The University of Bradford Institutional Repository

<http://bradscholars.brad.ac.uk>

This work is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our Policy Document available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this work please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published online version may require a subscription.

Link to publisher's version:

<http://dx.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2016.1146565>

Citation: Schuberth M (2016) Growing the Grassroots or Backing Bandits? Dilemmas of Donor Support for Haiti's (UN)Civil Society. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*. 11(1): 93-98.

Copyright statement: © 2016 Taylor & Francis. The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in the *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* (29 Apr 2016)

BRIEFINGS

GROWING THE GRASSROOTS OR BACKING BANDITS? DILEMMAS OF DONOR SUPPORT FOR HAITI'S (UN) CIVIL SOCIETY

MORITZ SCHUBERTH

Keywords: Haiti, peacebuilding, civil society, urban violence, gangs, non-state armed groups, MINUSTAH, USAID, Viva Rio

Introduction

The vast amount of literature emerging on the 'local turn' in peacebuilding has hitherto largely ignored one important dilemma donors may face when working with allegedly more locally accepted grassroots initiatives: while the latter are seen as indispensable actors that play important roles within their community, they might also reveal their (un)civil criminal dimension and start to prey on the supposed beneficiaries of peacebuilding and development programmes. This is exactly what I witnessed in Haiti during six months of fieldwork in Port-au-Prince in 2013. Based on semi-structured interviews and overt observation in Cité Soleil — often referred to as the most destitute slum in the Americas — my research investigates the dif-

ferent strategies that international actors take vis-à-vis community-based armed groups.¹ While these groups are seen as legitimate civil society organisations by some donors, and as dangerous armed gangs by others, my research reveals that these two categorisations are not mutually exclusive.

Yet, despite or precisely because of their Janus-faced nature, it is imperative for donors dealing with these groups to act in concert with one another. Failure to achieve this could lead to situations where one donor bankrolls the very group that threatens the safety of aid workers and the local population alike. Indeed, after the ouster of President Aristide in 2004, NGO staff were among the victims targeted by urban armed groups who presented themselves as part of Haiti's pro-democracy movement, but were simultaneously working on behalf of kidnapping rings.² The dilemmas of donor support for gangs posing as civil society are not limited to Haiti, however; similar groups are equally prevalent in other countries such as Kenya (Schubert 2014). Thus, a closer look at the Haitian case allows lessons to be drawn for comparable settings.

Haiti remains by far the poorest country in the western hemisphere, as many a study points out (Dupuy 2007, 51). Because of its tumultuous political history and low development indicators, the country has been a major recipient of international assistance and subject to no fewer than seven UN missions since the early 1990s. However, external actors are regularly criticised for exacerbating rather than relieving Haiti's problems. In 2015 a number of allegations concerning favouritism and squandering of resources were levelled against major donors in Haiti, including the American Red Cross,

the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Clinton Foundation (Glencorse & Ranjbar 2015). Such instances of aid mismanagement are all the more disastrous in contexts like Haiti where the government wields limited authority to regulate donors and to hold them accountable (Holly 2011).

International Actors and Community-based Armed Groups

For decades, residents of the most notorious Haitian slums, such as Martissant, Bel Air and Cité Soleil, have suffered under the use of non-state armed groups by political patrons, from the infamous *Tonton Macoutes* during the rule of the Duvaliers, to the *attacheés* under Raoul Cédras (Trouillot 1990). Yet, the most infamous example of the instrumentalisation of urban armed groups occurred during Jean-Bertrand Aristide's second presidency from 2001 to 2004 (Fleurimond 2009). In an unsuccessful attempt to avoid his second ouster in 2004, Aristide tried to consolidate his rule by expanding his clientelistic network — the *baz* — while arming their criminal wing — the *chimères* — as a powerful irregular force to silence the opposition (Dupuy 2007).

The resulting community-based armed groups (CBAGs) ³ are today often referred to as gangs, but observers disagree whether they should be framed as a politico-social movement (Hallward 2007) or as hardened criminals (v2007). This is due to the hybrid character of Haiti's CBAGs, which act simultaneously as neighbourhood vigilantes, community leaders, criminal gangs, and political militias. Hence, as illustrated in Figure 1, they serve political and criminal purposes for their sponsors, fulfil socio-economic functions for their members, pose as local civil society organisations to attract funds from donors, and protect their own communities as much as they prey upon them (Kolbe 2013; Schuberth 2015b). In the end, CBAGs in Haiti are the product of both greed and structural grievances, including skyrocketing inequality, historical injustice, fragile state institutions, and the absence of the rule of law.

