

DIGNITY Publication Series on  
Torture and Organised Violence  
Praxis Paper

#15

# PSYCHOSOCIAL MODELS FOR PREVENTION AND WELLBEING:

Addressing Authority-Based Violence in Urban Neighbourhoods

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**DIGNITY**  
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AGAINST TORTURE





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Addressing authority-based violence in urban neighbourhoods***

*A praxis paper prepared in collaboration between Balay, CSVR, LAPS and DIGNITY  
for the Global Alliance*

*DIGNITY Publication Series on Torture and Organised Violence No. 15*

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[www.dignityinstitute.org](http://www.dignityinstitute.org)

ISBN online: 9788790878894

# **PSYCHOSOCIAL MODELS FOR PREVENTION AND WELLBEING**

## **ADDRESSING AUTHORITY-BASED VIOLENCE IN URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS**

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## Foreword

Human rights work, and especially work to combat torture and its effects, is often characterized by unhelpful divisions between rehabilitation and prevention. Rehabilitation is the mainly the domain of doctors, psychologists and other highly specialized health professionals. Prevention, on the other hand, is dominated by social scientists and even more by lawyers, who tend to focus on institutional reform and legal frameworks. Much has been achieved over the years in both rehabilitation and prevention. However, this compartmentalization also has adverse effects, especially on the ground where the distinction makes much less sense. Here, state violence and its effects cannot easily be divided into prevention and rehabilitation. Often, state violence is chronic and repetitive. A clear chronology of before, during and after a traumatic event is hard to establish. Hence, there is a need to think out of these professionalized and disciplinary boxes – not to replace or put in doubt the contributions of legal and health interventions but to map out a field between them where much anti-torture work already happens. However, we need to find a better language – a new language – to discuss and reflect on this middle ground between rehabilitation and prevention. This paper is our contribution to this larger advocacy agenda.

The paper is the product of the collaboration between four like-minded organizations: BALAY Rehabilitation Centre in the Philippines, The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa (CSVR), The Liberia Association of Psycho-social Services (LAPS) in Liberia and DIGNITY-Danish Institute Against Torture in Denmark. The collaboration has been formalised under the heading ‘The Global Alliance Against Authority-based Violence’, established in 2014. The basic premise of the Alliance is that around the world and across different contexts, groups of people are deemed ‘victimizable’ by the powers that be – either state or non-state – and hence legitimate targets of order-maintaining – or authority-based – violence. The risk groups might include young, indigent and criminalized men in slum areas, suspects of terrorism, migrants and refugees, sexual minorities or alleged carriers of disease. Their alleged transgressions might be based in a legal framework (like drug peddling) or in moral norms (like sexuality). However, all are likely victims of state or non-state violence. At the time of writing, the Philippine ‘War on Drugs’ provides a chilling example of the legitimacy of violence against such groups.

As a central element in the collaboration, we produce a number of cross-cutting analyses of a variety of different issues while employing different methodologies. All topics emerge from our common discussions on our different contexts, and include linking human rights, development and violence in the city; legal frameworks for policing poor urban neighbourhoods; social work models; community organizing strategies and partnership models.





## Executive summary

This paper argues for the need to develop psychosocial approaches that focus on combining preventative and healing work through community-led interventions with risk groups, their families, their neighbours and wider communities, and finally the authorities that perpetrate violence to maintain order. While highly specialized (legal) prevention and (health-related) rehabilitation practices have contributed to addressing torture and ill-treatment, they also leave gaps, not least when we begin addressing violence employed to preserve local social, legal and moral orders in poor, urban neighbourhoods, what we term state and non-state authority-based violence. This violence is mundane and chronic rather than sudden traumatic eruptions of violence and has often been normalized, even by its victims. Interventions in such contexts demand that we reconsider some of our basic assumptions about how to go about working against torture and ill-treatment. This paper attempts to reconceptualise human rights work in ways that make sense for a focus on authority-based violence in poor, urban neighbourhoods. The paper does not produce a set of best practices and models to be implemented. Rather it sets out our reflections on how to understand the contexts of violence, identify the target groups of interventions and spell out the theories of change relevant in the different contexts.

The patterns of violence must be understood thoroughly. Authority-based violence in context takes many forms but it must arguably conform to certain underlying criteria in order for it to be legitimate: it needs to be construed as self-defence and it must be proportionate to the threat that it purports to counter. This form of violence does not exist in isolation and the paper outlines the relation between different forms of violence including youth violence, intimate violence, communal violence, state violence and revolutionary violence. This analysis of violence enables a reconsideration of target and risk groups. In much anti-torture work, torture is considered to be an extraordinary event. Focusing on the mundane nature of torture and ill-treatment, new risk groups emerge like young men or children in conflict with the law and the community they inhabit; sexual minorities, refugees and migrants or, as has been the case in both South Africa and Liberia, survivors or victims of diseases (HIV or Ebola). These groups, and others like them, are seen as affronts to public morality, sometimes because of their actions and sometimes because of what danger they are seen to represent (crime, drugs, terror, moral decay, threats to livelihoods, economic burdens etc.) and they are vulnerable to attacks from state officials, communities and even their own families who consider them in need of disciplining.

While focusing on legal rights of children, women, migrants and the rights not to be tortured or killed as important benchmarks, legal and health related approaches are not sufficiently responsive to these. Our work demonstrates the importance of relations as both protective and perpetrative. This suggests theories of change which focus on relations between risk groups, their families, the communities in which they live and the local public officials. Importantly, families, communities and public officials might constitute the most important protective networks that risk groups have. However, they might also perpetrate violence or allow it to take place. If families are not willing to protect their children, for instance because of drug abuse, those children are much more at risk of being harmed by community members and by the state.

This entails working with the young people themselves – to deal with the violence perpetrated against them, and often the violence they perpetrate on others, as well as to attend to the relations they have with families, peers, communities and public officials. This might include the following elements:

- a) Improved self-esteem, ability to deal with trauma, healing, awareness of the psychosocial impact of torture among risk groups in general and among victims in particular;
- b) Improved understanding among victims and risk groups of the issues that put them at risk and the ability to deal with the risk constructively;
- c) Improved skills to engage in meaningful social activities in relation to the labour market, education and other social arenas; and
- d) Victims and risk groups that are mobilized and organized for prevention and for engaging in meaningful relationships with authorities, communities and families.

