Environment&Urbanization Brief – 30

New frontiers in 21st century urban conflict and violence

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SUMMARY: *Increasingly cities are defined not only by violence, but also by conflict, with many now primary sites for warfare. Ten years after E&U's first volume on urban violence, this Brief reviews changes in violence and insecurity, as well as associated policy implications. Central to this shift is the fact that 10 years ago, there was optimism that violence, like poverty, was a problem solvable through development programmes. Today, there is a need to recognize that violence is an integral and intractable part of the current development model. Identifying "new frontiers" of research and practice shows that conflict has moved to cities, and categories of violence have multiplied and become more complex. Cities are now more spatially divided by fear and insecurity, and the scale of violence has expanded beyond the city to the nation and transnationally. Central to these processes is also the current identification of gender-based violence as a mainstream concern.*

The Brief highlights shifting paradigms of intervention: from those that aim to reduce conflict and violence, to those that seek to manage it, and ultimately to those that contest its underlying structural causes. Responses include generating resilience from the bottom-up, a multi-pronged partnership to manage and address structural causes of gender-based violence, and interventions that use a South–South learning process, creating a community development methodology. Central to the management of violence is a shift towards dealing with urban violence and conflict as a humanitarian problem. Finally, it is important to recognize the inherent dangers when external agencies focus on easily implemented technical solutions and fail to address structural causes or the political context of urban violence and conflict. Local responses need to engage with all the key actors (including gangs) and to seek collective solutions (making the city safe rather than arming individuals). Such responses need to prioritize the "everyday" violence that in most cities has far more impact than the occasional and more sensational stories of violence or conflict reported by international media.

I. INTRODUCTION

Some 10 years after "*lethal violence and its associated fear and insecurity*" was first addressed as an urban problem in a special E&U volume,[1] it remains an intractable concern – and continues to escalate in cities across the world. Many of the issues raised in 2004, including the introductory roadmap,[2] are still relevant to both research and policy agendas. However, with more than half the global population now living in urban areas, and violence, poverty and inequality inextricably interconnected, it is time for new thinking as well as more relevant, innovative and practical answers. To do so requires clarifying continuities, but also pushing the boundaries and exploring new frontiers in theoretical positions, empirical realities and successful practices in relation to urban conflict and violence.

II. NEW VIOLENCE REALITIES OF 21ST CENTURY CITIES

Ten years ago, there was optimism that violence could be reduced through a better understanding of the phenomenon, additional resources, and a marked policy shift towards safety and security. Violence, like poverty, was seen as yet another development problem or constraint that could be challenged and overcome, as reflected in the myriad of academic studies that have proliferated. More recently UN-Habitat's 2007 Global Report on Human Settlements[3] has continued to reflect this problematization, with international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) the latest of a range of international and NGO agencies to enter the field of urban violence. The IHOs, for instance, identify a set of procedures that establish parameters within which something is made into a "problem" and acted upon as a humanitarian concern such that "*increasingly cities will be the main site of humanitarian response to the needs of the population*".[4]

a. From violence reduction towards its management and contestation

Today, while it may be considered controversial, we need to recognize that urban violence is not going away. Indeed, violence is an integral part of the current model of development itself. While it may deepen, transform and mutate into unforeseeable forms, violence is here to stay. Recognizing this may be the first step towards a new approach that enables those who are more vulnerable and affected by violence not only to manage and control the daily manifestations of violence they experience, but more importantly to empower them to contest and confront the structural causes that lead to violence.

Because violence is an endemic systemic phenomenon, there are no blueprint solutions. While important new initiatives continue to address this challenge,[5] it is unlikely that the "good practice" intervention measures identified will be successful much beyond micro-level contexts. Even in cases where some success is achieved, the likelihood is that this will be short-lived. Indeed, the early optimism among practitioners and NGOs that violence could be addressed as a time-bound issue is fast disappearing. This results in important challenges for research, policy and programmatic intervention; it makes it essential to move beyond descriptions of causes, costs and consequences and the provision of checklist solutions; and it requires a more nuanced understanding of the historical, geographical, spatial and structural complexities as well as more realistic assessment of what can and cannot be done to reduce, better manage and contest violence. This Brief addresses these challenges through the identification of a number of "new frontiers".

