

Civil Society's Solution: Citizens Transforming the Honduran National Police

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Worth the Risk

One gray and rainy morning just months after I had become a member of the Honduran Police Reform Commission, I was leaving my house with my teenaged son when my bodyguard picked up a note that had been left on our doorstep. As my son climbed into the car, he showed me the note. It was a little wet, but I could still read it. It was a death threat.

It said something like, “We found you, we know that you live here, and you’re going to pay.”

I lived in Nueva Suyapa, a high-risk neighborhood in the south of Tegucigalpa, but I knew that the threat was unlikely to have come from a petty criminal in my neighborhood. It could have come from a corrupt police officer or a powerful drug trafficker affected by the reform. The police obviously had the intelligence at their disposal, and it would not have been difficult for them to find me.

A light bulb went off. I did not understand until that moment the impact of what I was doing and the level of risk that I was taking. The risk was no longer just a possibility. It was a reality. They had found me.

I took the piece of paper and tried to hide it from my son. I did not want to expose him to the danger, but he saw it. Obviously as a teenager, he was shocked and started to ask questions. I was shocked too.

There were a lot of questions going through my mind. Who had found me? Was it a common criminal, a drug trafficker, or someone with a lot of power? What is going to happen today? Are they going to come after my family?

In that moment I reassessed my situation. What am I doing? Is it the right thing or not? What is more important, transforming the police or protecting my family? On the one hand, continuing with the police reform could mean exposing my family and colleagues to great risk. On other hand, I believed that as a citizen, the problem of police corruption affected me and it was my responsibility to be a part of the search for solutions. I also believed that as a Christian, God called me to bravely do justice for the most vulnerable of society.

In the end, my family and colleagues encouraged me to keep going. Although I knew I needed to take precautionary measures, I also knew that I had to continue with the work to transform the National Police.

The Emblematic Case

This police reform began in 2016 after the New York Times published a story that implicated top Honduran police officials in high-profile assassinations and organized crime. The state responded to the scandal by creating the Special Commission for the Reform and Transformation of the National Police, and the Honduran president named three primary members to the commission. One represented the government, one represented civil society, and one represented the church. The commission invited three advisors to accompany them, and I was appointed as one of the advisors.

The reform did not come about quickly. In reality, it was the result of four years of struggle, advocacy, investigation, and evidence.

In 2011, I joined those advocating for the reform along with my organization, the Association for a More Just Society (AJS), an organization of brave Christians dedicated to making the Honduran government function properly for the good of the nation's most vulnerable. For four years we positioned ourselves to be one of the strongest groups in civil society.

At that point in time, Honduras had become the nation with the highest homicide rate in the world. Previously, AJS had not been very involved in the sensitive issue of public security, but that year an event occurred that moved us all. Police officers assassinated the son of the president of the National Autonomous University of Honduras, Julieta Castellanos.

Her son Rafael Vargas and his friend Carlos David Pineda were on their way home one night from a party around 2 am when a police car tried to pull them over near the Tegucigalpa airport. The young men did not follow the orders, possibly out of fear, considering that police were known for carjacking vehicles or, at the very least, demanding bribes. The police chased the young men and fired shots at their vehicle, injuring Rafael and his friend. Rafael stopped the car and the police grabbed the young men and threw them in the bed of the police car. The officers then shot the boys to death. Later, they carried the bodies outside of the city and threw them into a ditch.

They were found the next morning.

Rafael's mother, Julieta, was an opinion leader and a sociologist with great influence in Honduras. In that moment, we were not directly connected with her, but the murder of her son provoked a strong reaction at AJS and in civil society.

The murder confirmed what the country already knew. The police were linked with crime.

Advocacy, Evidence, and Leadership

Once evidence was released that the police had murdered the two young men, we started to feel the weight of Julieta's pain to lose a child at the hand of the government officials who were meant to protect him. We thought about her suffering and the suffering of so many others in Honduras and we began to ask, "We have to do something, what can we do?"

Meanwhile, there were other groups like the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras, World Vision, and Caritas (a Catholic NGO) that were experiencing the same weight and pain.

It was in that moment that we all decided to join forces and begin a dialogue as friends, as Christians and as Hondurans that were suffering.

We sought out Julieta, and after insisting various times, we met with her to plant the idea of how we could help, how we could support her in her pain, and how we could do justice together.

