

Peacebuilding and the City: Setting the Scene

Oliver Jütersonke with Keith Krause

This year's annual meeting of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform reflects on the linkages between building peace and responding to violence and insecurity in "fragile" urban environments. It attempts to place "the city" at the heart of reflections on the dynamics of violence, insecurity and peacebuilding, and to draw some links between disparate stakeholder communities addressing these questions from a variety of angles. Which actors and institutions working on violence prevention and reduction, municipal planning and urban safety should be part of the debate, and what is the practical content and meaning of "peacebuilding and the city?" Experiences of diverse forms of conflict and non-conflict violence in cities such as Abidjan, Aleppo, Baghdad, Dili, Goma, New Delhi, San Salvador or Sarajevo highlight the multiple forms and challenges peacebuilders may face.

To date, reflections on violence, conflict and insecurity in the city have been mainly dominated by analysts looking at the issue from a counter-insurgency or pacification perspective, or focusing on the "hardening" of urban targets and creating secure spaces. This has seldom been coupled with a broader "peacebuilding" approach, and this background paper attempts to provide a conceptual backdrop to the discussion by giving a snapshot of the key issues, and by raising a few – deliberately provocative – questions. It does not provide answers, nor does it constitute the only perspective one could take on the subject. But hopefully it will provide some food for thought to stimulate the discussions.

Peacebuilders are not new to the city, but there is scope for more exchange with other communities of practice working in urban areas.

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:

The urban century

According to UN estimates, more than half of the world's population now lives in cities, with the proportion likely to rise to around 75% by 2050. This astonishing urbanisation is predominantly occurring in Africa, South and East Asia, and Latin America, and most of it has only materialised in the past five or six decades. Dhaka, for instance, had a population of about 400,000 in 1950 – by 2025 it is set to surpass 22 million. In a similar vein, Africa's urban population rose from around four million in 1907 to 395 million in 2009, with the figure set to reach 1.2 billion by 2050.¹ Worldwide, there are already more than 500 cities with a population of over one million, and 24 "megacities" with a population of over ten million. In some cases, the urban sprawl has also resulted in rural areas disappearing altogether, leading to urban corridors such as the 500-kilometre-long Rio-Sao Paulo Extended Metropolitan Region, with a population of over 40 million. And even without such territorial proximity, the "global cities" of today are in many ways closer to and more interdependent with one another than they each are with their own rural hinterlands.

Unsurprisingly, city authorities have been hard pressed to deal with such a rampant demographic boom, coupled with unprecedented rates of rural-urban migration. Indeed, in contrast to trends during the industrial revolution, when people flocked to Birmingham and Manchester to meet the labour demands of new factories, cities such as Buenos Aires, Johannesburg and Mumbai have instead been experiencing deindustrialisation over the past decades. Either the manufacturing sector has closed down altogether, or it has fled the decaying urban core and shifted to more accessible industrial zones. The result – more than a billion people living in urban squalor deprived of decent living conditions, with no access to basic infrastructures or public services, and without the prospect of finding formal employment – echoes what Mike Davis has called the "planet of slums".²

Sensationalism aside, the extent to which the urbanisation of the planet is intricately related to rising inequality is startling and potentially problematic. While the peacebuilding community has focused most of its attention on fragile and conflict-affected states (of which there are currently around 35 to 40), the development community has started to recognise that to pursue its poverty-eradication agenda, it needs to shift its attention to communities – often urban – within emerging and middle-income countries, as this is where about 75% of the world's poor can today be found.³ They reside in the urban sprawls of countries which may be on the road to economic prosperity on the macro level, but where the daily reality for the overwhelming majority of the

¹ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *The State of African Cities: Governance, Inequality and Urban Land Markets* (Nairobi: United Nations, 2010). For the purpose of this Platform Brief, bibliographic references have been kept to a minimum. Readers are invited to consult the documents mentioned in these endnotes for further readings.

² Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

³ For the changing geography of poverty and repercussions for development aid see Gilles Carbonnier and Andy Summer, "Reframing Aid in a World Where the Poor Live in Emerging Economies", *Revue internationale de politique de développement* 3 (2012), online: <<http://poldev.revues.org/977>>.