III. BROADENING THE AGENDA: CONNECTING URBAN CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

It is now widely recognized that conflict is much more critical than it was in the past in increasing numbers of cities in the global South. While the peasant wars of the 20th century were more likely to be rural in nature, conflict is increasingly transferring from rural to urban areas. This is being accompanied by changes in focus from "fragile states" to "fragile cities", and the introduction of terms such as "urban wars" and "slum wars".[6] This is most evident in "post-war" or post-conflict cities in which "new" forms of violence have emerged. For instance, in Juba, Southern Sudan's capital, following the end of hostilities in 2005, "land violence" has replaced armed conflict, as a range of civilian internally displaced persons (IDPs) and ex-soldiers compete in the struggle over access to land as an increasingly scarce urban resource.[7] By contrast, in "post-invasion" Kabul, the high visibility of "infinitesimal" spectacular insurgent attacks invisibilizes existing categories of urban violence including domestic abuse, especially of women and girls, which constitutes far more of a threat to physical well-being.[8]

Nevertheless, it is also well-known that cities in post-conflict contexts are not the only ones dealing with gratuitous daily violence. A recent review of fragile cities cites evidences that 46 of the top 50 most violent cities in the world were not in fact experiencing armed conflicts in 2013.[9] Yet in the shift from "fragile states" to "fragile cities", cities are now being reconceived as the primary sites of "tomorrow's warfare and development". The fact that urban violence is beginning to "*resemble a classic armed conflict situation*" has become the justification for humanitarian aid to now include urban violence within its remit.[10]

a. Introducing new conceptual frameworks connecting violence and conflict

A key aspect of the broadening agenda is to recognize the symbiotic relationship between violence and conflict. This challenges researchers and practitioners to go beyond single categories and focus on their interconnections. To address this, a recent research project on Understanding the Tipping Point of Urban Conflict introduced two new concepts into the field of violence research.[11] First is the concept of a "tipping point", relating to a transition from conflict to violence. This can occur when a social process acquires a certain critical mass, but also, as recently popularized by Gladwell, it is "*the possibility of sudden change*".[12] Second is the concept of "violence chains" to explore how different forms of violence that are generated by tipping point processes interact with each other in a knock-on effect.

Recent research results illustrate the explanatory power of these concepts. For instance, in Kenya's capital city Nairobi, a city-level tipping point was identified in the brutal 2008 post-presidential election political violence in which more than 1,000 people were killed, an event closely associated with the contestation of power amongst the dominant elites. Sub-city participatory violence appraisals confirmed political violence as the primary concern, with the concept of violence chains adding texture and complexity in showing how politics often tipped into violence, relating to tribalism, political fights and loss of property. A further chain-related result was the transformation, led by political leaders and criminal gangs, of landlord–tenant violence into ethnic violence.[13]

In other recent research in Santiago, Chile, sub-city appraisals were undertaken in spatial communities representing three income groups: a low-income "popular" social housing settlement, a middle-income neighbourhood, and an elite area. Contrary to perceived wisdom, results showed that violence

5. See, for instance, the recent impressive $11 million programme on Safe and Inclusive Cities supported by the Canadian International Development Research Centre and UK Department for International Development, which seeks "*to understand the complex causes of urban violence and find practical solutions*".

6. Beall, Jo (2007), *Cities, terrorism and urban wars of the 21st century*, Working Paper No 9, Series 2, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science; also Rodgers, Dennis (2007), *Slum wars of the 21st century: the new political geography of conflict*, Working Paper No 10, Series 2, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science.

7. See the paper by Gabriella McMichael listed on the back page.

8. See the paper by Daniel Esser listed on the back page.

9. See the paper by Robert Muggah listed on the back page.

10. See the paper by Simon Reid-Henry and Ole Jacob Sending listed on the back page, page 431.

11. Caroline Moser undertook this University of Manchester project, together with Dennis Rodgers and colleagues in four cities in the global South. See Moser, Caroline and Dennis Rodgers (2012), *Understanding the tipping point of urban conflict: global policy report*, Urban Tipping Point Project Working Paper No 7, University of Manchester, Manchester, 17 pages. This and other working papers are all available online at: http://www.urbantipping point.org/documents/ Working%20Papers.

12. See Gladwell, Malcolm (2000), *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Back Bay Books, Boston, MA, page 12.