While an estimated 75% of the country's population live below the poverty line, more than half of all Haitians live in extreme poverty (UN 2011). But even in this unfavourable environment, neighbourhoods in which CBAGs are found are particularly worse off. According to a survey of residents in Cité Soleil, 83% report being unemployed and 82% say they would

Figure 1: Functions and Relations of CBAGs

65 not earn 'enough money to feed their
households' (Marcelin 2011, 25). Given
these bleak living conditions, the range of
options available to poor urban youth is
70 limited and gang members can be seen as
violent entrepreneurs who are seeking to
improve their limited life chances.

Equally multidimensional are interna-
tional actors intervening in Haiti, as well
as their approaches vis-à-vis CBAGs.
75 While only a few programmes are explic-
itly labelled as peacebuilding — such as
the Peacebuilding Intervention by Con-
cern Worldwide and Glen Cree — they
all work towards the common aim of
achieving the ill-defined 'liberal peace'.
80 Their means to achieve this end, how-
ever, are far from consistent. As can be
seen in Figure 1, it is possible to discern
three institutional logics which can each
be attributed to different organisational
5 subfields of peacebuilding (Barnett et al.
2007, 49): (1) the coercive logic of stabilisa-
tion driving security actors as epitomised
by military peacekeepers; (2) the coopera-
tive logic of conflict resolution informing
10 development and humanitarian actors —
including Concern Worldwide and Viva
Rio; and (3) the substitutive logic guiding
statebuilding efforts by USAID and MI-
NUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization
15 Mission in Haiti).⁴

Although MINUSTAH is conceptual-
ised as an integrated mission and vari-
ous mechanisms are in place to enhance
cooperation and coherence between its
military and civilian components, dif-
ferent UN agencies remain divided by
conflicting institutional logics which are
20 based on entirely different worldviews.
Yet, widely differing perspectives on
CBAGs in Haiti can also be found with-
in one and the same organisation. For
instance, a US subcontractor managing
25 grants for a major donor with only limited
exposure to the communities in question
gave a rather idealistic view of CBAGs as
respected community organisations head-
ed by notable leaders which 'everyone in
30 the community looks up to'.⁵ This inter-

pretation is in stark contrast to that given
by a Haitian respondent who had actual-
ly implemented projects for the same or-
ganisation on the ground, recalling long
and rather frightening negotiations about
access with gang leaders at night, where
having a loaded gun pointed to their head
for the entire meeting was the norm rather
than the exception.⁶

Different Strategies vis-à-vis Community-based Armed Groups

How have different peacebuilding and
development actors managed — or not
— to navigate the uncharted territories
of Haiti's urban slums? It is almost im-
possible for external actors to gain safe
access to gang-ruled *quartiers populaires*
without direct contact with gang lead-
ers; otherwise the security and, indeed,
life of aid workers would be put on the
line. Hence, implementing agencies often
find themselves in situations in which it
is extremely difficult to adhere to their
own institutional standards or to those of
their donors regarding the interaction, or
non-interaction, with CBAGs. As a matter
of fact, members of staff of a major inter-
national agency in Haiti and of a logistics
supplier for MINUSTAH told me that
their organisations have been simply pay-
ing off gang leaders in order to ensure the
security of their staff when carrying out
projects within the gangs' turf.⁷

Even donors that have established clear
rules on how to deal with CBAGs do not
always live up to their own policies. A case
in point is USAID's Haiti Stabilization Ini-
tiative (HSI). Initially it had been reported
that HSI 'explicitly avoided the option to
"negotiate" directly with so-called gangs
and criminal actors, preferring instead to
focus on undermining their source of le-
gitimacy' (Muggah 2010, S452). However,
I interviewed one former HSI staff mem-
ber who had directly negotiated with
gang leaders, a claim backed by another

former HSI employee in a subsequent interview.⁸ To make matters worse, different sources confirmed that gang members were involved in the selection of beneficiaries for cash-for-work projects, which enabled them to favour their own family members, while other community members had to pay in cash or sex for a place on the list.⁹ This strengthened gang members to the point that Haitians started to complain that 'you have to be a gang member to get a job as supervisor'.¹⁰ In order to avoid such incidents of donor-driven exploitation, donors must make sure that their rules are strictly adhered to by implementing agencies.

