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Third-Generation Gangs and Criminal Insurgency in Latin America

Hal Brands

In May 2006, a previously obscure gang known as the First Capital Command (PCC) threw Sao Paulo into chaos. Over a period of five days, the PCC attacked hundreds of public buildings and private businesses, murdered policemen and civilians, and brought life in South America's largest city to a standstill. The scope of the violence clearly overwhelmed state and local authorities, and order was restored only after negotiations with the gang's leader, a man named Marcola. All told, the incident demonstrated that the PCC—rather than the government—effectively ruled large parts of Sao Paulo. As one Brazilian security official put it, “The sad reality is that the state is now the prisoner of the PCC.”¹

Roughly a year and a half earlier, another Latin American gang staged an even more shocking display of its power and ruthlessness. In December 2004, members of *Mara Salvatrucha*, or MS-13, stopped a bus in Chamalecon, Honduras, and proceeded to massacre 28 passengers. As Ana Arana relates, the killings were as notable for their apparent randomness as for their gruesomeness. “The slaughter had nothing to do with the identities of the people onboard; it was meant as a protest and a warning against the government's crackdown on gang activities in the country.”²

Both the December 2004 incident in Honduras and the May 2006 attacks in Sao Paulo are part of a broader trend in Latin America: the rise of sophisticated, internationally-oriented, and extremely violent gangs. These “third-generation gangs,” as they are often called, participate in the drug trade and myriad other illicit economies, and use violence and corruption to undermine the state. They increasingly straddle the line between crime and insurgency, and constitute a dire and growing threat to internal stability in the region. This phenomenon is most pronounced—and most remarked upon—in Central America, but it has spread well beyond the isthmus and now plagues countries from Mexico to Brazil.³

¹ Stephanie Hanson, “Brazil's Powerful Prison Gang,” Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, September 26, 2006, www.cfr.org/publication/11542/; Samuel Logan, “Riots Reveal Organized Crime Power in Brazil,” *International Relations and Security Network*, May 18, 2006.

² Ana Arana, “How the Street Gangs Took Central America,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005, pp. 98-99.

³ On gangs in Central America, see Federico Brevé, “The Maras: A Menace to the Americas,” *Military Review*, July 2007, pp. 91-92; Thomas Bruneau, “The Maras and National Security in Central America,” *Strategic Insights*, May 2005, www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2005/May/bruneauMay05.pdf; Clare Ribando Seelke, “Gangs in Central America,” Congressional Research Service Report, October 17, 2008, passim.

This essay offers an analytical framework for understanding third-generation gangs and the challenge they represent. It begins by examining the sources and characteristics of the gang problem in Latin America. It then considers the implications of gang activity for democratic government and internal stability in the region. It concludes with suggestions as to how the United States and its Latin American partners might go about addressing these threats.

Third-Generation Gangs and the Regional Context

Analysts generally divide gangs into three categories: first-generation, second-generation, and third-generation. First-generation gangs, which make up the largest of the three categories, are street gangs. They focus mainly on protecting their turf—normally no more than a few city blocks—from equally parochial rivals. Their criminal activities—assault, robbery, and petty extortion—are small-scale and opportunistic. First-generation gangs rarely have more than a few dozen members, and their organizational structures are horizontal rather than hierarchical. Second-generation gangs are larger and more complex (and thus less commonplace) than first-generation gangs. Frequently organized around illicit economies like drug trafficking, second-generation gangs operate across several cities or even internationally. They have links to transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) like drug cartels, and feature a more centralized leadership and a more hierarchical structure than first-generation gangs. Their violence is systematic and meant to protect or expand market share.

Third-generation gangs are sophisticated TCOs in their own right. They are complex, hierarchical organizations that operate according to a division of labor. While they participate in many of the same activities as first- and second-generation gangs, they operate on a grander scale. Third-generation gangs usually operate in more than one country, or at the very least have international alliances with other criminal groups. They control crucial nodes in a variety of illicit global networks: drug smuggling, arms dealing, money laundering, kidnapping, human trafficking, and others. Third-generation gangs are the rarest of the lot, occupying the highest part of a pyramidal gang hierarchy.