13. Wee Omenya, A and G Lubaale (2012), *Understanding the tipping point of urban conflict: the case of Nairobi, Kenya*, Urban Tipping Point Project Working Paper No 6, University of Manchester, Manchester, 58 pages.

was not confined to poor areas, with victims and perpetrators in all socioeconomic groups. However, factors influencing tipping points of conflict and violence chains varied with the intersectionalities of place, income and gender. In low-income areas, violence resulted from exclusion and a lack of opportunities in interconnected chains of drug use, micro-trafficking networks, fights and shootings, and power struggles, generating high levels of fear in public spaces. The small size of houses made them unsafe places, generating a chain of stress and frustration that led to violence in family relationships, child abuse and violence against women. In contrast, in the middle-income area, households struggling to improve their lot suffered high levels of family breakdown, with violence against women within couples explained in structural terms as resulting from the "stress that we live in as a society". Finally, in the elite area, chains linked direct forms of economic violence, such as assaults, house burglaries and car thefts, with a fear of the "other" as different, poor and violent, creating feelings of insecurity and a perception of the community as unsafe.[14]

IV. SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF URBAN CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

The built environment of cities has increasingly become more spatially divided by fear and insecurity; at the same time, the scale of violence and conflict has expanded beyond the city. Both factors affect violence-related policy and strategies. But urban fragility is neither inevitable nor linear and can affect different places differentially. Often stable and functioning areas of cities co-exist alongside fragile and violence-affected spaces. The fact that "slums" continue to be identified as inherently dangerous spaces has resulted in the associated reshaping of the built environment through the creation of gated communities, walls, railings and other dividers that generate spaces of exclusion and so-called "infrastructural violence".[15]

Another spatial element relates to the spatial diversification of gang structures across institutions, particularly with the increased role of prisons in street gang organization. Here prison gangs can gradually morph into organized criminal gangs; and the prison can become an extension of street gang territory. In Central America, for instance, the increasing incarceration of gang members means prisons have become alternative organizational spaces for gangs from across the country to debate, make pacts and decide on structures, strategies and ways to operate. As Winton has commented, "*mass incarceration serves not to dismantle gangs but, rather, to reinforce and transform the way in which they operate*".[16]

Along with space, the scale of urban violence and conflict beyond the city also relates to transnational migration and the creation of linkages among diasporic groups abroad. In urban Colombia, for instance, transnational migration or displacement occurs as people manage their experiences of insecurity. While it is well-known that armed conflict leads to refugee migration across international borders as well as IDPs, forced and voluntary transnational migration is also a response to everyday violence. Thus cities in the global South have porous violence and conflict boundaries in terms of rural–urban linkages, as well as transnational mobilities, with such interrelations reinforced by financial remittances. For migrants in cities of the global North, ironically, fear and insecurity from violence are often replaced by anxiety and discrimination associated with living without legal papers, invisibilized in Northern cities such as London.[17]

V. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AS A NEW DOMINANT GLOBAL AGENDA

Gender-based violence (GBV), violence against women and girls (VAWG), or intimate partner violence (IPV), as it is variously known, has been a long-term priority of feminist researchers and practitioners. Increasingly, however, it has become identified as a mainstream concern not only in research, as demonstrated in the Urban Tipping Point project, but also in the policy domain, with its recognition as a human rights violation and development challenge. Within the UN system, for instance, in 2008 the Secretary General launched UNiTE, a global campaign to end violence against women; UN Women identifies ending violence against women and peace and security as two of its seven core areas of work; and the 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security recognizes sexual violence against women as a core dimension of armed conflict (updated and reaffirmed in six subsequent Security Council resolutions). At the same time, it can still so easily be invisibilized due to the scalar politics of the global media, as is the case in Kabul.[18]

It is widely recognized that GBV, non-partner violence and violence against children tend to be more frequent and acute in cities of the global South, especially in urban slums.[19] Evidence shows that violence against women by male partners is less prevalent in urban than rural areas, while GBV by non-partners is higher in cities. The urban environment heightens the exposure of women to stress-induced violence associated with poor quality and remote sanitation facilities, widespread sale of alcohol and drugs, and secluded, un-policed spaces with limited street lighting. Such risks are further compounded by women's urban occupations in sex work and export processing zones. At the same time, for women there are also positive aspects of living in cities; with greater freedom from social stigma, women are

14. See the paper by Alfredo Rodríguez, Paula Rodríguez, Marisol Saborido, Olga Segovia and Lylian Mires listed on the back page.