In contrast to HSI, the Brazilian NGO Viva Rio works with liaisons who 'speak several languages' — that of the gangs as well as that of the donors, as its director Rubem César Fernandes explained it to me.¹¹ Perhaps in part because of the access that their language ability provides, Viva Rio has thus been able to establish itself as an indispensable intermediary in the Bel Air neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, negotiating between international agencies and Haitian politicians with resources at their disposal on the one side, and local groups who can grant access and credibility on the other side. While still running the risk of bypassing the state and further strengthening certain illiberal local actors, relying on such gatekeepers whose behaviour can be at least partly monitored by implementing agencies is perhaps the least bad option; it certainly is preferable to paying off the next best bandit who demands 'protection fees'.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, the example of USAID's HSI shows that even when donors formulate clear guidelines not to support criminals, these are bound to be ignored by implementing agencies that do not properly understand the local power dynamics. Viva

Rio's use of liaisons, by contrast, is itself a precarious balancing act between the constructive and destructive dimensions of Haiti's CBAGs. While the liaisons have to maintain their ties to criminal actors in order to fulfil their mandate as 'guards of the crossroads' between donors and gangs, their behaviour is easier to control than that of moonlighting protection rackets and their vulnerability to financial incentives offered by criminal third parties can be reduced by a regular salary.¹² Positive results in the Bel Air neighbourhood and many years of successful cooperation with the same liaisons strengthen the impression that this approach is working better than ad hoc payments to gang leaders (Moestue & Muggah 2009).

Donors should closely monitor how projects are implemented and beneficiaries are chosen. This especially applies to short-term quick impact projects, which should ideally be supplanted by more sustainable long-term programmes. Sexual exploitation in exchange for aid is a prevalent malpractice not only among gang members posing as civil society actors, but also with regard to staff of international agencies operating in Haiti, as evidenced by repeated accusations of this nature against MINUSTAH troops (UN OIOS 2015). For donors to reduce the risks of sexual exploitation in cash-for-work schemes, women-led NGOs such as MOIFECs in Cité Soleil should be responsible for the recruitment of female workers and only women should be assigned as team leaders. Moreover, all beneficiaries of quick impact projects and all peacekeepers should receive training on anti-corruption and exploitation on the work site.¹³

Most importantly, it is imperative for donors to ensure that everyone involved in implementing projects firmly sticks to the rule not to simply pay off bandits to gain access to their turf. However, this guideline poses a serious moral dilemma: while the principle of do-no-harm forbids the implementation of projects that risk

AQ1

25 exacerbating exploitation and criminal
 30 violence by financing bandits, is aban-
 35 doning the most vulnerable parts of the
 population not a type of harm as well?
 Alternatively, donors could try to enter
 the strongholds of CBAGs with represent-
 atives of what could be described as Hai-
 ti's 'genuine' civil society, as these actors
 often command considerable authority
 even vis-à-vis criminal groups. While it is
 difficult for external actors to distinguish
 between Haiti's 'civil' and 'uncivil' soci-
 ety, working only with NGOs registered
 with the Ministry of Planification could be
 a first step in this direction.¹⁴

40 A quite different approach could be to
 include CBAGs in community platforms
 as representatives of one section among
 many others — such as business, edu-
 cation, health, culture, and religion. By
 doing so, one could give gang leaders
 the impression that the rule they exer-
 cise over their territory is respected,
 while they are actually sidelined by
 the other actors that dominate deci-
 sion-making within the platforms.¹⁵ Ulti-
 50 mately any recommendation will come
 with trade-offs. Indeed, in the long run,
 only substitutive approaches — such
 as MINUSTAH's Community Violence
 Reduction initiative and efforts to re-
 form the justice system, which is seen
 55 by many as unjust, corrupt, and useless
 (Marcelin 2011, 22f) — can weaken the
 grip of gangs, strengthen the commu-
 nity, and provide alternatives to for-
 mer gang members who are willing to
 60 change.