Most important, third-generation gangs stand astride the line separating crime and insurgency. These organizations go to such lengths to protect their highly lucrative economic activities that they end up undermining the authority and legitimacy of the state. They murder police officers, soldiers, and other authorities that try to interfere with their business; they infiltrate, corrupt, or otherwise weaken government institutions; they use intense, calculated violence to carve out geographic zones where they can dominate the population and operate completely free of state control. For the most part, third-generation gangs do this for profit rather than ideology,⁴ but their actions are nonetheless deeply corrosive to state sovereignty, licit economic activity, and public security. In other words, while third-generation gangs often lack the explicit political agenda generally associated with insurgencies, their activities thus have many of the same political effects as an insurgency.⁵

⁴ As various authors have pointed out, a few groups—most notably the PCC—do profess an ideology based on economic redistribution and social justice. Given the fact that these gangs use brutal violence in dealing with the poor as well as the rich, however, it seems likely that such statements are merely justifications for criminal activity.

⁵ For a discussion of gang typologies, see John P. Sullivan, “Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels, and Netwarriors,” *Transnational Organized Crime* 3 (1997), pp. 95-108; idem,

Throughout the developing world, the post-Cold War era has seen a dramatic rise in both the prevalence and prominence of third-generation gangs. As Moisés Naím relates in his book, *Illicit*, criminal organizations have exploited some of the most important international trends of the past 20 years to achieve unprecedented wealth and influence. Economic and financial integration, innovations in communications technology, the rising number of weak and failed states, a thriving global arms trade, and the general erosion of national borders: These trends have created a “smuggler’s nirvana,” giving impetus to both massively profitable illicit commerce and the violence that inevitably attends it.⁶

Latin America has proven particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon. The region has porous borders, numerous illegal economic flows, and is awash with guns—all factors conducive to organized crime. Corruption is endemic and state institutions are weak, giving criminal organizations significant leeway to operate. Widespread poverty and social alienation ensure the gangs a steady supply of young recruits; densely packed urban slums give them near-impenetrable havens in which to operate. Finally, in Central America especially, the deportation of tens of thousands of criminals from the United States over the past 15 years has effectively swamped law enforcement systems in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala.⁷

As a result, Latin America is now home to some of the world’s most fearsome third-generation gangs. Central American *maras* such as MS-13 and M-18—rival gangs whose adherents are frequently marked by their elaborate tattoos—have tens of thousands of members spread across countries from El Salvador to Canada.⁸ In Brazil, the PCC is one of several gangs that dominate the slums and prisons of the country’s major cities. The PCC, which began as a prisoners’ rights gang before diversifying its criminal portfolio, now has perhaps 100,000 members and maintains alliances with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and mafia groups in Paraguay and Argentina.⁹ In Mexico, the chaos surrounding the drug trade has given rise to groups like *Los Zetas*. Though the Zetas are a relatively small organization (they are estimated to have between 100-200 members, perhaps slightly more), they are now considered by U.S. officials to be “the most technologically advanced, sophisticated and violent” of the drug-related organizations active in Mexico.¹⁰ The group has terrorized its opponents while carving out lucrative drug

“Transnational Gangs: The Impact of Third Generation Gangs in Central America,” *Air & Space Power Journal* (Spanish Edition), Second Trimester 2008, airpower.maxwell.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2008/2tri08/sullivan_eng.htm.

⁶ Quoted in Moisés Naím, *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers, and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), p. 36.

⁷ A good summary of the conditions conducive to third-generation gang activity can be found in Max Manwaring, *A Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty: Gangs and Other Illicit Transnational Criminal Organizations in Central America, El Salvador, Mexico, Jamaica, and Brazil* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), *passim*; also Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Tackling Transnational Crime: Adapting U.S. National Security Policy,” July 18, 2008, www.brookings.edu/articles/2008/spring_latina_merica_felbabbrown.aspx?p=1.