Work with risk groups must be complemented with interventions in relation to families, communities and public officials. In the Global Alliance, not all organizations work equally with all levels. For example, while it is true that LAPS and CSVN target all levels, DIGNITY works more with public officials, community members and volunteers whereas BALAY works more with families and young people. Depending on the context and the organization, the following elements may be relevant:

*The families:*

- a) Improved family cohesion and functioning to establish rehabilitative and healthy relations, including with risk groups and target groups;
- b) Improved social protection and prevention of violence by supporting families in their relationships with neighbours and state authorities; and
- c) Families mobilized to engage in advocacy for non-violent and healthy relationships with state authorities, and in advocacy for state authorities to assume their role as duty bearers.

*The community:*

- a) The community, mapped through stakeholder analysis and treated as potential partners, should be part of an alliance to prevent violence against risk groups based on a solid analysis of violence;
- b) Overall community efficacy improves where there are fewer incidents of violence and conflicts, and where conflicts may be addressed in constructive ways; and
- c) Improved ability to identify possible areas of collaboration and create inclusive communal projects (especially those that promote pro-social behaviours), and to seek support for them both inside and outside the community.

*The state and public officials:*

- a) State authorities could be mapped through stakeholder analysis, and potential partners inside the state could be mobilized based on an analysis of the patterns of violence;
- b) Important state officials need to reflect attitudes towards risk groups that are based on sound understanding of the problems of the risk groups;
- c) State authorities need to assume their responsibilities as duty bearers towards risk groups, families and communities; and
- d) State authorities could engage in welfare activities and programmes in partnerships with families and communities that enable them to participate in society as full citizens.

# Introduction

Across the world in poor, urban neighbourhoods, both state and non-state authorities use violence against those they consider to be in opposition to them, whether to control their constituencies or to impose dominant moral norms. This form of violence is often considered legitimate by authorities, even by those that fall victim to it. Targets might be drug-dealing or drug-using youth, sexual minorities, outsiders or migrants. Sometimes the violence is exercised by state authorities; at other times, it is perpetrated by non-state actors acting on the behest, in the absence or with the consent of the state; and finally, sometimes the violence is directed against the state. What unites these different forms of violence is a claim to uphold order, discipline, justice and the rights of those who allege they represent the many by targeting groups of so-called transgressors, and for this reason we can say it is authority-based. Importantly, different groups might constitute the object of the discipline depending on which authorities are in control locally. While such violence happens in rural areas as well, authority-based violence in the cities takes on a specific nature different from rural areas. As several commentators have noted (Bjarneson and Jensen, 2014; Rodgers, 2014; World Bank, 2011, Arias, 2006), urban violence is characterized by a range of actors and forms and by a high degree of conflict between different violent networks and actors, including vigilante groups, neighbourhoods, and different competing political actors and state officials.

Apart from being different from rural violence, this form of urban violence is quite different from how we often understand state violence as for instance torture and ill-treatment – as extreme, spectacular forms of violence. Rather, the violence we are addressing is commonplace, taken for granted; it happens every day; it is often considered legitimate by the majority of the parties, and it often escapes human rights interventions as they are usually focused on legislative reform and training state institutions on how to uphold human rights. For instance, what puts youth or sexual minorities at risk is not the ignorance of authorities of what they can and cannot do; it is what they feel legitimated to do and what communities demand that they do, including the kinds of violence that police are sometimes expected to use against criminals by the general population (Hornberger, 2014; Jensen 2014)<sup>1</sup>. The targeted groups are usually at risk because of the practices they engage in (stealing or rioting), what they symbolize (moral corruption), how they look (sexual minorities), or where they are (strangers, migrants). But more than anything they are at risk because no one is willing to protect them, as they are seen to transgress moral boundaries or not be “worthy victims”. When they are hurt, few people think they deserve treatment or care.

**A different approach to addressing authority-based urban violence is therefore necessary.**

There is a tendency within the field of prevention and rehabilitation to divide the healing and prevention and to equate psychosocial approaches only to rehabilitation. This means that the potential of the psychosocial field to influence prevention is not explored. Currently in the field of prevention, efforts focus mainly on institutional reform and training. In contexts of urban violence, the differentiation between prevention and rehabilitation is not useful in creating a sustainable

1 The issue of definitions is complicated. We use the terms authority-based violence here to stress the need to begin from local practices of authority rather than strict legal norms (Kyed, 2012). In many cases, the forms of violence registered here will indeed be carried out by the state. While they may appear legitimate from a local point of view, they will often be in contravention of the Convention Against Torture, at least the part of the convention that concerns cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. While state officials will not always carry out the violence, they will often, in the words of the convention, consent or acquiesce, and hence be in contravention of the convention. For further discussion of definitions in a South African context, see Jensen, 2014 and Dissel, Jensen and Roberts, 2009.

approach to addressing authority-based violence. The Global Alliance aims to advocate for an integrated approach towards working with healing and prevention within the urban violence field through using the psychosocial approach. We outline a psychosocial approach which focuses on combining preventative and healing work through community-led interventions with risk groups, the neighbourhoods in which they live, their families and the authorities that see fit to punish them to maintain order. This approach complements legal approaches to prevention. Instead of reproducing an approach that assumes a dichotomy between victims (as rights holders) and perpetrators (e.g. as duty bearers), we focus on relationships between victims and risk groups and their surroundings in their families and communities and in relation to authorities. We also understand that in contexts of urban violence it can be difficult to differentiate between victims and perpetrators: in many instances the face of the victim and perpetrator is the same (e.g. someone who is perceived as a perpetrator of interpersonal violence may be a victim of police torture).

The purpose of this paper is to explore such a psychosocial, community-led approach. We do not describe in detail what the different interventions in the four contexts of Denmark, Philippines, Liberia and South Africa comprise. Rather, we discuss principles and reflect on how to understand the violence that we aim to prevent and the effects we aim to address.