65 **MORITZ SCHUBERTH** is a PhD can-
 didate in Peace Studies at the Universi-
 ty of Bradford. His research focuses on
 non-state armed groups, peacebuilding,
 statebuilding, and urban violence. He is
 the author of recent articles in *Africa Spec-*
trum, *Conflict, Security & Development*, and
Contemporary Security Policy.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Fiona Macaulay as well as the anonymous reviewers and the editors at JPD for constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

ORCID

Moritz Schuberth <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0924-1911>

Endnotes

¹ I conducted 35 interviews between June and December 2013 with community leaders, religious leaders, current and former gang members, local NGOs, CSOs, peace initiative workers and a number of international agencies working in communities with gang presence. In order to increase the validity of the research, I triangulated the data by carrying out overt observation within informal settlements in Port-au-Prince between June and December 2013.

² Author interview, Pétion-Ville, October 2013.

³ For a discussion of the concept of community-based armed groups, see Schuberth (2015a).

⁴ The substitutive logic entails making CBAGs obsolete by replacing the different functions they fulfil, for instance by reforming the security sector so that communities do not have to rely on vigilantes, or by offering alternative means of income for gang members.

⁵ Author interview, Pétion-Ville, September 2013.

⁶ Author interview, Port-au-Prince, November 2013.

⁷ Author interviews, Haiti, November and December 2013.

⁸ Author interviews with HSI staff, Port-au-Prince, October and November 2013.

⁹ Author interviews, Haiti, September to November 2013.

75 ¹⁰ Author interview with Haitian development worker, Port-au-Prince, November 2013.

¹¹ Author interview, Pétiön-Ville, November 2013.

80 ¹² Author interview, Pétiön-Ville, November 2013.

¹³ Author interview with Monitoring and Evaluation consultant, Pétiön-Ville, October 2013.

85 ¹⁴ Author interview with Community Violence Reduction (CVR) section of MINUSTAH, Port-au-Prince, October 2013.

¹⁵ Author interviews, Haiti, September to November 2013.

90

References

Barnett, M., Kim, H., O'Donnell, M. & Sitea, L., 2007, 'Peacebuilding: What Is in a Name?' in *Global Governance* 13: 1: 35–58.

95 **Dupuy, A.** 2007, *The Prophet and Power: Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the International Community, and Haiti*, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.

5 **Fleurimond, W.K.** 2009, *Haïti de la crise à l'occupation: histoire d'un chaos (2000–2004), Tome I: La chute d'Aristide*, Paris: L'Harmattan.

Glencorse, B. & Ranjbar, A.S. 2015, 'Shaking up Aid Donors Five Years after the Haiti Earthquake' in *Miami Herald*, 9 January: <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/issues-ideas/article5765367.html>.

10 **Hallward, P.** 2007, *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*, London and New York: Verso.

15 **Holly, D.A.** 2011, *De l'État en Haïti*, Paris: L'Harmattan.

Kolbe, A. 2013, 'Revisiting Haiti's Gangs and Organized Violence', HASOW Discussion Paper 4, Rio de Janeiro.

AQ3

Marcelin, L.H. 2011, 'Cooperation, Peace and (Re-)Construction? A Tale from the Shanties' in *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 6: 3: 17–31.

Moestue, H. & Muggah, R. 2009, *Social Integration Ergo Stabilization: Assessing Viva Rio's Security and Development Programme in Port-au-Prince*, Rio de Janeiro: Viva Rio.

Muggah, R. 2010, 'The Effects of Stabilisation on Humanitarian Action in Haiti' *Disasters* 34: : S444–S463.

Schuberth, M. 2014, 'The Impact of Drug Trafficking on Informal Security Actors in Kenya' in *Africa Spectrum* 49: 3: 55–81.

Schuberth, M. 2015a, 'The Challenge of Community-based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs, and Vigilantes' in *Contemporary Security Policy* 36: 2: 296–320.

Schuberth, M. 2015b, 'A Transformation from Political to Criminal Violence? Politics, Organised Crime and the Shifting Functions of Haiti's Urban Armed Groups' in *Conflict, Security & Development* 15: 2: 169–196.

Trouillot, M.-R. 1990, *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*, New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.

UN 2011, 'Report of the United Nations in Haiti 2011', New York, NY: United Nations.

Un, O.I.O.S. 2015, *Evaluation of the Enforcement and Remedial Assistance Efforts for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by the United Nations and Related Personnel in Peacekeeping Operations*, New York, NY: United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services.

AQ2