⁸ See Christopher Araujo, “Central America’s Increasing Gang Problem,” Council on Hemispheric Affairs Report, July 31, 2007, www.coha.org/2007/07/central-america%E2%80%99s-increasing-gang-problem-a-comforting-handshake-needed-as-much-as-a-tough-fist-to-fight-crime-epidemic/.

⁹ On the PCC’s international ties, see Logan, “Riots Reveal Organized Crime Power in Brazil.”

¹⁰ National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2008*, www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs25/25921/25921p.pdf; George Grayson, “Los Zetas: The Ruthless Army Spawned by a Mexican Drug Cartel,” May 2008, www.fpri.org/enotes/200805.grayson.loszetas.html.

trafficking and distribution networks and cultivating relations with gangs in Central American and the United States. The list goes on; additional third-generation gangs can be found in countries throughout the region.

Characteristics and Methods

While third-generation gangs in Latin America vary dramatically in terms of size, history, and composition, all four of the groups discussed above—as well as a number of their counterparts—share several key characteristics. For one thing, their operations run the gamut of illegal activities. All of these groups derive significant income from drug trafficking and distribution, but they are also involved in a range of other enterprises—human smuggling, kidnapping, extortion, contract killings, arms dealing, and simple robbery. These various activities, in turn, require the gangs to dispose of vast sums of dirty cash, and they have therefore become key participants in the money laundering industry.

Latin American gangs can manage this broad portfolio because they are, in many cases, extremely well organized. These groups are no mere street gangs; they are complex organizations layered both vertically and horizontally. In MS-13, for instance, a top tier of transnational leaders provides direction to *clica* (local branch) bosses, who oversee several divisions responsible for enforcement, recruiting, propaganda, intelligence, finance, arms procurement, and other specific activities.¹¹ The Zetas operate according to a multi-tiered structure in which *La Dirección* (The Command) oversees the activities of relatively decentralized cells composed, variously, of teenage lookouts, intelligence-gathering prostitutes, former special-forces soldiers, and electronic surveillance specialists.¹² Brazilian gangs are just as complex; the PCC has a business and legal division in addition to cells tasked with performing many of the activities described above.¹³

As these descriptions indicate, most Latin American gangs boast a high degree of technological sophistication. The Zetas, for instance, employ computer experts to track the cell-phone signatures of their rivals and penetrate police and military communications channels. More generally, these groups use commercially available technology to coordinate strategy and operations. Central American *maras* have reportedly used satellite and cell phones to order assassinations, and Marcola, the leader of the PCC, directed the May 2006 attacks via cell phone despite being in solitary confinement in a maximum-security Brazilian prison. More audacious still, the PCC regularly holds conference calls that connect up to two-dozen leaders in various Brazilian prisons. Latin American gangs have also discovered the uses of the internet, employing web pages and chat rooms for recruiting and propaganda purposes.¹⁴

¹¹ Steven Boraz and Thomas Bruneau, “Are the Maras Overwhelming Governments in Central America?” *Military Review*, November-December 2006, p. 37.

¹² Grayson, “Los Zetas”; Colleen W. Cook, “Mexico’s Drug Cartels,” Congressional Research Service Report, October 16, 2007, p. 8.

¹³ Andrew Downie, “Brazil Gang Takes on State,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 2006; Marcelo Soares, “Inmates Unleash a Torrent of Violence on Brazilian City,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 2006.

¹⁴ Grayson, “Los Zetas”; U.S. Agency for International Development, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment: Annex 2: Guatemala Profile*, April 2006, www.usaid.gov/gt/docs/guatemala_profile.pdf; Logan, “Riots Reveal Organized Crime Power in Brazil”; Joao de Barros, “Brazil’s Real Overlords,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 25, 2007; Celinda Franco, “The MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs: Emerging Transnational Gang Threats?”

