



Franchising Organized Crime in the Amazon – PCC and Comando Vermelho on the rise

As a research project combining different disciplines and knowledge holders, PRODIGY wants to understand the connections between nature, economy and society in the southwestern Amazon region between Peru, Brazil and Bolivia.

Our research is based on the idea that diversity in ANY system increases resilience to disturbances. Therefore, we study functional diversity not only in the soil or ecosystem, but across ALL components of the southwestern Amazon region, including local communities, decision-making processes, economic activities, values and norms.

Since 2012, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo criminal factions are spreading within Amazonian prisons and alongside transnational cocaine routes in the tri-national border region of Peru, Bolivia and Brazil.

In contrast to local gangs such as the Bonde dos 13 (B13) in Acre or other local gangs, the Comando Vermelho (CV) and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) function as businesses based on binding rules. In order to achieve the right climate for their business, factions need a minimum of public security and predictability within their territories. As with the provision of public policy in other political fields, the local state is often unable to provide anything alike.

Consequently, factions are increasingly taking over conflict-prone neighborhoods in order to establish their ideas of a monopoly of violence. Based on the accumulated criminal knowledge of a third generation institution, newly arrived factions are franchising the southern Brazilian factions CV and PCC, adapting them to Amazonian conditions. In my focus for ongoing field research in 2022 and 2023 are the impacts of this development on the environmental governance of the Amazon rainforest and the question of whether this development is a driver for land use change .

Today, criminal organisations practice illegal land transactions, money laundering, and territorial control which can manifest in the conversion of forests to agriculture or use of grazing land. Drug/human/weapons trafficking, illegal gold mining, illegal slaughter and trade in beef, wildlife crime and corruption provide the money needed to maintain these businesses; respected businessmen, politicians, criminal organizations, youth gangs and militias reproduce them.

In the history of the expansion of the frontier in the Brazilian Amazon we are observing economic cycles developing from informality to illegality and finally criminality. Just as businesses are becoming more professional and concentrated in fewer hands, we can see this happening with organized crime: from secondary drug traffickers on the routes and small gangs in the cities to rule-based cartels with thousands of 'baptised' members.

In the absence of better alternatives, gang- or fraction-memberships often become a life-project option for young people. What would have to happen to change this social "tipping point" for the better and to show or develop alternatives to gang or faction memberships? This is one focus of my research.

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