Community-led approaches to violence prevention and healing have often been heralded as a panacea for social ills including poverty and violence. The assumption is that only through a community-led approach are we able to reach the countless numbers of poor people where they are. Furthermore, community-led approaches are associated with notions of empowerment and ownership. While we are sympathetic to these arguments, community-led interventions have been marred by a number of shortcomings: lack of monitoring, lack of clarity of goals, and target groups that are ill-defined. They have also been credited with being effective even in situations where their impact might be limited. This paper aims to reverse some of these shortcomings by presenting a clear description and analysis of the context of authority-based violence, including understanding who the risk groups are, outlining possible theories of change with indicators for the psychosocial model, and sketching the main national, regional and global advocacy agendas. Hence, the paper explores four different contexts of authority-based violence, each illustrated by one of our four cases. Next, it details who ends up at risk in the four contexts. As we shall see, who that is might shift drastically whilst still looking surprisingly similar. Finally, we explore how we understand processes of change – what do we hypothesize will happen when we do something?

The paper begins with a critical analysis on how we conceptually understand the violence to be addressed and prevented by the psychosocial approach. It then explores possible elements of a community-led psychosocial intervention, including theories of change. We do not attempt to create one monolithic approach to be followed by all. Rather, the paper aims to enable reflections about psychosocial interventions addressing violence in poor, urban neighbourhoods. The paper is based on the work carried out in four countries: Denmark, Philippines, Liberia and South Africa by respectively DIGNITY, Balay, LAPS and Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV). Thus, it represents a unique experience that transcends the global south and the global north to produce insights that might be relevant for community-led interventions across the world and for thinking of healing, functioning and prevention within one analytical and practical framework.

## Understanding contexts of violence

When aiming to prevent violence and address its implications for risk groups, two of the first questions to ask are what kind of violence we are addressing and how different forms of violence relate to each other. Although our account is not exhaustive, we identify the following forms of violence as relevant to the four different project intervention sites:

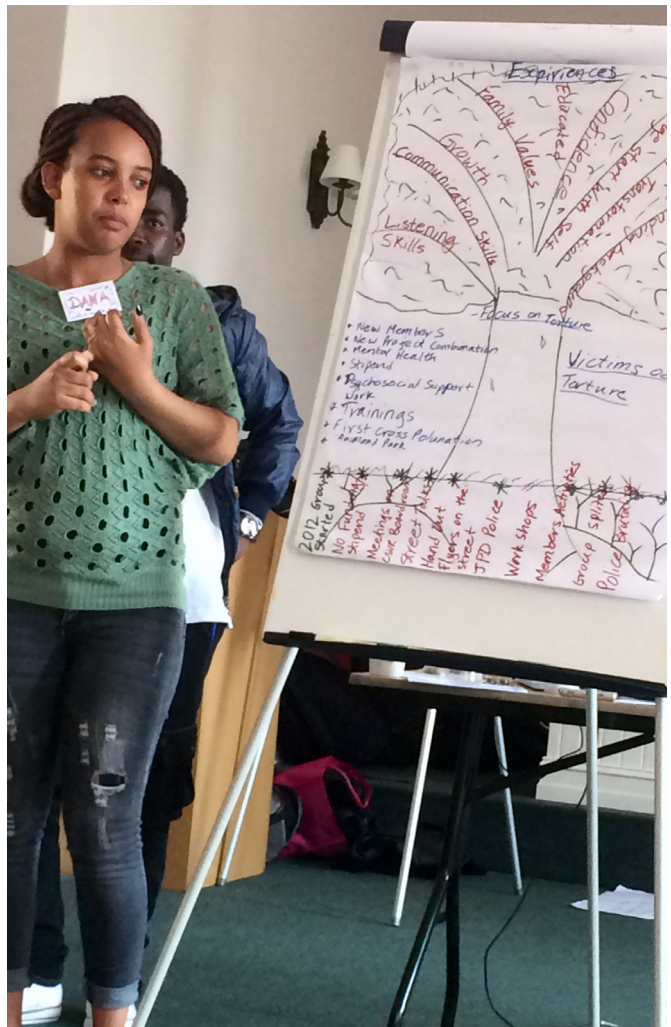
- 1) Youth violence including gang violence, criminality, school violence and violence related to drug consumption;
- 2) Collective violence including vigilantism, xenophobic attacks, hate crimes, service delivery related violence, protest against forced evictions and violence against victims of disease (e.g. HIV and Ebola). Collective violence is usually legitimized by referring to some kind of moral community that protects local morals or a moral order;
- 3) Intimate and interpersonal violence including child abuse, domestic violence, and conflicts between neighbours and community members related to alcohol consumption, debts, resources, land or humiliations. In other contexts, these are called 'social fabric' crimes;
- 4) State violence involving teachers, police, military, health staff, prison staff, politicians and welfare officials;
- 5) Extractive violence involving maintaining and creating economic resources including strike breakers, mining guards and landlords; and
- 6) Revolutionary violence including regime-toppling activities locally or globally.

These forms of violence exist in different ways and to different degrees in all four countries. It serves no purpose to go through all forms of violence in the four different places, but a few examples might illustrate the point. Collective violence, a term that derives very much from the South African context (Von Holdt et al, 2013) exists in all four contexts. In South Africa it appears in forms such as violent service delivery protests, vigilante activities, and xenophobic attacks on foreigners. In Liberia, the primary targets of violence were young ex-combatants (often talked about as the motorcycle boys). Furthermore, in the wake of the Ebola crisis, new targets were those that were seen to bring in disease and death. In the intervention sites in the Philippines, collective violence often takes the form of vigilante activities but in other places around the country, collective violence might relate to revolutionary, extractive and state violence. In Danish housing estates young people, or people who are seen as somehow deviant from a social norm of a strong group within the estate, might be disciplined in ways that are often referred to by mainstream Danish media as being from a 'parallel society' (Johansen, 2013). Likewise, state violence exists in all four locations. However, there are huge differences in how it is perceived and how it relates to the law. Violence perpetrated by the Danish state is most often legitimized in laws involving incarceration and penetration into families. In the Philippines, violence is often associated with corrupt police practices.