15. See Rodgers, Dennis and Bruce O'Neill (2012), "Infrastructural Violence: Introduction to the Special Issue", *Ethnography* Vol 13, No 4, pages 401–412.

16. See the paper by Ailsa Winton listed on the back page, page 410.

17. See the paper by Cathy McIlwaine listed on the back page.

18. See the paper by Daniel Esser listed on the back page.

19. Chant, Sylvia (2013), "Cities through a 'gender lens': a golden 'urban age' for women in the global south?", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 25, No 1, pages 9–29.

more likely to seek help, informally through social support mechanisms, as well as through violence reduction projects.

Positive spatial policies to address GBV are not necessarily new. Historically, in the 1980s the UK Greater London Council had an impressive track record in spatially addressing women's fear and insecurity through transport planning, the design of housing estates and the inclusion of women in consultation processes. This example went on to inform women's safety audit guides in cities across Canada and Europe, extended later to the global South, and finally influenced the spatial focus of the 1996 UN-Habitat Safer Cities Programme, as well as the 2002 UNIFEM Cities without Violence against Women, Safe Cities for All programme.[20]

VI. SHIFTING PARADIGMS OF INTERVENTION

Increasing recognition of the complexities of conflict and violence not only reveals the limitations of blueprint guidelines, but also highlights the growing spectrum of new institutional "governance" actors involved in the urban conflict and violence industry.[21] Once it is recognized that violence is not a solvable "problem" but an intractable component of development itself, the paradigm of policy and associated programme interventions must shift towards a continuum of interventions. These comprise:
• interventions to **reduce** conflict and violence;
• interventions to **manage** violence and conflict; and
• interventions to **contest** the structural causes of violence and conflict.
This Brief concludes, therefore, by describing interventions that illustrate this continuum.

First are initiatives that identify conflict and violence as problems that can be reduced if not solved. One interesting example links violence and "resilient cities",[22] a concept that, even if inadvertently, draws on notions associated with climate change such as risk and resilience. These refer to the capabilities of social actors at individual, household, civil society and state levels to prepare for, respond to and recover from shocks and stresses associated with disasters and severe weather.[23] In the case of violence, their focus is on reversing fragility and promoting resilience through a *range of hard and soft measures … [ranging] from pacification programmes or proximity policing initiatives … to mediation and social capital promotion*".[24] At the same time, the concept of resilience gaining traction in conflict-ridden contexts is in itself a manifestation of the relative de-politicization of violence and security. Enhancing resilience, while seen as a progressive bottom-up approach rather than top-down security response, is a coping strategy, not one of redistribution or political change. Thus, for instance, while humanitarian actors have moved beyond addressing symptoms of urban violence, the international humanitarian approach is

"approaching the city as a space to be secured and closed off rather than enabled or opened up … what is selected for intervention … are not the structures themselves but those 'local bearers' of structural problems … such as the participants in programmes aimed at consciousness-raising, educational programmes, mobile clinics and so on".[25]

Further along the spectrum, practitioners increasingly recognize the importance of interventions that acknowledge that violence is an integral part of development itself and that it is impossible to eradicate violence altogether, and potentially desirable to build on some of its manifestations rather than seeking to eliminate them. The difficulty of addressing its causes has resulted in recognition of the need to prioritize the innovative management of violence in cities. However, such interventions can be criticized as neglecting the real daily problems experienced by local households and communities in violent and conflictive urban contexts. Interestingly, it is in the field of gang-related solutions that this approach is especially advanced. Greater understanding of the structural and contextual, rather than causal, conditions in which gangs exist has led to the recognition that gangs are responsive to changing economic and political structures. "*As new global processes exacerbate existing inequalities and create new ones … gangs may be seen as a barometer of increasingly widespread societal failings*".[26] Once gangs are seen as institutional actors they can also be recognized as part of fundamental societal change. While gang-related interventions, in and of themselves, are not new, it is the manner in which they are implemented that is innovative, working as they do with the structure of gangs, rather than trying to dismantle them. The willingness to "engage with gangs themselves" shifts the approach from one focused on violence reduction to management.