Above all, these gangs are extremely violent. In Mexico, Central America, and South America alike, third-generation gangs use a panoply of deadly weapons—heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, improvised explosive devices, sniper rifles, even crude armored vehicles—and strike with astounding brazenness and savagery. The Zetas and their Mexican competitors have assassinated hundreds of officials at all levels of government (including the chief of federal police) and frequently torture, behead, or immolate their victims. MS-13 and M-18 are just as vicious; they leave decapitated bodies in the streets and have in several cases massacred busloads of innocent travelers.¹⁵

This violence is sometimes described as senseless or random, but in fact it serves an essential political purpose. Waves of violence, whether directed at the authorities or at civilians, invariably come in response to government crackdowns on gang activity, and are coupled with warnings that future meddling will elicit even more violence. What the gangs are doing, in essence, is seeking to intimidate the state and the citizenry into submission and win a free hand in pursuing their lucrative business dealings.¹⁶

Across the region, gangs like the PCC, the *maras*, and the Zetas have taken this approach to the logical next step: using violence to carve out geographic areas where the government is essentially powerless to intervene. In cities in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Brazil, gang violence has become so intense that the authorities have simply retreated from these areas, surrendering them to the gangs. The gangs then use these areas as free zones for drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and other illegal activities, and actually begin to exert their own perverse form of governance over the population. They collect “taxes” through extortion, and lay down a code of conduct for residents of the zone. Those who comply receive protection as well as limited social services like food, toys, and clothing; those who don’t are entitled only to brutal punishment. Just as the Latin American insurgents of the 1970s and 1980s had their “liberated zones,” the gangs now have their own domains where they—rather than the government—can dominate the population and impose a degree of “order.”¹⁷

Violence is not the only method used to undermine state institutions; corruption also plays an integral role. Latin American criminals have long used the formula of *plata o plomo* (money or bullets) to corrupt government officials; third-generation gangs have become masters of this strategy. Confronted with the choice between an easy payout and a gruesome death, law enforcement personnel frequently opt for the former, and each week seemingly brings news of another gang-related corruption scandal. In Mexico, groups like the Zetas have bribed tens of

Congressional Research Service Report, January 30, 2008, pp. 8-9; Samuel Logan, “MS-13 Organization and U.S. Response,” *Seguridad & democracia*, February 2007, www.samuellogan.com/publications/MS-13-Organization-and-US-Response.pdf.

¹⁵ USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment: Annex 2: Guatemala Profile*; “Mexican Government Sends 6500 Troops to State Scarred by Drug Violence, Beheadings” *International Herald Tribune*, December 11, 2006; “Es provocación cabeza arrojada en alcaldía de Acapulco,” *La Crónica*, June 30, 2006; Adam Elkus, “Gangs, Terrorists, and Trade,” *Foreign Policy in Focus Report*, April 12, 2007, <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4144>.

¹⁶ See Arana, “How the Street Gangs Took Central America,” pp. 98-99.

¹⁷ William Langewiesche, “City of Fear,” *Vanity Fair*, April 2007, www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/04/langewiesche200704; Telephone interview conducted by the author with a DEA official, July 23, 2008; Manwaring, *Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty*, pp. 27-29.

thousands of officials, from beat cops to authorities at the highest levels of the attorney general's office, in return for information and protection. In Central America, numerous government ministries have fallen prey to corruption. The PCC actually prepares young recruits for civil service exams, funds political candidates, and thereby infiltrates its loyalists into strategic positions within government. The gangs are not just battering the state from without; they are also weakening it from within in.¹⁸

Implications for Internal Stability and Democratic Governance

The effects of gang activity have been devastating for Latin America. Corruption is more pervasive than ever, and murder rates are alarmingly high. Drug and gang-related violence took nearly 6000 lives in Mexico in 2008, and Latin America has the highest murder rates in the world.¹⁹ The region's youth murder rate—a key indicator of gang violence—was more than twice as high as that of any other region last year.²⁰ Swaths of territory in numerous countries have been rendered virtually lawless, public security has declined precipitously, and a pervasive sense of fear has spread among the population in parts of Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, and other countries. “We are prisoners in our own homes,” says one Mexican woman.²¹