## Models for understanding violence

These remarks prompt questions in relation to violence which are central to the psychosocial model for prevention and wellbeing in poor urban neighbourhoods, including the fundamental one of why we should intervene at all to reduce violence. We will briefly consider these questions through anthropological, trauma and public health approaches to violence. Let us begin with the anthropological approach. Firstly, when is violence considered violent and by whom? While this question might seem self-evident, it is actually not. Most of the people we work with – especially poor, young people – do not consider the violence they experience as violence because it is what it is – just normal life. In the Philippines, the term ‘Ok lang’ or ‘just ok’ captures the sense of violence that is to be expected and hence not ‘real violence’, even if victims are hurt or humiliated by it (Jensen, Hapal and Modvig, 2013). Torture is a category of violence that is most often associated with specific events or regimes like the apartheid regime in South Africa or the martial law period in the Philippines. Few people are willing talk about the current, everyday violence perpetrated by police as relevant to the Convention Against Torture. In these instances, what defines violence is who the victim is. Violence perpetrated by the police against activists is perceived as real violence, yet the same violence, when perpetrated against young men in trouble with the law is not considered violence. Likewise, the repressive powers of the Danish state are rarely spoken about as violence.

Violence seems to be relevant only in relation to excess, as the French philosopher Etienne Balibar (1998) suggests. His analysis closely follows the legal requirements of jus bellum or just war. Under these requirements, violence can be legitimate only if it is perpetrated in self-defence and if it is proportionate to the threat. This model is implicitly in operation in almost all discourses on violence. Take for instance the war on terror, which is legitimized as pre-emptive strikes against a threat that will materialize in the future. Even attacks like these draw on the idea of self-defence, as do many preventative criminal justice interventions. The discussions on sentencing are an example of how



proportionality is a constant element – how long should a criminal stay in prison for a certain crime? These remarks also suggest that while the principle for the use of legitimate violence refers to self-defence and to proportionality, this is a fault line which is up for constant discussion and contestation by those involved. Hence, while American military personnel might consider drone attacks legitimate, residents in the tribal areas of Pakistan clearly do not agree. The same can be said about raids in South African townships. While the police might conduct such raids with self-defence in mind – protecting South Africa against a drug menace – many township residents do not agree (Jensen, 2008). Hence, when violence is legitimate or not is constantly negotiated and contested.

The second question to be considered is What is the purpose of violence? On a concrete level, the answer to this question is that it depends on the context. However, we can explore it at a more abstract level. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup> suggested a useful distinction between law-preserving and law-making violence. In Benjamin's analysis, violence is not destructive of law and order; it is constitutive for law and order. Hence, we should not only be concerned with what violence destroys but also what kind of sociality and community it enables and produces. The idea that violence produces sociality might be counter-intuitive for many. However, consider vigilante violence and how ambivalent it is; while it destroys human bodies and lives, it also reconfirms and reproduces the existence of a proclaimed moral community at the same time as it condones violence in ways that arguably eat away at a social fabric shared by all. In that sense, it is exactly what Benjamin would call 'law-preserving violence'. While it is not based on formal or constitutional law, it relies on another, more localized 'law' which is no less effective in the specific context. If we follow this thought, we might say that many of the forms of collective violence mentioned above fall into the category of 'law-preserving violence', even if the violent practices are in contravention of formal law. An example here could be the violence visited upon sexual minorities, which is against the South African Constitution but legitimized by moral and religious codes (Jensen, 2005). In all the cases, collective violence is legitimized as the defence of a moral community; that is, that group of people who are able to assert their authority as the community. This suggests that the concept of community is also contested. 'The community' then becomes an entity that depends on the ability and power to define it and maintain it, often through 'law-preserving violence'. State violence clearly falls under the category of law-preserving violence. We could argue that many forms of domestic and interpersonal violence would fall under the category of law-preserving violence, as domestic violence often relates to the preservation of for instance patriarchal or generational power structures. To a very large extent, the violence here described through the concept of law-preserving violence is what we refer to in the project as 'authority-based violence', that is, violence that preserves what is locally considered a moral community or a community of morally upstanding residents.

On the other hand, according to Benjamin's analysis, law-making violence relates to war between nations, where the conqueror would change the legal status quo. As revolutionary violence also aims to make law by toppling a legal regime, it can be considered in this category. In each of the four sites, there are traces of revolutionary violence – the rebellion in Liberia, the Maoist and Moro insurgency in the Philippines, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and to some extent the so-called foreign fighters in Denmark travelling to Syria to topple a regime there. It can also be applied to terrorist actions in Denmark and elsewhere in the Western world, since they aim to topple what is considered 'Western dominance'. While it might be stretching the imagination, we could also discuss some parts of youth violence as law-making violence, as gang narratives (focused around gangster-rap and the American rapper Tupac) often portray gang violence as resistance to society (Jensen and Rodgers, 2009).

2 <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/10/11/notes-thought-walter-benjamin-critique-violence/>



The last example, however, may indicate the limit of Benjamin's concepts, as youth violence – and indeed other forms of violence – clearly cannot be explained purely as either law-making or law-preserving violence. Other explanatory approaches are necessary to focus usefully on violence in dysfunctional families and communities, as well as on structural forms of violence like unemployment and social marginalization; that is, an ecological and public health approach. The book 'Youth Violence in South Africa' is a well-argued example of the ecological model (Ward, van der Merve and Dawes, 2012). Here the focus is less on the productive than the destructive side of violence. This clearly also finds resonance in Galtung and Lederach's suggestions that while conflict is inevitable, violence can be prevented (Lederach, 1998; Galtung, 1996).

The third question is: What drives this violence? The public health and trauma approaches assist in answering this question. The public health approach looks at violence from the perspective of risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors are those which place individuals at risk of either perpetrating violence or being victims of violence and protective factors are those that protect one from perpetrating violence or being victimized. In instances where risk factors outweigh protective factors, an individual can be considered at risk of either perpetrating violence or suffering it. A lot of work has been done within the field of public health to identify both protective and risk factors for violence perpetration. They range from individual to family to neighbourhood to societal. Some examples are biological issues (e.g. males being at a higher risk than females), familial (parental especially maternal neglect and rejection as a risk factor), neighbourhood social attitudes (a neighbourhood with pro-social values as a protective factor and a neighbourhood with antisocial values as a risk factor), and at meso-scale societal factors such as inequality are found to be a risk factor for violence perpetration. While these help us to better understand what drives general violence, there has been limited work on understanding what drives authority-based violence. Most of the time within the public health model, the same people who are at risk of perpetrating violence on others are also found to be at risk of victimization by the authorities. There has been limited work in understanding this interface between victimhood and perpetration. Furthermore, there has been limited work done to understand the risk and protective factors for the perpetration of authority-based violence. Some of the risk factors that have been identified in the four communities included legitimization and condoning of the violence by the communities.

