

Synthesis

KOFF Roundtable, June 2022

“Community-led responses to violence in Brazil”

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On the 23rd of June, terre des hommes schweiz and swisspeace organized a KOFF roundtable on “Community-led responses to violence in Brazil - lessons for Urban Peacebuilding”. The roundtable built on an ongoing reflection on what it means to build peace in contexts of urban violence, looking at the impact of police violence on community life in Brazil, as well as the ways in which civil society and researchers from the peripheries respond to it. terre des hommes schweiz invited two speakers, Luiz Eduardo Lopes, human rights defender and Professor at the Federal University of Maranhão, and Siobhan Wills, Professor at Ulster University.

They are both engaged in participatory action research with marginalized communities in peripheral neighbourhoods of Brazilian cities, who are directly affected by this violence. From their presentations, it became clear that there is “undeclared conflict” going on in Brazil due to the war-like police operations that terrorize entire peripheral and racialized neighbourhoods. The Brazilian state wages a civil war on its own citizens, whereby military police units are equipped with army material previously used during Brazilian peacekeeping operations in Haiti. The latter has also been strongly criticized for their use of violence and violations of human rights. It became clear how this physical violence is embedded in much larger economic, cultural, and political forms of violence that affect in particular, the racialized and urban poor.

Speakers

- **Luiz Eduardo Lopes**, Associate member of the Maranhense Society for Human Rights (SMDH), Professor at UFMA and EJA PRISIONAL (seduc - MA). Stephanie Hofer, Program Officer, [cfd – The feminist Peace Organization](#)
- **Prof. Siobhan Wills**, Director of the Transitional Justice Institute, and former Course Director of the LLMs in Human Rights and Transitional Justice and Gender, Conflict and Human Rights at Ulster University (UK). She coordinates a study on the impact of police violence on communities in Brazil.

Moderators

Andrea Zellhuber, Development Policy and Desk Culture of Peace, terre des hommes schweiz

Claske Dijkema, Senior Researcher, Policy and Platform Program, KOFF/swisspeace

Summary

Prof. Lopes comes himself from a marginalized neighborhood in São Luís. Once he accessed the university, he made sure that the concerns of the population primarily confronted with police violence are better represented in academic research. Together with colleagues, who are also from the communities, he set up a public security observatory, which is part of a network of observatories across five Brazilian states, tracking a broad range of violence and human rights indicators ([Rede de Observatórios de Segurança](#)). They create their own database of violence, including police violence, neglected and denied, if not encouraged, by the federal state. Prof. Lopes stressed the importance of "data activism" in contexts where official statistics do not realistically reflect the extent of violence, especially police violence. Moreover, together with colleagues, community leaders and rap artists, he is very much involved in cultural mediation to raise awareness about violence and to strengthen the resilience of communities.

Through her participatory research with mothers who had lost their sons to police violence in, Prof. Wills gave powerful examples of how whole communities are traumatized by constant militarised police operations. Together with filmmaker Cahal McLaughin, she presented the participatory film [It marked me a lot](#), which gives a voice to these women activists, showing how they mobilize, not only with regard to the loss of life, but also with regard to the mental health of a much wider community. We further discussed concrete possibilities for police reform and how to support progressive forces within the security agencies.

From the perspective of Switzerland, the implementation of strict regulations for arms exports to Brazil is an important signal that systematic human rights violations by security forces cannot be tolerated.