Peacebuilders will increasingly be working in urban settings that are not necessarily in conflict zones, but marked by inequality and social exclusion.

population is marked by a politics of social exclusion, unequal access to basic public services, punitive and often militarised policing, and forced evictions to make way for urban renewal schemes privileging the wealthy or middle class. Given that we know that inequality and proximity are stronger drivers of conflict and violence than absolute poverty, it is worth thinking about the future consequences of highly concentrated urban inequalities.⁴

Violence and urbanisation

While much of the academic and practitioner-oriented literature on the world's urbanisation has recognised that the city is not just the place of socio-economic opportunity and transformative potential, but also the site of rising inequality and possibly violence, many questions remain unanswered. Is there something specific about the type and intensity of violence in urban settings? Does it involve a particular set of actors, institutions, or conflict dynamics? And is there a link between rapid urbanisation and rates of violence?⁵ In 2011, the World Bank report on violence in the city, and the Global Homicide Report of the UNODC both revealed some patterns of urban victimisation and the concentration of people experiencing crime in urban centres, but overall the picture remains highly ambiguous.⁶ And although urban violence and its effects are of mounting concern to parliamentarians, mayors, urban planners, and civil society organisations in major cities and municipalities around the world,⁷ the basic assumption about a positive correlation between city size or population density and rates of violence remains highly contentious. Instead, there is evidence that violence in urban areas is itself highly heterogeneous, multi-causal, and spatially uneven, and that it is not the largest cities that are necessarily the most violent.⁸

In many cities of the Global South, certain slum neighbourhoods and shantytowns have assumed the character of gang- or criminally-controlled zones beyond the control of public (and private) security forces. Insecurity in these areas is, of course, relative, with some areas within these slums being considered more dangerous to residents than others. Yet many middle- and

Little is known about the ways in which cities, their institutions and neighbourhoods are able to cope and adapt in the face of uncontrolled urbanisation.

⁴ See T. Y. Wang, William J. Dixon, Edward N. Muller and Mitchell A. Seligson, "Inequality and Political Violence Revisited", *The American Political Science Review* 87:4 (1993), pp. 977-994; and Pablo Fajnzylber, Daniel Lederman, and Normal Loyaza, "Inequality and Violent Crime", *Journal of Law and Economics* XLV (2002), pp. 1-40. For the argument that urban social disorder is mostly due to a low economic growth rate rather than economic inequalities, see Henrik Urdal and Kristian Hoelscher, "Explaining Urban Social Disorder and Violence: An Empirical Study of Event Data from Asian and Sub-Saharan African cities", *International Interactions* 38:4 (2012), pp. 512-528.

⁵ For a discussion, see Keith Krause, "Beyond Definition: Violence in a Global Perspective", *Global Crime* 10:4 (2009), pp. 337-355.

⁶ World Bank. *Violence in the City. Understanding and Supporting Community Responses to Urban Violence* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2011); UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), *Global Study on Homicides 2011: Trends, Contexts, Data* (Vienna: United Nations, 2011).

⁷ See UN-Habitat, *Global Report on Human Settlements 2007: Enhancing Urban Safety and Security* (Nairobi: United Nations, 2007).

⁸ For an overview, see Oliver Jütersonke, Keith Krause and Robert Muggah, "Guns in the City: Urban Landscapes of Armed Violence", in *Small Arms Survey 2007: Guns and the City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 161-195. Large cities tend to be economic or political hubs, and thus also more likely to receive greater attention for security, safety, services and infrastructure issues. There are, of course, exceptions.

upper-class residents may feel compelled to build (higher) walls and elaborate (more sophisticated) security systems to shield themselves, giving rise to a fragmented city space of “safe” gated communities and “violent” slums. Real and perceived levels of violence and insecurity thus reinforce each other to create what Tunde Agbola has aptly termed an “architecture of fear”.⁹ The result is a progressive fragmentation of public space, a breakdown of social cohesion through the generation of new forms of spatial segregation and social discrimination, negative consequences on citizenship and local democratic practices, and potentially more violence. Evidence suggests that excluded residents do find ways to claim their “rights to the city”¹⁰ – in the extreme, this involves citizens taking security provision into their own hands, and has led to some cities experiencing gang-related violence and vigilantism in which parts of the civilian population are in a state of near-permanent conflict with the state authorities.¹¹

While alarm bells are being sounded over the real and imagined threats presented by uncontrolled urbanisation, surprisingly little is actually known about the ways in which cities, their institutions and neighbourhoods are able to cope and adapt in the face of massive capacity deficits. The manner in which informal institutions in chronically violent cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Port-au-Prince, Beirut or Kingston are capable of reproducing alternative service functions to provide security and public safety remains poorly understood. It does appear to be the case, however, that high rates of inter-personal and collective forms of violence in cities are linked to the structural dynamics of urban agglomeration, as well as to the competing interests of – and power relations between – social groups.¹² Yet city “disorder” need not imply that urban spaces are unable to cope with such challenges and ultimately transform. To the contrary, the “resilience” of cities is a crucial feature that is often overlooked, and one that would need to be explored further from the peacebuilding perspective.¹³

⁹ Tunde Agbola, *Architecture of Fear: Urban Design and Construction Response to Urban Violence in Lagos, Nigeria* (Ibadan: African Book Publishers, 1997).