The public health model further identifies trauma as a risk factor for perpetration of violence. Gabarino (2013) specifically looks at type 3 trauma (where there has been severe childhood neglect and violence). Garbarino argues that behind every perpetrator there is an untreated traumatized child, and that violence prevention therefore has to deal with these untreated childhood wounds. Whilst this concept can be useful in helping to understand some of the individual psychological drivers for individuals who perpetrate authority-based violence, it does not help in understanding the collective and/or institutional nature of this violence. Concepts from the emerging field of collective trauma maybe helpful in explaining this. Collective trauma suggest that it is possible for collectives such as neighbourhoods, institutions (police etc), and societies at large to be traumatized (Bloom, 1996). It suggests that a collective can have a psyche of its own, and consequently, just as with an individual's trauma, if a collective trauma goes untreated or unresolved it will manifest itself in several ways. One way for a collective to deal with unbearable and traumatic memories is by acting them out. This is a way of trying to relieve and undo the trauma (Bloom, 1996). According to Bloom in these instances history repeats itself. This is seen in instances like violent service delivery protests in South Africa, where some of the experience of apartheid are repeated, e.g. singing of struggle songs, the 'toyi-toyi' dance and the type of interaction between the protesters and the police, where the police often use the same violent crowd control mechanisms that were used during apartheid

(Mogapi, 2011). This is also seen in countries with unresolved histories of violent repressive states where state institutions such as the police once used violence to deal with ‘activists’ or people the state considered ‘terrorist’. Even if such countries now have democratic states, the institutions that used violence during the oppression still use similar tactics to address ‘at risk’ groups today. In these countries, traditional human rights approaches such as pro-human rights laws, policies and practices have not been effective in transforming these institutions. We argue that part of the reason for the lack of success of these traditional human rights approaches is that they do not deal with the collective trauma that exists in these institutions. The memories linked with the collective trauma are transferred from one generation of the police to the next, and the narratives used against activists in the past are transposed onto the ‘problematic individuals’ in the present. Psychosocially informed violence prevention thus involves addressing this institutional trauma and not just training on human rights.

In the account above, we introduce three different models for understanding violence. In the public health model violence is akin to a disease that needs to be cured and prevented. In the trauma model, violence is a symptom and there is a need to address both the symptom and the underlying causes. Finally, in the more anthropological approach, implicitly inspired by Benjamin, violence is constitutive and always there. It is not a by-product of unfortunate structures but central to law itself. All three models – violence as destructive, as symptom and as productive – are relevant for interventions we discuss, as we shall see below, and not necessarily contradictory. We can see this if we consider the question: Why should we intervene in different forms of violence?



## Why intervene in relation to violence?

If we accept that both modes of explanation are relevant – i.e. that violence is both a disease and constitutive to society – the next question is why we should intervene and try to prevent it at all. Let us briefly go through some of the different forms of violence identified above that seem most relevant for our work in poor urban neighbourhoods: youth violence, interpersonal violence, collective violence and state violence.

### *Youth violence should be prevented because:*

- 1) It harms and it hurts. The territoriality of much youth violence prevents the full life and movement of young people and residents. It prevents the building of relationships, community and the full realization of potential;
- 2) It has the potential to escalate from interpersonal violence to collective violence, even into regional wars and international criminal networks, as we have seen in many of the wars in West Africa and Liberia where ex-combatants have participated in international migration, mercenary activities and drug trading (Vigh, 2016);
- 3) Youth violence invites other forms of violence – especially collective and state violence – to counter its effects, for example vigilante activities, wars on gangs and counterinsurgency measures;
- 4) Preventing youth violence might break the cycle of violence – the culture, the psyche, the history – that sees violence perpetuate itself from one generation to the next;
- 5) Youth violence adds to and legitimizes the marginalization of youth and reproduces its 'victimizability'. In that sense, youth violence is a predictor of other forms of violence;
- 6) Preventing youth violence reduces the potential for police corruption;
- 7) Preventing youth violence may work to improve relationships between children and parents and between young people and the general neighbourhood; and
- 8) Youth violence clogs public health and criminal justice systems.

### *Interpersonal violence (intimate, intergenerational and gender violence) should be prevented because:*

- 1) Addressing it may address the unequal and vertical relations of power in intimate and interpersonal spheres as a central part of cultures that perpetuate violence locally – gender (men above women), intergenerational (old before young) and communal (ethnic, racial, national, etc.);
- 2) Preventing it may prevent escalations into collective and state violence;
- 3) Interpersonal violence is a proxy and a predictor for violence in a society as it often feeds and enables other forms of violence, as when a child is punished and carries this violence with him or her into their own practice;

- 4) Interpersonal violence can be transmitted unconsciously in situations of domestic violence, wherein the violent behaviour of a parent surfaces in domestic situations of the children once they are adults
- 5) Individual human rights violations can create collective trauma, which can, in turn, fuel additional human rights violations and other forms of violence.

*Collective violence should be addressed because:*

- 1) It hurts and harms and destroys the livelihood and social fabric of the most vulnerable groups of society – those who are seen as a threat to a given moral community;
- 2) Addressing collective violence may address the vertical lines of power of the moral community that perpetuates the violence. This may take the form of xenophobic violence, intergenerational violence, hate crimes and violence against victims of disease; and
- 3) Collective violence often escalates into state violence and intra-communal struggle.

*State violence (carried out by teachers, prison guards, police and other state officials) should be prevented because:*

- 1) It harms and destroys the lives and livelihood of the poor and wrecks individual and communal trust;
- 2) It undermines the belief in justice and the rule of law;
- 3) It is intimately connected to violent extortionist and informal state practices;
- 4) It escalates into collective violence and often propels youth violence, even if they are obliged by law to protect the dignity of people;
- 5) It prevents meaningful change from occurring as people are frightened to engage in civil action; and
- 6) It perpetuates mistrust between citizens and state actors, which is crucial for effective violence prevention and strengthening of democracies.