We created the Alliance for Peace and Justice (APJ), an alliance of organizations and citizens committed to social auditing, advocacy and facilitating citizen participation to make the Honduran justice and security systems more efficient and effective. The Alliance's main objective was to take advantage of this emblematic case to reposition the issue of police corruption and the reality that Honduras, unfortunately, could not progress in the fight against violence and crime without confronting corruption.

At the same time, we started to meet with individuals from the public sector including government employees and congress representatives. We advocated for changing the police laws and creating a commission to reform the police. We conducted reliable investigations and reports that evidenced police corruption.

Through advocacy and the credibility of the investigations, the alliance became a fighting force in society and one of the groups with the strongest presence in denouncing wrongs and demanding change.

The advocacy was marked by the social legitimacy of the civil society leaders involved. For example, we had the president of the university, the country director of World Vision, the Federation of Non-Government Organizations for the Development of Honduras, the Evangelical Fellowship and Caritas. All were strongly involved in development work.

Opinion surveys in Honduras say that the most credible institutions in the country are the church and civil society. Our combination of the two made for an influential group, and for that reason, public figures listened to us.

We also obtained citizen support. The people of the country began to identify with people like Julieta and Omar Rivera, who later became the director of advocacy at AJS and a member of the Police Reform Commission. Society began to identify with the cause, and that made APJ a group with very strong media presence.

I believe this is what provoked the government to open its doors and be willing to talk, but it was not easy. We had to pressure people and make demands. The process lasted four years until we managed to nail down concrete results.

It was because of this growing influence and persistent advocacy, that when a report from the New York Times was published in 2016, the government was forced to take action and decided to

create the Police Reform Commission. In that moment, the most important decision for us was deciding whether or not we would be involved. In the end, the decision was yes; we had to do it.

In the Interest of Civil Society

The Commission was made up of seven people working together, three from the political sphere, and four from civil society. The first three were the Minister of Security plus two prominent Hondurans, Vilma Morales, the former president of the Supreme Court, and German Leitzelar, a top Honduran labor lawyer and former congress representative, as an advisor.

The Commission also had two primary members that were civil society leaders and members of APJ. They were Alberto Solórzano, a prominent pastor and president of the Evangelical Fellowship, and Omar Rivera. These men invited Jorge Machado, another prominent pastor and executive director of the Evangelical Fellowship, and me to join the Commission as advisors.

We were all committed to conduct the reform transparently and with public accountability. For two years we worked to investigate the background of each member of the police from the top, with the most high-ranking generals, to the bottom, with patrol officers.

The presence of civil society representatives on the Commission ensured that reforms were based on evidence and best practices, not fear and political negotiations. The Commission was clear that it could not trust the same police that were under investigation to do any of the technical work. This opened up the opportunity for civil society, through our presence on the Commission, to insert our own priorities into the discussion and to be directly involved in designing new laws and policies. It kept the process outside of the hands of politicians and police, who had a personal interest in the outcome of the reform, and placed it in the hands of civil society, who the people could trust to keep their best interests at heart.

There were many individuals and groups involved with the Commission. For example, although she was not a member of the Commission, Julieta Castellanos was active in advising the Commission. AJS was involved with legal and technical support. The American Embassy and Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) helped with the vetting process and legal advice. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the USAID lent their support to projects for the modernization of the police force, such as the transformation of the Police Academy.

In the end, the spirit and philosophy of the Commission and the reforms, including the new police laws, represented the interests of civil society. For example, the idea of developing community police – police who respect human rights – was very close to our values as civil society, and it became a part of the law.

Rubbing Elbows with the Corrupt

We confronted various challenges in the reform process including navigating differing opinions about the police. Corruption is seen as generalized in the public eye. For that reason, there were

sectors of society that believed that the police force was too corrupt to be reformed. They thought we should disband the police completely and create an entirely new police force.

However, starting from scratch would have created a lot of risk. For instance, it could have strengthened the militarization of public security. We had to act cautiously and open up a dialogue with the police even though we knew that they could be corrupt. We also had to dialogue with the police to generate certain level of empathy that would allow them to view the Commission as a group of people who wanted to transform the institution, not destroy it.

The process of transformation was painful. We had to remove the bad but also empower the good. We not only had to identify the good police, but we also had to build relationships to know whom we could trust. The bad police reacted, and they reacted violently. They looked for ways to attack us, to report us, to campaign against us, and even to kill us. However, in the process we identified police who loved their institution and who wanted to turn it into a positive force.