Just as troubling, gang activity has driven down economic activity across the region. Intense internal violence scares off domestic and foreign investment, imposes high costs (such as paying protection money or hiring private security guards) on legitimate businesses, and forces governments to devote scarce resources to security rather than economic development or poverty alleviation. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, the economic costs of violence in Latin America may be as much as 14.2 percent of gross domestic product.²²

The cumulative result of all this has been to create a serious legitimacy deficit for democratic governments in Latin America. The fact that many governments cannot protect their citizens, control large areas of their own territory, or maintain relatively trustworthy police and judicial institutions has led to intense popular disillusion in the region. Confidence in government and democracy is down region-wide, sparking well-grounded concerns that Latin America's young democracies are being hollowed out from within. “In many countries,” reports the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), “high levels of crime provide the strongest justification

¹⁸ Jose de Cordoba and David Luhnow, “Mexican Officials Allege Drug Cartel Infiltrated Attorney General's Office,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 28, 2008; Colleen Cook, “Mexico's Drug Cartels,” Congressional Research Service Report, February 25, 2008, p. 9; “Drug Charges for Guatemala Tsar,” *BBC News*, November 16, 2005; N.C. Aizenman, “Endurance of Corruption Shakes Guatemala Anew,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 2006; Luis Esteban G. Manrique, “A Parallel Power: Organised Crime in Latin America,” *Real Instituto Elcano de Estudios Internacionales y Estratégicos*, September 28, 2006, www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/1049.asp.

¹⁹ Marc Lacey, “Killings in Drug War in Mexico Double in '08,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2008; “Homicide Rates Highest in Southern Africa, Central and South America,” *UN News Centre*, 30 December 2008, www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=29435&Cr=unodc&Cr1.

²⁰ “Latin America Tops Murder Tables,” *BBC News*, November 26, 2008, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7750054.stm.

²¹ George Grayson, “Surge Two,” Center for Immigration Studies Report, October 27, 2008, www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=3841DDDC-CF92-43EC-BB94-E1C071D31220.

²² Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2006), p. 20.

in people's minds for a military coup."²³ Along these lines, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Brazil have all seen disaffected citizens and off-duty members of the security forces engage in vigilante violence against gang members in a manner reminiscent of the "death squads" of the Cold War. In other cases, residents of poor urban slums have simply thrown up their hands and welcomed the semblance of order that the gangs provide.²⁴ These trends simply reinforce the negative trends at work in Latin America, and hardly bode well for democratic stability in the region.

Policy Implications

There is no easy solution to the gang problem. Latin American gangs are often better armed than the police, and, due to past human rights violations, involving the military in domestic security matters raises a host of difficult political questions in many countries. Latin American authorities have also struggled with the fact that the transnational nature of gang activity means that no one country can grapple with this issue alone. At the structural level, moreover, the success of the gangs reflects a number of factors deeply embedded in regional politics and society. Endemic corruption and weak judicial institutions facilitate gang activities and vitiate the effectiveness of government crackdowns; rampant poverty and a lack of economic opportunity ensure a steady stream of recruits into the lower levels of these organizations.

These issues have so far frustrated many of the anti-gang initiatives deployed by Latin American governments. These initiatives—the counter-drug strikes launched by the Calderon government in Mexico, the *mano dura* (iron fist) programs in Central America, high-profile sweeps of gang-dominated slums in Brazil—have incarcerated tens of thousands of suspected gang members without providing any lasting solution to this challenge. In certain respects, *mano dura* programs are actually counterproductive, as locking up first-time offenders—the people who start at the lowest levels of these organizations but may eventually rise to the top—simply forces them to rely on their gang affiliations to survive in prison and thereby hardens gang loyalties.²⁵