## Victims, and risk and target groups

From the lists of violence and reasons for intervening above we may deduce risk groups of authority-based violence, as well as target groups for intervention. In our work we distinguish between five different target groups for our psychosocial approach to addressing authority-based violence. They comprise victims of violence, risk groups of violence, families of victims and risk groups, the communities in which they live and institutions wielding authority (state or non-state) in the given context. In different ways these five groups populate the field in which authority-based violence is a central problem. While they all inhabit the field, the psychosocial approach distinguishes between victims and risk groups on the one side and families, communities and authorities on the other.

Victims and risk groups comprise those groups that in different ways are seen as an affront or threat to a locally endorsed moral community. As we can see from above, these groups might be constituted by young people, migrants, suspected terrorists, sexual minorities, victims of disease, or any other group that is marginalized by the moral community. Who they are must be determined in the specific context. However, for all our four contexts, young people (mostly men but also women) are generally understood as both a risk and at risk. Often authorities – state and non-state – perceive them as inherently criminal or violent and out of control; as members of gangs and drug abusers. These perceptions legitimize intervention and often disciplinary or retributive violence against young people. While these perceptions to some extent have little relation to the reality of young people, young people are objectively at risk and often their own practices invite retribution and disciplinary action. Thus we may usefully refer to young people as victim-perpetrators where it is to some extent their own practices that invite violence. Hence, protection must include working both with the perceptions of society and the practices of young people. These remarks suggest that while we can establish a first distinction between victims and risk groups of authority-based violence, both are central target groups for intervention. Any project must describe in detail both victim and risk groups in relation to the structures of violence. Finally, when it comes to interventions it is crucial to distinguish between victims who have actually experienced violence, ill-treatment and even



torture on the one hand and risk groups on the other. While risk groups should be engaged with as potential future victims, there are health (physical and psychological) issues specific to victims that need to be dealt with differently than risk groups.

A second order of target groups can also be deduced from the above. They comprise families, neighbourhoods (communities) and state officials. These groups are characterized by being both potential perpetrators of violence – either as direct perpetrators or as condoning the law-preserving violence against risk groups – and potential critical support structures in preventing violence and addressing its consequences. Collective violence will often take its point of departure in a moral community and state violence will often find its legitimacy in the real or perceived threat posed by risk groups. While families do not necessarily engage in direct collective violence against their own members, they may endorse it for disciplinary reasons. Hence, parents in the four contexts have been known to ask authorities to discipline their children or simply to accept it. Families may even constitute the single most violent space for risk groups. The disciplining may also involve violence to preserve domestic and generational power structures. Intervention should therefore be focused on working with families, communities and state officials as a way to prevent violence. As with victims and risk groups, projects must understand and describe the relationship between this second-order target group and authority-based violence. Finally, authorities often exact severe forms of both physical and psychological violence to an extent that it falls under the purview of the Convention Against Torture. However, in the case of families, communities and authorities they may also turn out to be critical alliance partners in preventing authority-based violence and addressing its consequences.

While we advocate for a psychosocial approach that focuses on victims and risk groups, interventions may begin from and focus on all actors within the field, be they victims and risk groups or families, communities and authorities.

## **Theory of change – focusing on relationships**

A central focus of the psychosocial approach is on relationships – in families, in communities and with the state. If we make our point of departure the above comments on the contexts of violence and perpetrators and victims, we note that relationships pervade our discussions. Risk groups and victims are put at risk due to the relationships – as moral affronts, societal dangers and as people in need of disciplining – they have with their families, communities and the state. Similarly, we note that good relationships with the same groups and actors may be supportive and protective. Take one of the CSVR partners in Kagiso, who explained that he and his group needed to work on their image in the community. This suggests an awareness of what puts him and his compatriots at risk – namely problematic relationships. Asked about his relationship with the police, he went on to explain that in fact the relationships with family and community were more important than the one with the police because a good relationship with the former would protect him in relation to the latter. This does not mean that authorities are not important; rather, it suggests that protection can begin in the intimate family and community relations. This also informs much of what Balay does in Bagong Silang, namely working on parental skills and relations between parents and their children. Protection does not have to start with institutional reform of the police. It can begin from below, through a concerted effort towards enabling victims and risk groups to engage in meaningful and productive relationships and helping families, communities and authorities support and nurture such relationships. Good relationships are also useful in facilitating healing from trauma. Many of the traumatic experiences are as a result of being dehumanized and

disrespected by another during oppressive regimes, and this is mostly in the hands of the state. Continued dehumanization and disrespect can work as triggers for re-enactment of the trauma through violence. Strong, caring relationships that promote human dignity can counteract the effects of trauma and thus contribute to violence prevention.

In this way, our analysis is borne out in the experiences we have from working in poor, urban neighbourhoods. While the approach and the thinking behind it does emanate out of local engagements, this paper will not spell out in detail what should be done. That is subject to contextual analysis. Rather, we spell out central principles that may inspire and connect to different approaches to community-led interventions.

The overarching Theory of Change covering all psychosocial interventions in relation to the field of authority-based violence can be stated as follows: If we work with well thought-out and stronger psychosocial approaches to urban violence supporting and producing positive relations, then we will be able to prevent authority-based violence and tackle its consequences. This theory of change needs to be broken up into its constitutive parts in relation to victims, risk groups, families, communities and authorities. Below we detail theories of change and outcomes for each of the five target groups.

## **Victims/at risk groups: Facilitate healing, social inclusion and psychological awareness**

The closer one gets to victims the more central the health and healing approaches become. They are important for rehabilitative purposes, not least the ability of victims to engage in meaningful relationships. Attempts by victims of violence to engage in social relationships may be mired in withdrawal and fear. This can damage relationships, even with their own families. In addition, health approaches cannot stand alone, even in relation to healing. It is imperative to enable victims and risk groups to engage in social, cultural and economic activities. Furthermore, empowering, organizing and shifting attitudes and cultures can be seen as a move towards violence prevention. Empowerment may also nurture advocacy as victims and risk groups find platforms to tell their own stories. This lifts the psychosocial approaches beyond service delivery into advocacy.