We on the Commission were committed to fearlessly confronting the bad, but we also were not afraid to sit down with honest police officers or to receive criticism from those who asked, “Why would you talk with the police?”

The reform completely transformed the institutional culture of the National Police. It was a hierarchical institution that had been greatly influenced by the military. In Honduran history, the police have been closely linked to the military spirit and philosophy. On the other hand, we were civilians. For the police, a civilian coming in and assuming a position of authority is difficult to swallow, and in the beginning, we came up against a lot of resistance. It was not necessarily expressed verbally, but it was evident in the actions of the police.

Corruption in the police was much greater than what we imagined. The problem was so big that there were many times when we felt like we did not have the power to confront it. In those moments, the social and spiritual support that we received helped us greatly.

The Responsibility of Civil Society

Previously in Honduras, the issue of security was so delicate and complex that only the State and government authorities dared to get involved. Civil society played a role in denouncing issues, but it was very superficial. We generally did not involve ourselves further because it could have been difficult and dangerous.

In the light of that, I believe that one of the paradigm shifts that has occurred in Honduras through the work of the Commission is that now security is seen as everyone’s problem. Insecurity and violence affect all Hondurans – rich, poor, government, and non-government alike – and therefore all of us have to be involved in the search for solutions.

This shift has garnered a lot of criticism and questioning because people are not used to that level of citizen participation. The idea of people from civil society getting involved in security reform, or

even working with Congress to define extradition law, a law against money laundering, or a law for the management of organized crime, was far outside of the norm.

These are difficult issues, but in the end, as victims of violence, we too have a stake. We now have the opportunity to sit down at the discussion table and channel the opinions of other Hondurans who do not have that chance. It's not just civil society that benefits. Decision makers also have the opportunity to sit at the table with subject experts from civil society, informing and improving their work. That is one of the most important things in the Honduran model of change, a model that is not very common in the world. Unofficial groups become directly involved in the search for solutions.

From Theory to Practice

Since our appointment in 2016, the Police Reform Commission has evaluated over 10,000 police officers and fired 5,067. We have seen 7,288 new police officers integrated into the police force through an internationally competitive education program. Police are now trained to become specialized in their fields, and they are equipped with modern tools in technology to perform their jobs well, such as GPS, radar guns and new vehicles. Though there is still work to be done to build a strong police force that can stand against corruption in the future, the transformation thus far has been evident and significant.

I believe that this is one of the greatest things that I personally have been involved with. After years of living in one of Honduras' most violent neighborhoods, I knew what it was like to be close to crime, but this is the first time I felt it targeting me so directly. With the intention of doing something good, I was gaining enemies and those enemies were not just fired police officers. They were criminal groups for whom the police worked. I was most afraid of the drug traffickers because I was used to reading and seeing movies about the way that the mafia acts and how they attack people.

Throughout my work with the Commission, one of my biggest fears was that something would happen to my family. I decided to get involved in this work, but my wife and kids did not make that decision. However, they were also put in a position of risk. There were many times in which I was afraid, not just for myself but for my family and the AJS team. People had come to work at AJS with big dreams, and I could have been exposing their lives to danger.

I had to confront my fears one day when the State sent me an intelligence report that said, "You are at an extraordinarily high level of risk, and you have to modify many things including your living situation, your security, and the security of your family."

To have an authority figure tell me that I was at risk was a shock.

I thought, "Oh no, they're following me. They'll do this and that to me. This is going to happen."

At that point in time, my Christianity was very abstract, but I was confronting a reality that led me to reevaluate my faith.

I asked myself over and over again, “Am I a Christian? What does being a Christian imply?”

As a Christian, I believe that God calls everyone to do justice for the vulnerable. As a member of civil society in Honduras, I believe that the problems of my country affect me, and I should, therefore, be part of the solution.

I put that theory to the test, and continued the work to transform the Honduran National Police.

The level of transformation we have accomplished in just two years is a testament to the power and influence that civil society can have. We researched the issue, brought our evidence and ideas before the key decision-makers of Honduras, and tirelessly advocated for reform. We gained the respect of the authorities, and when crisis came, they turned to us to implement our ideas. Our advocacy and our work on the commission gave civil society a voice and a significant role in developments working towards peace.

I believe that this model for change will continue to work to transform Honduras into a more just society, and that it has the ability to impact change in other countries around the world. Civil society has a strong presence. If people work together to confront even the most pressing issues, they can influence change.