



Big Cities: Sources of and Approaches to Urban Insecurities in Fragile Contexts

Background Note



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Background note for the event Big Cities: Sources of and Approaches to Urban Insecurities in Fragile Contexts

1. Urbanisation and new dimensions of conflict

Rapid urbanisation, especially in developing countries, is one of the engines of fast-growing economies and has become emblematic of the globalization process. However, there is ample evidence to show that it is also the cause of significant social tensions and human insecurity. Changes in the structure and incidence of armed violence suggest that this is less anchored in traditional forms of conflict, and more integrated with criminal violence, terrorism and forms of civil unrest ([World Bank, 2011](#)).¹ As a result, the ability of large cities to act as magnets for economic activity is seemingly mirrored by the way they may bring together threats to peace and security.

The large-scale civil wars that prevailed until the late 1990s are no longer the main contexts of violence. “Today’s wars are more likely to be civil wars and conflict is increasingly likely to be urban,” argues geographer Simon Reid-Henry.² According to a number of analysts, the distinction between crime, terrorism and warfare is becoming less clear-cut, and technology and the exploitation of networked organizational forms has changed the way organised crime and other non-state actors work at the local and global level.³ The distinction between war and no-war zones is also becoming less obvious. According to recent UN data, while nearly 60,000 people die in wars every year, [an estimated 480,000 are killed, mostly by guns, in cities](#). This evolution in violence suggests the international community may need to change its focus on fragile state to one on fragile cities, which can be reconceived as the primary sites of economic development, population growth and warfare.⁴

¹ World Bank, *World Development Report*, Washington DC, (2011).

² John Vidal, “Murder Capitals of the World: How Runaway Urban Growth Fuels Violence” *The Observer*, (November 2014), at <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/nov/01/murder-capitals-world-city-violence> (last accessed November 07, 2014).

³ John P. Sullivan & Robert J. Bunker, “Drug Cartels, Street Gangs, and Warlords,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Volume 13, Issue 2, (2002):40-53.

⁴ Robert Muggah, “Deconstructing the Fragile City: Exploring Insecurity, Violence and Resilience”, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 26 no. 2 (2014): 345-358.

2. Urbanisation: Where and how fast?

A recent report published by the UN estimates that in 2014, 54 per cent of the world's population is urban and [by 2050 two-thirds of the world's population will live in cities](#). However fast urbanisation is not equally spread, being particularly concentrated in Latin America but also widespread in Africa and large urban centres in Asia.⁵ According to the UN Population Fund, [the number of city dwellers is expected to double by 2030](#). Africa is expected to add 440 million people to its cities by then, and Latin America and the Caribbean nearly 200 million. Moreover, according to the military strategist David Kilcullen, there is evidence to suggest that coastal areas are particularly affected by rapid urbanisation and, in turn, the risk of violence, as 80 percent of the world population is now living within sixty miles of a coast. In Kilcullen's opinion, fast urbanisation, accelerating littoralization, and ever greater connectedness between people - a crucial element in political mobilization and illicit economic activity - are the main engines of contemporary and future conflict.⁶

3. Association of social and economic indicators with violence

Urbanisation and city density, unemployment and inequality are some of the factors recognised as the main causes of urban violence; however, not all of these claims are supported by evidences.

Many scholars have explored the ambiguous correlation between **poverty and violence**. A common assumption is that urban poor are the main culprits for and victims of violence.⁷ Scholars also agree that concentrations of urban violence and insecurity are also visible across generations, since marginalized economic status and its associated psychological effect tend to reproduce the same conditions over time.⁸ More than poverty, however, some authors, such as Robert Muggah, argue that violence is linked to **inequality and impunity from the law**. In his view, urban

⁵ Stergios Skaperdas, Rodrigo Soares, Alys Willman, Stephen C. Miller, *The Costs of Violence*, Washington, DC: World Bank (2009); <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2009/03/11304946/costs-violence> (last accessed November 10).

⁶ David J. Kilcullen, "The City as a System: Future Conflict and Urban Resilience", *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* Vol.36 no.2 (2012). To give an example, in his view this set of conditions explains why the two most urbanized and littoralized countries of the MENA region, Tunisia and Libya, were the most affected by popular revolutions during the Arab Spring.

⁷ Patricia Justino, "Poverty and Violent Conflict: A Micro-Level Perspective on the Causes and Duration of Warfare", *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 46, no.3, (2009) : 315-333.

⁸ Tani Adams, "Chronic violence and non-conventional armed actors: a systemic approach", NOREF and Conflict Research Unit-Clingendael report (2014). http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/Adams_NOREF_Chronic%20Violence_SEPT_NY%20FINAL.pdf (last accessed November 11, 2014).

violence generates “cascading” and cumulative effects, and in turn constrains the upward and outward socio-spatial and socio-economic mobility of the poor.⁹

Social and income inequalities, particularly those affecting specific ethnic groups (“horizontal inequalities”), are often related to higher rates of violence, as well as repressive policing in post-conflict settings. On the other hand, **urban density** is not clearly correlated with violence. Interestingly, middle-size cities seem to be more inclined to violence.¹⁰

It is also usual to associate violence with **drug trade, extortion and illegal migration**, especially when referring to Latin America, which ranks as the top region for hosting the [most dangerous cities in the world](#). However, according to one recent study the rise of violence is mainly due to the speed at which urban areas have grown in the last two decades, often as a result of disorderly and unplanned economic growth.¹¹ This happens because a rapid influx of people overwhelms the capacity for state response and the ability of public services to manage; the case of the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juárez, the most violent city in the world in 2008 and 2009, is one example.¹² From a similar perspective, Kilcullen argues that as a result of rapid urbanisation, more people fight over scarcer resources in crowded, under-serviced, and under-governed urban areas.¹³

4. Hybrid insecurity and the feral city: the spiral of violence

This brings us to introduce the concept of *feral city*, which can be defined as “a metropolis with a population of more than a million people the government of which has lost the ability to maintain the rule of law, but yet remains a functioning actor in the greater international system.”¹⁴

According to this view, some non-traditional stakeholders like criminals, armed resistance groups, clans, tribes, can exert various degrees of control and power in these contexts, and find a free space to develop sophisticated and complex networks. A more pessimistic perspective refers to these phenomena as *failed cities*, indicating that civil order completely succumbs to powerful criminal gangs who operate through the manipulation of violence and disorder.¹⁵ Here ordinary forms of state control and influence are very weak. Police and military forces are often reluctant or even unable to intervene and restore order.