*While contextually determined, interventions should focus on creating the following outcomes:*

- a) Improved self-esteem, ability to deal with trauma, healing, awareness of the psychosocial impact of torture among risk groups in general and among victims in particular;
- b) Improved understanding among victims and risk groups of the issues that put them at risk and the ability to deal with the risk constructively;
- c) Improved skills to engage in meaningful social activities in relation to the labour market, education and other social arenas; and
- d) Victims and risk groups that are mobilized and organized for prevention and for engaging in meaningful relationships with authorities, communities and families.

## **Families: Promoting families as support structures rather than as perpetrators or risk groups**

Families can be at risk; they can suffer the collective impact of violence against their members; they can be perpetrators of (interpersonal and intimate) violence and they can also be crucial partners in preventing violence and creating an enabling environment. Families in the poor, urban neighbourhoods we work in are often subjected to excruciating pressure from poverty, marginalization and exploitation. On top of this, they are often caught between their own expectations, the expectations of the surrounding community and the state on the one hand, and the practices that they (including for instance young men) need to engage in to survive. Parents, for instance, are often caught between their responsibility to discipline their sons and their sons' problematic behaviour. Navigating between these different demands often results in interpersonal violence and abuse. Hence, psychosocial interventions must assist families in improved functioning to enable them to engage productively with both surroundings and their own family members who are targeted violently by authorities. Assisting families to become the best possible families on their own terms has preventative as well as rehabilitative effects. Having a stronger and more supportive family facilitates healing for victims and reduces the risk for target groups of being exposed to authority-based violence. This approach also potentially works towards social prevention, as organizing families into associations or different kinds of networks increases their ability to engage with state authorities to push for the prevention of authority-based violence.

*While outcomes are contextually determined, they should include the following considerations:*

- a) Improved family cohesion and functioning to establish rehabilitative and healthy relations, including with risk groups and target groups;
- b) Improved social protection and prevention of violence by supporting families in their relationships with neighbours and state authorities; and
- c) Families mobilized to engage in advocacy for non-violent and healthy relationships with state authorities, and in advocacy for state authorities to assume their role as duty bearers.

## **Community: Promoting communities as support structures rather than as perpetrators**

As is evident in our remarks above, we cannot assume that communities are inherently peaceful and/or cohesive. In many ways, struggles over the right to define the (moral) community of the righteous are at the heart of communal and collective violence. The politics around the definition of community feeds into perpetuating violence. Hence, there is a need to explore how the use of violence is instrumental in producing and maintaining communities and to understand what might contribute to less violence. Again, the focus of the psychosocial approach must be on enabling and supporting positive relationships



between risk groups, families and the wider community. A central part of this work revolves around the realization that communities potentially condone violence and perpetuate violent values. Research also indicates that pro-social attitudes in communities are a protective factor against violence whilst those that promote antisocial attitudes can be a risk factor for violence. Thus developing social cohesion around activities that promote social values is a critical component of violence prevention. Hence, a psychosocial approach must work with shifting attitudes to transform communal settings into structures that facilitate the prevention of violence and support for victims. Another important insight from our work is that community work does not necessarily relate to an entire community, but focuses on groups within the community. As it is often unrealistic to imagine harmonious and non-conflictual communities, our work must focus on establishing and supporting a critical mass within a community that can advance violence prevention.

*While outcomes are contextually determined, they should include the following considerations:*

- a) A community needs to be mapped through stakeholder analysis and potential partners should be part of an alliance to prevent violence against risk groups;
- b) Overall community efficacy improves where there are fewer incidents of violence and conflicts, and where conflicts may be addressed in constructive ways; and
- c) Improved ability to identify possible areas of collaboration and create inclusive communal projects (especially those that promote pro-social behaviours), and to seek support for them both inside and outside the community.

## **State authorities: Perpetrators or duty bearers**

As our remarks above suggest, it is imperative to factor in state and non-state authorities for any psychosocial approach. State authorities are especially important as they often command considerable resources to suppress the state's own population and support its wellbeing as a duty bearer. Human rights approaches will often target state authorities to conduct institutional reform, to train and capacitate its workers and, if nothing else works, ultimately to shame them into compliance, assuming their role as duty bearers. While this is a central approach to working with state authorities, especially at a policy level – and one that each of the four partners in the Global Alliance also employs – the psychosocial model for prevention of violence and treating its consequences must work at a different, more relational level. The state is present in each of our four contexts, from the almost omnipresent Danish welfare state to the highly challenged Liberian state. But whatever the strength of the local state, interventions must be aimed at supporting the practices and institutions that might be partners in preventing violence. Such interventions must be based on sound stakeholder analysis and an intimate knowledge of the workings of the local state, including the officials working there. It is about assisting local state institutions to become the best possible partners. This entails working with authorities to explore and shift the norms, mind-sets and cultures that perpetuate violence. It is also about finding ways to work with the local institutions of the state to create and maintain supportive institutions that

promote people's dignity rather than strip them of it. This is a critical component of violence prevention as the promotion of people's dignity has been indicated as a key component of violence prevention in the psychosocial field. Psychosocial studies indicate that humiliation and the stripping of one's dignity and self-worth is at the core of violence in urban settings. In contexts such as South Africa, Liberia and the Philippines, where there has been a history of oppressive regimes with government institutions feeding into dehumanizing experiences, the reconstruction of state-citizen relations to a level that promotes mutual respect and human dignity is thus a crucial component of violence prevention. Psychosocial studies in the field of trauma indicate that if individuals have unresolved histories of being violated, a current experience that reminds them of the trauma could serve as a trigger, leading to them acting out their pain through violence. In other words, interactions with hostile, uncaring and violent state institutions can set in motion a replay of unresolved historical violence. Thus functional, respectful government institutions in these contexts can be a powerful vehicle of both healing and prevention.