At the other end of the continuum is an innovative partnership approach to contest GBV in order to achieve structural change. This partnership framework identifies that interventions need to be multipronged if GBV is to be managed effectively; it uses the metaphor of "four legs for a good table" to focus on the combination of four categories of actors: elected officials who function as "champions"; public servants who can be valued as "enablers"; community-based groups as "advocates"; and, finally, researchers as "information brokers". This means paying close attention to the most appropriate scale for policy action, such that local strategies to achieve the goal of reducing GBV are interlinked with actions to contest and confront GBV at regional, national and supra-national scales. In addition, the

20. See the paper by Carolyn Whitzman listed on the back page.

21. See the paper by Simon Reid-Henry and Ole Jacob Sending listed on the back page.

22. See the paper by Robert Muggah listed on the back page.

23. For an extensive recent literature on urban climate change resilience see *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 25, No 2 and Vol 26, No 1.

24. See the paper by Robert Muggah listed on the back page, page 352.

25. See the paper by Simon Reid-Henry and Ole Jacob Sending listed on the back page, page 434.

26. See the paper by Ailsa Winton listed on the back page, page 407.

27. See the paper by Carolyn Whitzman, Caroline Andrew and Kalpana Viswanath listed on the back page.

28. See the paper by Mariam Yazdani, Daniela Bercovitch and Jane Charles-Voltaire listed on the back page, page 464.

partnership framework shifts the focus from individual to collective solutions; from individualized security measures such as carrying pepper sprays or learning self-defence to those identified through collective consultative process in which women identify their right to live, work, move around and participate in the city. Partnership processes in the global North and South, as well as at the international level, show how the combination of actors has the potential to mobilize sufficient power, information and resources to create the kind of urban social change that can promote gender equity, diversity and inclusion.[27]

A final example that seeks to simultaneously or sequentially address all three objectives across the continuum is the Viva Rio project in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

"The goal of Viva Rio's Tambou Lapè project in Bel Air is to **reduce** community violence and to **manage and transform** conflict in the intervention area. As a stabilization strategy, the project works with local power structures through a process of peace negotiations between local community leaders. It also facilitates the implementation of other community projects, thus solidifying the process of stabilization and development as well as the presence of Viva Rio in the neighbourhood."[28] [emphasis added]

Following the signing of a peace agreement by rival leaders of four areas of Greater Bel Air, together with important dignitaries, Viva Rio implemented a highly innovative "incentive" programme that combined peace and education. After one month free of homicides, Viva Rio offered scholarships to children and adolescents in a lottery-based selection procedure. If a conflict-related violent death occurred, the lottery draw was suspended for the month. After two months without a violent death, the programme offered vocational training grants to rival group members ("*bases*"). Every month without violent death—resulting from collective or personal reasons—a lottery draw award was made and granted to the leaders of the *bases*, in recognition of the safety advances made in Bel Air. Awards varied and sometimes included motorcycles, which are a symbol of prestige.

This is only one component of an extensive programme of interventions undertaken by Viva Rio in Haiti over the past 10 years as part of a South–South knowledge transfer. A community development methodology, originally developed in Brazil over 20 years of working in favelas, has been adjusted to the Haitian context to work "from within" and in collaboration with the community. This allows the organization to actively confront its "outsider status" and grants it the opportunity to be more spatially and socially connected to realities on the ground to combat the violence that has plagued the country.

VII. NEXT STAGES: DILEMMAS IN ADDRESSING SENSATIONALISM OF URBAN CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

A consistent and very real concern across cities, categories and political contexts is the exaggeration and sensationalism that are encroaching on this area of policy-focused work. This results in a dilemma; while the global media attention given to tragic gang rape issues (such as the case of Jyoti Singh Pandey in Delhi) was essential in raising awareness of this profoundly severe manifestation of urban violence, sensationalizing can create backlashes in terms of implementing policies to actively address only this type of GBV and neglecting others. More recently, the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in June 2014 resulted in a comparable dilemma. In this case it was a concern that this initiative would result in the neglect of everyday rape in contexts outside of armed conflict. Yet these endemic forms of violence erode urban dwellers' quality of life much more than the extreme examples sensationalized by predominantly Western policy-makers and the media.

As we go forward, while it is important to understand better the increasingly intersectional and scalar complexities that comprise the "new frontiers" of urban violence, it is also essential to challenge sensational notions of it as "apocalyptic". It is worth remembering that violence is imagined and framed by global discourses as much as other facets of development, if not more so. We need to embrace and address complex local and transnational realities of urban violence and conflict in pragmatic ways. This will entail, first, conducting more high-quality evidence-based empirical research in order to grasp the nuances of such phenomena, and second, recognizing that interventions to reduce urban violence and conflict may realistically involve their management rather than their eradication.

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