¹⁰ The classic text on this is Henri Lefebvre, “The Right to the City”, in Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, selected, translated and introduced by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 147-159.

¹¹ See, for instance, Dennis Rodgers, “We Live in a State of Siege”: Violence, Crime, and Gangs in Post-conflict Urban Nicaragua (London: London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Development Studies Institute (DESTIN), 2002); and Teresa P. R. Caldeira, “Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation”, *Public Culture* 8:2 (1996), pp. 303-328.

¹² Dennis Rodgers, “Urban Violence Is Not (Necessarily) a Way of Life: Towards a Political Economy of Conflict in Cities”, United Nations University – World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) Working Paper No. 2010/20, online:

<http://www.wider.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/2010/en_GB/wp2010-20/>.

¹³ See also Oliver Jütersonke and Moncef Kartas “Resilience: Conceptual Reflections”, *Geneva Peacebuilding Platform Brief* No. 6 (Geneva: Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, 2012).

The fragile city

Just as the resilience of cities can be over-emphasised, so can their vulnerability. This is most clearly echoed in what has been termed the new “military urbanism”: a trend that sees “cities’ communal and private spaces, as well as their infrastructure – along with their civilian populations – a source of targets and threats”.¹⁴ Characteristic of this narrative is the use of war as a dominant metaphor to describe urban society in both the developed and the developing world, from a war against drugs and crime to one waged against terror and insecurity itself. Military strategists thus claim that “mega slums” constitute the new frontiers of armed violence and breeding grounds for violent extremism, and that so-called “feral cities” are “natural havens” for a variety of hostile non-state actors who may pose “security threats on a scale hitherto not encountered”.¹⁵ The referent of fragility thus shifts from the OECD’s terminology of “fragile states and situations” to the “fragile city” itself; fragile because its public spaces are the target of attack, and because its ungoverned, unpatrolled and impenetrable built-up areas are perceived to harbour the threats themselves.

Although impoverished and under-serviced urban areas have often surprisingly generated new and informal forms of coping mechanisms, the political and ideological commitment to restoring state and metropolitan order remains dominant. Cities, and especially the capital city, play important symbolic, political and economic roles in both conflict and non-conflict settings, and it is thus in the world’s main urban centres that the state’s presence is most felt, if not always in a positive way. Recent and on-going events in Syria, Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) again demonstrate that rebel groups are not only roaming the rural areas but also bear down on major cities in ways that threaten the state’s sovereign prerogatives. This is the classical “civil war” narrative in which the ultimate capture of the capital is the main goal.¹⁶ But increasingly, the city itself is seen to be a source of fragility and insecurity, from its ever-growing (and disgruntled) population that, once mobilised, represents a force that can bring down governments and even topple authoritarian regimes. The protests and political changes in the Middle East and North Africa in recent years certainly did not fit the “rural insurgency” model and were predominantly urban-driven.

As witnessed particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, public authorities have repeatedly sought to find a robust response to the perceived threat posed by uncontrolled urban enclaves by engaging in heavy-handed interventions that resemble military-style stabilisation missions. Indeed, the defence of fragile urban environments has begun to appear in the military doctrine emerging from Western military establishments, and the notion of

Cities are becoming the focus of a security narrative that sees urban areas as both targets and threats.

¹⁴ Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2011), p. xiii.

¹⁵ John Rapley, “The New Middle Ages”, *Foreign Affairs* 85:3 (2006), pp. 95-103; Richard Norton, “Feral Cities”, *Naval War College Review* 66:4 (2003), pp. 97-106, at 105.

¹⁶ See Stathis N. Kalyvas, “The Urban Bias in Research on Civil Wars”, *Security Studies* 13:3 (2004), pp. 160-190.

stabilisation is an integral part of strategic thinking on urban counter-insurgency. In places such as Kabul and Port-au-Prince, the two are virtually synonymous.¹⁷ And in the face of an often exaggerated media hype around “urban violence” – from the *banlieues* of Paris to the *favelas* in Rio – the stabilisation logic has come to play a prominent part of enforcing order in non-conflict settings as well.

The creative potential of urban politics

Of course, the above depiction tends to occlude the valuable “bottom-up” work that has gone on at the community level in many of the world’s cities – from earlier efforts in Belfast and Johannesburg to more recent exploits mediating gang truces in parts of Central America. Peacebuilders have been active in urban areas already, and police and security forces have also been exploring innovative approaches to community policing that seek to foster precisely the opposite of punitive interventions to restore order: namely the prevention of both political and criminal forms of violence through an approach privileging consultations and dialogue with residents, exchange with other parts of local and municipal government (in particular planning departments), and a proactive approach to societal tensions.