What is therefore necessary is a strategy that enhances internal security capabilities in Latin America while also addressing the underlying issues that fuel gang activity. On the former count, Latin American governments will need U.S. assistance in bolstering the forces of order. This means not simply upgrading the tactical capabilities of the police and other domestic security institutions. It also means helping Latin American countries develop intelligence sharing procedures and asset forfeiture laws, implement effective anti-gang legislation and asset forfeiture laws, and interdict cross-border drug and weapons flows. The United States and its Latin American partners have already put a number of programs in place to address these issues—interdiction programs in Central America, the Eastern Pacific, and the Caribbean, an international MS-13 task force, the Merida counter-drug initiative, and the Transnational Anti-

²³ Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, p. 9; see also Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Tackling Transnational Crime."

²⁴ See Langewiesche, "City of Fear"; Ginger Thompson, "Shuttling Between Nations, Latino Gang Confound the Law," *New York Times*, September 26, 2004; Freedom House, "Freedom in the World—El Salvador (2007)," www.freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cfm?year=2007&country=7171&pf.

²⁵ See Clare Ribando Seelke, "Anti-Gang Efforts in Central America: Moving Beyond *Mano Dura*?" Report for the *Maras, Security and Development in Central America Task Force*, April 10, 2007, www6.miami.edu/hemispheric-policy/SeelkeTaskForcePaper.pdf, esp. pp. 3-4.

Gang Unit, to name a few. Going forward, U.S. and Latin American officials must soberly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these programs so as to build upon successful initiatives and address potential shortfalls.²⁶

On the latter count, Washington should assist in the formulation of initiatives meant to combat corruption, rehabilitate young gang members and first-time offenders, and ease the poverty and alienation that makes gang membership such an attractive option for young Latin Americans. Given the stubbornness of these problems, this often seems a Sisyphean task, but there are already a number of nascent programs that U.S. and Latin American officials can look to in this regard. In Mexico, the Calderon administration has had some success with creating small, specially vetted counter-drug units, and is pursuing a promising judicial reform. In Central America, the FBI and other agencies have begun to run personnel exchange programs meant to promote a culture of professionalism and respect for the rule of law. In El Salvador and Honduras, USAID has made some initial progress with programs that provide former gang members with micro-loans and vocational training. Finally, micro-lending and targeted social spending have helped reduce extreme poverty and increase school attendance in countries like Chile, Peru, Uruguay, and even Nicaragua. None of these programs are panaceas, but they do indicate ways that U.S. and Latin American officials might go about making sustainable progress in the fight against the gangs.²⁷

Two decades after the end of the Cold War brought down the curtain on the brutal civil wars that roiled Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, the region is once again beset by bloody internal upheaval. This time around, the culprits are sophisticated criminal gangs rather than Marxist guerrillas, but their rise threatens to be every bit as destructive as the insurgencies of an earlier era. Defeating third-generation gangs will require an integrated strategy that combines measures ranging from security assistance to social programs. Implementing such a strategy will be neither cheap nor easy, but the alternative—a lawless region where democratic governments cannot protect their citizens—would be many times worse.

Hal Brands is a defense analyst in Washington, D.C. He is the author of From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World (2008) and Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counter-Drug Policy (2009), as well as a forthcoming study on the Cold War in Latin America. He recently received his Ph.D. in History from Yale University.

²⁶ On existing U.S. programs, see Ribando Seelke, "Gangs in Central America," pp. 12-17.

²⁷ On these programs, see USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, pp. 13-14, 30-32; Laurence Iliff and Alfredo Corchado, "2 Mexican States Trying Out New Justice System," *Dallas Morning News*, August 18, 2008; Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, "The Long War of Genaro García Luna," *New York Times*, July 13, 2008; Julieta Palma and Raúl Urzúa, "Anti-Poverty Policies and Citizenry: The *Chile Solidario* Experience," Paris: UNESCO, 2005, unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001402/140240e.pdf, pp.20-22.

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