

The role and impact of local citizen security councils as a challenge to criminal violence

Lessons from Michoacán

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Key messages

- In the face of deficient security provision in Michoacán as crime-related violence has escalated, an important societal response has been the establishment of local security councils, which address community-specific problems of insecurity and basic safety.
- While not a direct challenge to organised crime groups or conflict, these councils have the potential to re-open public space that has been closed down by violence.
- Mirroring the political economy of local community structures, local security councils have been more or less participatory.
- In varying ways, they have tactically engaged with state-provided law enforcement and security provision; engaged with local self-defence groups perceived by the community as credible security-provision actors; and established strategic coalitions with national-level civil society organisations to better monitor and report on violence and security challenges facing the locality or community.
- The councils in Michoacán were established by communities. If donors seek to create similar structures, it is important to acknowledge that they cannot be controlled, as their participatory nature means the priorities are decided by the group.
- However, supporting participatory bodies will have an indirect impact on the type of violence donors seek to address.
- Citizen councils should not be viewed as a silver bullet, as they can be messy, local institutions – but they can have a significant impact alongside other responses to violence.



Background and acknowledgements

This briefing draws on findings from the research project ‘Assessing the potential of civil organizations within regions affected by organized crime to hold state institutions to human rights-based development’ (University of Aberdeen, Colegio de Michoacán, CIDE-Aguascalientes and ODI). This has reviewed societal responses to violence in contexts of organised crime and institutional fragility. The authors would like to thank Marija Atanaskova and Samantha Themimulle for their review and comments.

Introduction

Local citizen councils sometimes surface with the aim of challenging conflict, organised crime and violence. For example, following the civil war in Sierra Leone, provincial security committees brought together the security sector, local leaders and civil society. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has developed committees at community level to increase local security and safety in a number of countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina.

When international donors create local participatory institutions, these bodies develop their own agenda, and accordingly cannot be controlled by the donors. The committee established by the UNDP in Bosnia-Herzegovina was designed to challenge organised crime after the war, but it focused more on addressing local concerns, such as stray dogs, noise and how stadiums are used.

Despite this, as a deliberating space these institutions challenge the closure of public space by conflict, crime and violence. Indirectly, they challenge the power of organised-crime groups. Drawing on the creation of councils in three parts of the Mexican state of Michoacán – Chinicuila, Tancítaro and Zamora – this policy brief outlines the different characteristics of each council, the roles played by each of them, what they achieved and the impact they had, as well as challenges posed by this form of response to conflict, crime and violence.

The impact of the cartels

Organised crime has always been present in Michoacán, yielding high levels of criminal violence and undermining the capacity of the state to provide security (Maldonado, 2018; Pansters,

2018). However, the gravity of levels of capture and complicity has significantly increased with the presence of the Knights Templar cartel. The cartel has more deeply compromised citizen security by infiltrating police agencies, the bodies that should protect communities from violence. As a result, cartel presence has effectively closed down the governance space, allowing the group to operate uncontested. For example, in Chinicuila, cartels have directly impeded public gatherings and the operation of councils.

Accordingly, official responses to criminal violence in parts of the state are limited. Trust in police is low, as are levels of police recruitment. Similarly, although there are dedicated government agencies to promote citizen participation in many policy areas, there has been limited citizen involvement in security. Crime reporting rates are low, and there is limited citizen involvement in security provision, for example through neighbourhood watch schemes.

Although the actions of so-called *autodefensas* (self-defence groups), in conjunction with federal government forces, managed to contain the operations of criminal organisations in 2013 – and even bring crime under control in certain municipalities – homicide rates have, nonetheless, remained very high in the state.

The emergence of councils

Across Latin America, currently the most violent region in the world, several government initiatives have been launched to involve citizens in security management, in the process convening regular meetings where problems and solutions related to insecurity are discussed. One such example of these initiatives involves the establishment of local committees that evaluate and organise

neighbourhood or community police. Elsewhere, neighbourhood committees are used to facilitate communication between residents and local government on issues related to crime.

In Michoacán state, some initiatives – referred to here as local citizen security councils (LCSCs) – have emerged as a result of citizen mobilisation to challenge the impact of the cartels, forming in communities deeply affected by criminal violence and institutional capture. Although they are peripheral to institutionalised politics, LCSCs coexist and interact in different ways with self-defence groups, police agencies and armed forces, as well as with public officials and local citizens.

LCSCs are citizen organisations that meet regularly to make decisions about a specific jurisdiction. Some of these councils are made up of representatives elected by popular election (as in Chinicuila), whereas in other cases they are constituted by citizens who are known as leaders in their communities of origin and by municipal, state or federal authorities responsible for security and justice (as in Zamora). Council meetings can be open to the interested public, or they can be accessible only to members of the organisation. Although individual LCSCs differ in nature, there are commonalities in all scenarios: members share the notion that security and justice are a joint responsibility of citizens and authorities; they strive to address local problems; and they are particularly interested in addressing security and justice problems.