*While outcomes are contextually determined, they should include the following considerations:*

- a) State authorities should be mapped through stakeholder analysis and potential partners inside the state mobilized to be part of an alliance with communities and families to prevent violence against risk groups;
- b) Important state officials need to reflect attitudes towards risk groups that are based on sound understanding of the problems of the risk groups rather than stereotypical notions of danger and moral contamination said to be embodied in the risk groups;
- c) State authorities should assume their responsibilities as duty bearers towards risk groups, families and communities as part of and integral to their order-maintaining activities rather than placing them in opposition to order; and
- d) State authorities should engage in welfare activities and programmes in partnerships with families and communities, and support them in practices that ease the pressure on them and enable them to participate in society as full citizens.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Based on work in poor urban neighbourhoods by BALAY, DIGNITY, CSVN and LAPS, in this paper we have argued for the need to develop psychosocial approaches which focus on combining preventative and healing work through community-led interventions with risk groups, the communities in which they live, their families and the authorities that perpetrate violence to maintain order. While highly specialized (legal) prevention and (health-related) rehabilitation practices have contributed to addressing torture and ill-treatment, they also leave gaps, not least when we begin addressing what we have termed authority-based violence, that is, violence employed to preserve local social, legal and moral orders in poor, urban neighbourhoods. This violence is often carried out by the state but in many contexts, non-state forms of authority assume the responsibility to maintain and preserve order often in complex relations to the state. It is mundane and chronic rather than sudden traumatic

eruptions of violence and has often been normalized, even by its victims. Interventions in such contexts demand that we reconsider some of our basic assumptions about how to go about working against torture and ill-treatment. This paper is a first step for us – and might inspire others working in similar conditions – to reconceptualise our work in ways that make sense for a focus on authority-based violence in poor, urban neighbourhoods. The paper does not – cannot – produce a set of best practices and models to be implemented. Rather it sets out our reflections on how to understand the contexts of violence, the target groups of interventions and the theories of change relevant in the different contexts. However, throughout the project, several projects and approaches are tested and will be described in subsequent publications.

Authority-based violence in context takes many forms but it must arguably conform to certain underlying criteria in order for it to be legitimate: it needs to be construed as self-defence and it must be proportionate to the threat that it purports to counter. However, this form of violence does not exist in isolation and the paper outlined the relation between different forms of violence including youth violence, intimate violence, communal violence, state violence and revolutionary violence. Furthermore, we explored how these relations produced conditions conducive for authority-based violence. Central to this understanding is the ability to combine different approaches to violence as productive of social relations and as destructive of life and limb.

This analysis of violence is absolutely central and, we argue, often forgotten or replaced by assumptions of violence as destructive only, or as violations of legal norms. It also enables a reconsideration of target and risk groups. In much anti-torture work, torture is considered to be an extraordinary event (Jensen, Kelly et al, 2017). Once we realize the mundane nature of much torture and ill-treatment, new risk groups emerge like young men or children in conflict with the law and the community they inhabit; sexual minorities, refugees and migrants or, as has been the case in both South Africa and Liberia, survivors or victims of diseases (HIV or Ebola). These groups, and others like them, are seen as affronts to public morality, sometimes because of their actions and sometimes because of a danger they are seen to represent (crime, drugs, terror, moral decay, threats to livelihoods, etc.). While they are targeted violently by public officials, in ways that may constitute torture and ill-treatment, communities and even their own families who consider them in need of disciplining also use and condone violence against them.

- e) While focusing on legal rights of children, women, migrants and the rights not to be tortured or killed as important benchmarks, it is not enough to simply to heal the wounds of victims or to lecture officials of their duties. Our work demonstrates the crucial importance of relations as both protective and perpetrative. This insight suggests a theory of change which focuses on relations between risk groups, their families, the communities in which they live and the local public officials. Importantly, families, communities and public officials might constitute the most important protective networks that risk groups have. However, they might also perpetrate violence or allow it to take place. If families are not willing to protect their children, for instance because of drug abuse, they are much more at risk of being harmed by community members and by the state. This entails working with the young people themselves – to deal with the violence perpetrated against them, and often the violence they perpetrate on others and to attend to the relations they have with families, communities and public officials. This might include the following elements:

- a. Improved self-esteem, ability to deal with trauma, healing, awareness of the psychosocial impact of torture among risk groups in general and among victims in particular;
- b. Improved understanding among victims and risk groups of the issues that put them at risk and the ability to deal with the risk constructively;
- c. Improved skills to engage in meaningful social activities in relation to the labour market, education and other social arenas; and
- d. Victims and at-risk groups who are mobilized and organized for prevention and for engaging in meaningful relationships with authorities, communities and families.



Work with risk groups must be complemented with interventions in relation to families, communities and public officials. In the Global Alliance, not all organizations work equally with all levels. For example, DIGNITY works more with public officials, community members and voluntaries, whereas BALAY works more with families and young people. Depending on the context and the organization, the following elements may be relevant:

### *The families:*

- a) Improved family cohesion and functioning to establish rehabilitative and healthy relations, including with risk groups and target groups;
- b) Improved social protection and prevention of violence by supporting families in their relationships with neighbours and state authorities; and
- c) Families mobilized to engage in advocacy for non-violent and healthy relationships with state authorities, and in advocacy for state authorities to assume their role as duty bearers.

### *The community:*

- a) The relevant community mapped through stakeholder analysis and potential partners should be part of an alliance to prevent violence against risk groups;
- b) Improved community efficacy, where there are fewer incidents of violence and conflicts, and where conflicts may be addressed in constructive ways; and
- c) Improved ability to identify possible areas of collaboration and create inclusive communal projects (especially those that promote pro-social behaviours), and to seek support for them both inside and outside the community.

### *The state and public officials:*

- a) State authorities are mapped through stakeholder analysis and potential partners inside the state mobilized;
- b) Important state officials should reflect attitudes towards risk groups that are based on sound understanding of the problems of the risk groups;
- c) State authorities should assume their responsibilities as duty bearers towards risk groups, families and communities; and
- d) State authorities should engage in welfare activities and programmes in partnerships with families and communities and enable them to participate in society as full citizens.

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The Global Alliance is a strategic alliance established in 2014 between likeminded civil society organisations working towards building a global alliance of communities against torture and urban violence. We conduct country-based, as well as collaborative intervention and knowledge generating projects across partners, focusing on countering authority-based violence in poor urban neighbourhoods.

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[www.csvr.org.za](http://www.csvr.org.za)



Balay Rehabilitation Center, the Philippines;  
[www.balayph.net](http://www.balayph.net)



LAPS – Liberia Association of Psychosocial Services, Liberia;  
[www.lapsliberia.com](http://www.lapsliberia.com)



DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture, Denmark;  
[www.dignityinstitute.org](http://www.dignityinstitute.org)