⁹ Robert Muggah, *Researching the Urban Dilemma: Urbanization, Poverty and Violence*, IDRC, (2012).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Geneva Declaration Secretariat, *Global Burden of Armed Violence*, (December 2011).

¹² Alfredo Corchado, *Midnight in Mexico: A Reporter's Journey through a Country's Descent into Darkness*, New York: Penguin (2013).

¹³ David J. Kilcullen, op. cit., p. 37.

¹⁴ Richard J. Norton, “Feral Cities,” *Naval War College Review*, (2003):98.

¹⁵ Peter H Liotta; James F Miskel, *The Real Population Bomb : Megacities, Global Security & the Map of the Future*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books (2012).

5. How to tackle the issue? Different approaches and challenges

Implementing repressive policies to tackle crime and restore security has not only proven to be very often ineffective, but also generated critical effects on democracy and citizenship. Urban experts Stephen Graham and Teresa Caldeira, for example, warn that Western militaries and security forces have now come to perceive all urban terrain as a conflict zone, pushing cities to become segregated spaces where the use of “security” concerns is often used as a camouflage to suppress democratic dissent¹⁶

Less draconian alternatives to the challenges of big cities have also emerged. For example, the [Safer Cities Program of UN Habitat](#) has developed a multi-level government and multi-sectoral approach to tackle the issue in its different dimensions. The first phase of the programme focused on institutional crime and violence prevention, trying to promote alternative forms of policing and justice and investing in local community inclusion. The second and third phases increasingly recognise the importance of urban planning¹⁷ and community ownership and management, but also of fostering local government capacity and promoting institutional reform so as to develop more efficient security strategies.

The recognition of the central role of municipal actors and local institutions in providing not only security, but also a more effective governance over huge, interconnected and “globalized” cities, is increasingly celebrated by theorists such as [Benjamin Barber](#) or writers such as [Simon Jenkins](#) (“cities are the polities of the future”), and has led to the emergence of new concepts such as that of [City Diplomacy](#). Although much of this discourse is captured by promoters of big and extremely affluent urban centres¹⁸, it is also relevant to cities affected by violence and conflict. A number of projects aim to explore the positive correlation between devolution of power and more effective prevention of violence and conflict,¹⁹ as well as the renewed role of international associations aiming to foster cooperation between municipalities affected by the risk of insecurity.²⁰

¹⁶ Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism*, London: Verso Books (2011); Teresa Caldeira, *City Of Walls: Crime, Segregation, And Citizenship In São Paulo*, Oakland: University of California Press, (2000).

¹⁷ Urban planning has been recognised as an essential tool to tackle the rising tensions and to advance social integration. See Scott A. Bollens, “Peacebuilding in the City: Planning and Design Strategies, Fragile States”, <http://www.fragilestates.org/2014/04/14/peacebuilding-city-planning-design-strategies-scott-bollens/> (last accessed November 09, 2014).

¹⁸ Carlo Ratti and Matthew Claudel, “The Urban Village”, Project Syndicate (November 2014). <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/social-networks-urban-villages-in-cities-by-carlo-ratti-and-matthew-claudel-2014-11>

¹⁹ Upcoming project of The Hague Institute for Global Justice on the Role of Municipalities in Conflict Prevention.

²⁰ [The Forum for the Cities in Transition, United Cities and Local Governments \(UCLG\)](#),

[Technology](#) also provides new tools to help urban planners, municipal authorities and more generally researchers to better understand - and possibly anticipate - the onset of violent incidents or large-scale riots, for example by monitoring public perceptions through social media or collective mobile phone data.²¹ More broadly, the potential role of IT in urban management and planning has led to the concept of [smart cities](#). Many projects in the United States and European Union have been implemented on the basis of this optimistic vision of technology-enhanced urban development.²² However, some scholars remain wary about the possible implications of this approach, and warn of the risks that this process entails due to its limited inclusiveness and its dependence on private sector logic and interests.²³

New tools, inclusive processes and innovative governance solutions may all help better manage insecurity and violence in fast-growing metropolis. However, political will and adaptable institutional structures are often lacking. Thus, the question remains as to how best to support more effective governance with respect to the provision of security at the local level. Who are the stakeholders that can help designing new solutions, whether urban planners, architects, civil society organisations, or IT specialists? How to strike a balance between the need to ensure security and to maintain inclusive and participatory processes? These are only a few of the questions that remain to be explored.

²¹ Examples are the [Inclusive Cities Lab](#), of Leiden University, the [10th International Symposium on New Technologies for Urban Safety of Mega Cities in Asia](#).

²² See for instance the MIT lab at <http://senseable.mit.edu/> or EU projects at <http://www.smart-cities.eu/>

²³ Alberto Vanolo, "Smartmentality: The Smart City As Disciplinary Strategy." *Urban Studies* Vol. 51 no. 5, (2014).



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