From another stakeholder perspective, many local and civil society initiatives have focused tightly on violence prevention and reduction, in particular in cities in Colombia such as Bogota, Medellin, or Cali. But in spite of increasing positive experiences, such initiatives are still yielding mixed result. Evidence from Central America suggests that first-generation violence reduction initiatives (so-called *mano dura* strategies) actually tended to radicalise gangs, potentially pushing them towards more organised forms of criminality. Until comprehensive and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have been established, however, the jury is still out on whether second-generation interventions (so-called *mano amiga* or *mano extendida* strategies) can actually go beyond rhetorical advances to concretely reduce levels of violence.¹⁸ And in the meantime, another wave of the heavy-handed approach seems to be looming in Africa, where the fallout from on-going events, particularly in the Sahel, are leading to calls for a security cordon to be established to protect European coastlines in the Mediterranean.

Despite the continued emphasis by some stakeholder constituencies to privilege “security-first” interventions, bottom-up, community-level approaches are nonetheless gaining momentum. Such initiatives build on the insight that the city is both a site of cooperation and contestation – urban dynamics may foster societal conflict among competing interest groups, but the complexity

¹⁷ For an elaboration of this point see Robert Muggah and Oliver Jütersonke, “Rethinking Stabilization and Humanitarian Action in ‘Fragile Cities’”, in Ben Perrin (ed.), *Modern Warfare: Armed Groups, Private Militaries, Humanitarian Organizations, and the Law* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), pp. 311-327.

¹⁸ Oliver Jütersonke, Robert Muggah and Dennis Rodgers, “Gangs, Urban Violence, and Security Interventions in Central America”, *Security Dialogue* 40:4/5 (2009), pp. 373-397.

and interdependence of urban institutions also offer “political and mobilizational creative potential on an enlarged scale”.¹⁹ Indeed, the city’s “propinquity”, i.e. the physical and psychological proximity of people, makes densely populated urban areas laboratories of innovative democratic governance that highlight transparency and accountability through the institutionalisation of coherent checks and balances – and the type of community policing approaches just mentioned build on precisely these insights. Uncontrolled slums and shantytowns are, of course, a serious problem for law and order, and ultimately challenge the Hobbesian bargain between protection (by the state) and obedience of citizens in return for security. But cities are also the sites of social transformation, multiculturalism, and tolerance, and it is perhaps here that peacebuilders, whether local or international, can act as honest brokers between citizens and municipal institutions. In this complex relationship all actors – from predatory and protective gangs, to local governments, non-profit community organisations, or indeed the criminal justice system – have a crucial role to play.

Concluding reflections

Peacebuilding is not new to the city, although it would appear that there is room for a much more intensified exchange with other communities of practice, notably in the fields of armed violence reduction and prevention, urban safety, and city planning. In this complex institutional arena, peacebuilders will necessarily leave (and will only want to leave) a light footprint. As recent initiatives to negotiate truces among *maras* in El Salvador illustrate, a high degree of discretion is required for them to work – and this may well be at odds with the logic (and practice) of large, internationally-negotiated and mediated multilateral interventions. Peace mediation with gangs or elements of organised crime (either in the form of collaboration brokered by internationally supported peacebuilding professionals or deals negotiated by the police themselves), generally occurs far away from the public eye. The work required of the facilitating peacebuilder may thus not be compatible with the type of peacebuilding operations that privilege relations with the host state’s national authorities and the strengthening of its central institutions. Peacebuilding in the city requires a different approach, one that seeks to harness the symbiotic relationship between the public sphere of urban government, and the more informal processes of conflict mitigation.

Peacebuilding interventions need to recognise urban areas as laboratories of innovative democratic governance that privilege transparency and accountability.

¹⁹ Jo Beall, “Urban Governance and the Paradox of Conflict”, in Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (eds.), *Megacities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South* (London: Zed Books, 2009), pp. 107-119, at 107.

About the authors

Oliver Jütersonke is Head of Research for the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) and Research Associate at the Zurich University Centre for Ethics.

Keith Krause is Professor of International Politics at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Director of its Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP), and a member of the Steering Committee of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. He is also the Programme Director of the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey.

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The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) is the Graduate Institute's focal point for research in the areas of conflict analysis, peacebuilding, and the complex relationships between security and development. Its research projects focus on the factors and actors that are implicated in the production and reproduction of violence within and between societies and states, as well as on policies and practices to reduce violence and insecurity, and enhance development and peacebuilding initiatives at the international, state, and local levels. For further information, please visit <http://graduateinstitute.ch/ccdp>.

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Series Editor

Dr. Achim Wennmann
Executive Coordinator

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