago and eighty nine (89) in Trinidad, These gangs are predominately male gangs with gang involvement generally in areas of illegal activity involving drugs and ammunition. Gang members communicate via cellphone with each other and will fight other rival gangs for turf, territory and to maintain their position of power within communities. They operate within close proximity to each other and are aware of who are the persons within rival gangs.

How do we move forward?

In moving forward in the area of Mediation and Gangs it is important to ensure to try and include everyone (relevant to such an issue) in the potential starting of any initiative. As Father Jason, involved in the Pride in Gonzales project, stated in the book *Gangs in the Caribbean: Responses of State and Society*ˆ:

Peace has a literacy of its own. It requires communication and this requires skill and imagination ... There is literacy for peace that we must learn and teach. Yes, it is about communication and imagination but, fundamentally, it is about believing that peace is given, (322)

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Some recommendations on Mediation and Gangs put forth that I believe can be considered:

1. It might better to have a Working Committee on this type of initiative and use existing data gathered to also plot a way forward. Such data should also be qualitative and quantitative. Use of the information provided by the Gang Intelligence Unit is critical.
2. Use of the faith based community to become involved with an eventual focus on individuals within the gangs. Within our culture such communities are respected. Consideration of their methodology, as in the case of the Pride in Gonzales project, should not be; disregarded, however, as Seepersad points out the issue of "proximate causes" should not be disregarded. This suggests that information on existing or possible ongoing conflicts or rivalry within and between the gangs is important.
3. Use individuals or activists already involved in the gang issue within communities. These individuals or activists have a level of connectedness that can allow for the sharing of information on the internal issues in each gang. Information on working within the younger gang members, dynamics of leadership and acceptance, communication tools used, lifestyles of gang members and issues of mutual concession to start discussions. There has to be start and not a delay in having personal conversations with the leaders and by extension with members of gangs on such an initiative.
4. Identify established initiatives that might be working within communities and collaborate with them on the issue of an additional service available. Collaborative efforts are needed, particularly with activities that may involve the use of a different manner of communicating and resolving issues within gangs.
5. Ensure to have the right person(s) to facilitate the process. This is important in terms of acceptance.
6. There is a need to decide on whether to use different mediation frames with different gangs.

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Conclusion

Concerns and questions cannot be overlooked in using mediation and the questions put forth are personal to the author from a cultural viewpoint, insights gained from the readings, and understanding as a citizen the possible questions that will be asked. Some are highlighted below:

- Gangs are illegal and carry on illegitimate business, concerns from citizens will focus on the question of: why should additional resources (particularly financial), which might be better suited for legitimate businesses or interventions, be directed towards the use of mediation in that context?
- Would an intervention focus on gangs be considered legitimizing their presence as opposed to suppressing or eradicating their existence?
- The possibility of unintended outcomes such as more co-ordination and unification among gangs is possible, what will be needed to mitigate against such outcomes?

The research on gangs in Trinidad and Tobago are in its early stages and is limited, however, as articulated in the body of the report there is a base of information that can provide a starting point for the use of mediation as a next level of intervention and maybe even suppression of the negative outcomes of their existence. Further, mediation does not replace what has to be done in relation to addressing risk or societal factors, that make membership in gangs attractive or needed, and the legal and fair law enforcement efforts of the relevant state agencies. It has to be collaborative.

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- ⁱ Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office.
- ⁱⁱ Trinidad and Tobago. *The Anti-Gang Act (No. 10) 2011*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Trinidad and Tobago. *The Anti-Gang Act (No. 10) 2011*. First Schedule.
- ^{iv} Bissessar, Ann Marie. “ The Nexus between Structural Adjustment and Emergence of Gangs - The Case of Trinidad and Tobago.” In *Gangs in the Caribbean*. edited by Randy Seepersad and Ann Marie Bissessar, 131-149. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.
- ^v Seepersad, Randy. “Gangs in Trinidad and Tobago.” In *Gangs in the Caribbean: Responses of State and Society*, edited by Anthony Harriott and Charles M Katz, 95-116. Jamaica: UWI Press, 2015.
- ^{vi} Katz, Charles M. and Edward Maguire. “Diagnosing GangViolence in the Caribbean.” In *Gangs in the Caribbean: Responses of State and Society*. edited by Anthony Harriott and Charles M.Katz, 175-211. Jamaica: UWI Press, 2015.
- ^{vii} Wallace, Wendell.C. “Girls and Gangs in Trinidad - An Exploratory Study” In *Gangs in the Caribbean*. edited by Randy Seepersad and Ann Marie Bissessar, 195-218 Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.
- ^{viii} Felix-John, KathyAnn and Dianne Williams. “The Impact Of Mediation On Truce With Rival Gangs Of East Port-Of-Spain.” In *Gangs in the Caribbean*. edited by Randy Seepersad and Ann Marie Bissessar, 261-285. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.
- ^{ix} Wallace, Wendell C. “The Social Impact Of The Hearts And Minds Programme As A Component Of Hot Spot Policing On Communities In Laventille, Trinidad And Tobago” In *Journal of the Department of Behavioural Sciences* 44 Vol. 3, (1), February 2014 44 - 64.
- ^x Maguire, Edward and C. Jason Gordon. “Faith Based Interventions for Reducing Gang Violence in the Caribbean. Reflections from a Professor and a Priest.” In *Gangs in the Caribbean: Responses of State and Society*. edited by Anthony Harriott and Charles M Katz, 301 – 336. Jamaica: UWI Press, 2015.