In some cases, as with Tancítaro and Zamora, LCSCs have been formed as responses to specific security crises plaguing local cities and

municipalities; in other cases, councils are part of larger political projects linked to Mexico's democratic transition. In Chinicuila, for example, councils have been forced to address issues of security and justice in a context of radical insecurity that gave rise to the self-defence movement of 2013.

In Zamora, the Security and Justice Working Group (SJWG) was proposed as a space where public security officials and citizens could develop a common agenda concerning the security strategy of the city (see Box 1). Citizens included directors of professional and business associations, representatives of higher education institutions, and Catholic clergy. Working group sessions of the SJWG aim to generate cooperation mechanisms between government and citizens in order to rebuild trust. However, the notion of security is defined by the state government, law and policy; the methods to measure its effectiveness are not questioned, nor can citizens intervene in the design of public policies on security and justice. Despite this, the SJWG creates a space to discuss the particular threats of criminal violence that Zamora faces, as well as providing an opportunity to reiterate the principles of due process and rights protection that are clearly elaborated in the constitution.

The Municipal Security Council (MSC) of Tancítaro is composed of municipal officials and councillors, the chiefs of the Municipal Police and the state-wide Michoacán Police, representatives of the self-defence groups, and representatives of the local Citizen Wellbeing Council (CWC). These representatives discuss and agree on security

Box 1 The Security and Justice Working Group in Zamora

The Security and Justice Working Group (SJWG) in Zamora has had limited effectiveness. However, it did lead to the creation of a regional observatory dedicated to monitoring and offering reports on criminal incidence based on methodologies proposed by a national civil association, the National Citizen Observatory. The local observatory checks the crime statistics reported by the regional Prosecutor's office against national criteria, in order to ensure transparency and comparability.

The observatory meets with the regional Prosecutor in advance of SJWG meetings to discuss disparities in the crime statistics reported, before then presenting the corrected statistics to the SJWG. This has made for an effective working relationship between the observatory and the Prosecutor, and slightly improved the effectiveness of the SJWG.

Box 2 Tancítaro and the Municipal Security Council

In the case of the Municipal Security Council (MSC) in Tancítaro, security issues are defined in a broad way. Agreements are discussed and made by councillors in relation to the recruitment of local police officers, dealing with drug and alcohol trafficking and consumption, holding self-defence groups accountable and planning security operations.

Another public issue addressed by the MSC is deforestation. Tancítaro currently produces more avocados for export than any other municipality in Mexico. Pursuing those responsible for illegal logging is seen as important, because the felling of trees to clear land for avocado orchards affects the water supply to other areas of the municipality. When caught, loggers are invited to MSC meetings to discuss the case and to settle it through an agreement and a sanction, although this approach has not always been effective.

challenges, including the supervision of the two self-defence groups and the hiring of new members of the Municipal Police, as well as other issues, such as deforestation (see Box 2).

In Chinicuila, the Popular Council of Chinicuila (PCC) is made up of representatives of the rural communities of the municipality, but it also invites municipal officials to its monthly meetings (see Box 3). Participants at PCC meetings discuss and decide on a range of challenges, from environmental issues to security. In the context of the armed uprising in 2013, the PCC became a supervisory body of both the *autodefensas* and the elements of the Michoacán Police assigned to the municipality.

Impact of the local citizen councils

As with committees that have been supported by donors in other countries, the citizen councils active in Michoacán state do not directly challenge criminal violence or the cartels. But they change the operating environment, making it more challenging for cartels to maintain their activity and subverting the restrictions that cartels have placed on communities. The specific results vary, from the reconstruction of public space to strengthening of the local governance structure and even regulation of security responses (by managing the role of self-defence groups and Municipal Police).

The main contribution of LCSCs has been to create an arena for discussion of issues that include, but are not limited to, organised crime and the violence that accompanies it.

In Michoacán, the cartels had shut down public discussion; the councils created a space for re-opening it. This dialogue now includes discussion of what is understood by ‘security’ in the first place, as well as ways to achieve it.

In all three cases, LCSC discussions had the effect of monitoring not only criminal activity but also the performance of local government and policing. In Tancítaro and Chinicuila, the two smaller settlements, discussion focused on the specific cases reported, while in Zamora the focus was more on the reliability of crime statistics, as well as on the picture of crime that these painted.

In the cases of Tancítaro and Chinicuila, where the councils played a role in managing self-defence groups (and, to some extent, the Municipal Police), council discussion led to specific police operations, with some limited success.

The LCSCs in Tancítaro and Chinicuila also helped to create citizen participation in security governance, as well as to recruit and, to some extent, legitimise the security provision activities of self-defence groups active in their localities. Self-defence groups were involved in security provision with varying levels of collaboration with the Municipal Police. In Tancítaro the LCSC also helped to ensure that the rest of the population participated in security checkpoints put in place to prevent criminal organisations from re-entering the town. In Zamora, by contrast, the LCSC had no evident effect on police recruitment or broader citizen participation.

Box 3 The Popular Council of Chinicuila

The Popular Council of Chinicuila (PCC) controls self-defence groups in the region and has greater legitimacy than the Michoacán Police unit among the local population. As one of the founders of the PCC said: “the police [force] is fine because it gives people jobs, but we take care of the security” (Interview, 16 June 2017). The PCC manages an armed corporation that involves many of the young males of the municipality.

The Chinicuila council also manages other local issues, such as regulating the fishing of langoustine – an endangered species. Thus, the notion of security that is instituted by the PCC not only relates to containing organised crime, it also ensures the conservation of the environment.

The PCC also influences regional governance, as it has enabled an alliance between the self-defence groups of Chinicuila and those of the adjacent Coahuayana municipality and the nearby indigenous community of Ostula, allowing for some regional coordination in security strategy.

In all cases, the councils gave some legitimacy to the governments that supported and collaborated with them, in a context where the authorities had lost much of their legitimacy. In Tancítaro and Chinicuila the municipal government supported and gained legitimacy from the councils. In Zamora it was the state government that reaped the rewards.

Challenges

Although some of the councils have contributed to improving security provision and citizen participation within their specific localities in Michoacán state, there have also been challenges.

Councils are affected by local differences and conflicts

Councils are part of local social, economic and political life, and are affected by local divisions, power asymmetries and disputes. For example,

not only is the SJWG in Zamora divided between the agendas of the citizen members and that of the security officials, it is also criticised by other local groups for being elitist in its membership. In Tancítaro there are competing views about providing security that privileges different political projects. For instance, the MSC and the CWC were established and supported by a new local unity government in power between 2016 and 2018. The councils were supported by the unity government and a left-wing self-defence group. However, another self-defence group operating in Tancítaro opposed the unity government and the work of both councils, advocating for a more centralised approach to security.

Councils are vulnerable to electoral dynamics and can disappear after elections

This was the case in Tancítaro. Even though the MSC’s goals included creating a space where security-related issues could be discussed between local government, citizens and self-defence groups, opposition parties criticised its work and reach – this criticism increased during electoral campaigning in 2018. The new local government that took over after the 2018 elections was reluctant to continue supporting the council, and by 2019 it was not clear whether the council would continue to operate.

Similarly, in Zamora, the SJWG was effectively taken over by a Michoacán state government intent on centralising security provision. The Zamora municipal government has often been less inclined to work with the SWJG as a result.

In Chinicuila the same left-wing party that created the PCC has won the municipal elections since 2002. But if it were to lose an election, its members are aware that it might lose its authority.

As with state law-enforcement bodies, LCSCs are susceptible to political capture, as their existence depends on political support.

Councils vary in their representativeness of communities

The structure of the councils in Chinicuila and Tancítaro was designed to enable community-based representation; therefore, representatives from all of the communities in the municipality are part of the council. In the case of Chinicuila, community representatives have the obligation

to assist in the monthly council sessions alongside representatives of the self-defence groups, and municipal officials are invited to participate. Councils in Tancítaro work in a combined way – municipal officials and the police chiefs initially formed the MSC, after which representatives from different sectors of the population (such as leaders of self-defence groups and local agri-business leaders) were invited to take part.

The CWC in Tancítaro was planned in order to ensure broad representation. The municipality consists of nearly 80 communities, so in order to grant representation from all of them, the municipality was organised into 11 zones, each of which elects a representative for a two-year term; these representatives were also invited to assist in MSC sessions. The SJWG in Zamora includes state and municipal officials alongside civil society representatives, Catholic clergy and Zamoran businesspeople, but there is no representation of other constituencies in the city.

LCSCs, then, are not necessarily democratic, and they may have only limited participatory effect.

LCSCs may diverge from human rights standards

LCSCs are locally derived and based. As such, they respond to local moral codes, rather than broader human rights standards. Councils also articulate local notions of security, insecurity, crime and punishment. A clear example of this

arose in Chinicuila, where the self-defence groups are members of the PCC. As a result, the topics discussed included the carrying of weapons and threats from the local cartel, but not violence against women, despite many cases of sexual harassment. Violence against women is frequently considered to be the responsibility of women, rather than a matter of security or a threat to the community.

Recommendations

In post-conflict settings or other contexts where public participation has diminished, local councils can be effective in creating new spaces for public involvement, indirectly pushing back against violent groups. The councils that were established in Michoacán faced several challenges, as highlighted above. That they were created by the local population, however, gave them legitimacy and a level of representativeness. In contexts where donors may wish to establish similar structures, additional challenges are likely because such bodies will not be the product of a local push.

In addition, LCSCs are messy, local institutions; they create a powerful challenge to violent interests but should not be seen as a silver bullet to counter specific challenges. Because of their participatory nature, the groups will focus on issues that matter to members – which will not always correspond to issues seen to be the most pressing by donors.

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