Preventing Violent Urban Conflict

A Thematic Paper for the United Nations - World Bank Study on Conflict Prevention

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About this Paper

The new UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has made prevention his top priority. Conflict prevention is now understood not only in terms of averting the outbreak, but also the continuation, escalation and recurrence, of conflict.[*] The Secretary-General has recognised that in order for the UN to shift from its current, largely reactive, posture to a prevention-oriented approach, it will need to better integrate its peace and security, development and human rights pillars of work.[†] Sustaining peace and sustainable development will need to work hand in glove, rather than along two separate tracks as has often been the case in the past. In an effort to help shift the system toward this new approach, the UN and the World Bank are undertaking a joint flagship study on Preventing Violent Conflict. This thematic paper on preventing violent urban conflict was produced as a backgrounder for the UN-World Bank study.

Introduction: violence, conflict and urbanization

The future of violent conflict is urban – because the future of humanity is urban. If we want to prevent future violent conflict, we must prevent violent urban conflict.

More than half of the world's population now lives in cities. By 2050, some 6.4 billion people will be urbanites.[1] 90 per cent of the increase is expected in Asia and Africa. On current trends, Kinshasa, Karachi and Lagos will each have over 20 million inhabitants by 2030. Angola, Iraq, Sudan and Uganda will each add 25 million people to their urban populations, while Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Tanzania will each contribute 50 million people.[2]

The concentration of people, power and profit in cities creates opportunities for sustainable and peaceful development. But urbanization also disrupts established interests and power balances, changing a society's political economy and economic geography by moving power away from rural, often agrarian, forces, towards industrial, mercantile and urban actors, disrupting established social institutions, and changing identities.[3] Inevitably, these social, economic and political changes are contested, and that contestation can generate conflict, including conflict over how the city and those who live within it should be governed. Who should set the norms by which scarce resources are allocated and protection and social services provided? When disputes arise over these allocations, or over their outcomes, who should settle those disputes, and how?

Typically, a variety of neighbourhood, civil, municipal, state – and in some cases informal and illicit – actors emerge within cities to play these 'governmental' roles, setting and enforcing norms and resolving disputes. This contestation amongst the polity – the inhabitants of the polis, the city – is what is colloquially called politics, even where the actors involved operate outside formal state or 'Political' institutions. In fact, much of this urban contestation of governance happens below and outside formal, capital-P Politics.[4]

Contemporary urban governance usually involves not just formal state and municipal authorities, but also a variety of non-state, social, business, religious, labour union, political or hybrid organizations competing to govern territory, populations, flows or simply markets, within the city. Many of these groups avoid formal political roles and associations, but play central informal roles, mediating between the state and populations. Violence associated with these forms of informal governance, and the competitions between actors that seek to wield this informal governmental power, can take many forms: strikes, riots, 'crime wars', protests, neighbourhood rivalries, vigilantism – even terrorist strikes on civilian targets.

When the state or municipal authorities' ability to manage the change inherent in urbanization is weak, the space for such informal governmental actors to emerge as providers and protectors of local communities increases – and so too does the likelihood of violence, as different actors compete

for these informal governmental roles.[5] Yet not all urban violence derives from this contestation of power to govern neighbourhoods, people, flows or markets – whether overtly or clandestinely. Some urban violence can be more disorganized or domestic in nature.

The prevention of violent urban conflict should not, therefore, be understood to be synonymous either with the prevention of all urban violence, *per se*, or the prevention of urban conflict, *per se*. Urban violence may fall short of the intensity and scale thresholds traditionally associated with the category of 'armed conflict'; and urban conflict may not be violent. The prevention of violent urban conflict is about addressing the intersection of these two phenomena (see Figure 1 below). It involves preventing urban conflict – an inherent part of urbanization – from becoming (too) violent, and preventing urban violence from being organized along the lines of large-scale, inter-group competition for formal political authority we traditionally conceptualize as 'armed conflict', even if urban violence remains an indicator of ongoing contestation for informal governmental power.

Figure 1: The relationship between urban violence and urban conflict
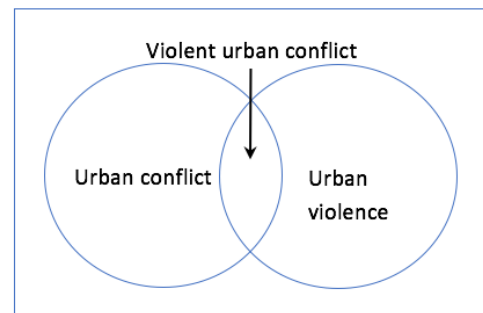
Adapting 'conflict prevention' theory and practice to this terrain is not straightforward. Until recently, most theorizing and practice of 'conflict prevention' has privileged armed conflict conducted in and from rural areas, aimed at securing formal political authority. It has excluded questions of criminal violence – whether or not that violence was intended to secure clandestine influence over formal political institutions, or informal governmental control over neighbourhoods or illicit trafficking routes or vice markets.[6] And it has also largely overlooked many of the other forms of informal organized violence in urban settings, such as neighbourhood militias, private security markets, political militias, union violence and state repression. The 'civil war' orientation of much conflict prevention theory derives from historic patterns of manoeuvre of massed troops or rural insurgents, with a resulting bias towards large-scale battles and 'battle deaths'. This raises questions about how well the traditional understandings of the relationship between violence, conflict and governance embedded within 'conflict prevention' theory and practice map onto contemporary urban life, and whether our approach to 'conflict prevention' may need to adapt to accommodate those realities.

To explore these questions, we begin this paper with an overview of urbanization trends and what is known about how these relate to risks of large-scale violence, identifying factors relating to demography, horizontal inequality and

governance as particularly significant. Next, we look at three obstacles to adapting 'conflict prevention' theory and practice to account for these insights: a) conceptual; b) data-related; c) capability- and mandate-related. Finally, we reflect on what forms the prevention of violent urban conflict might take, if these obstacles were addressed.

We argue that existing international approaches to conflict prevention – including mediation and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) – need to be adapted to the contemporary realities of urban life, paying more attention to how informal urban governance connects to formal politics. We argue for greater attention to urban group identities, networks, livelihoods and culture. We suggest that international involvement in the prevention of violent urban conflict should focus on the emergence of violent urban armed groups whose informal governmental power has implications for national (and international) politics. And we argue for the adaptation of existing conflict prevention tools to develop a coherent approach for the 'managed exit' of these groups from violent contestation of informal governmental power, while harnessing the social capital within these groups to foster sustainable development.

1. Urbanization and violence

Humanity is increasingly likely to live in a city. In 1950, 30 per cent of all people lived in cities; by 2050 the figure will probably be 66 per cent.[7] The urban population has grown by over 500 per cent between 1950 (746 million) and 2014 (3.9 billion).

The biggest changes will come in Asia and Africa. Today, only 40 to 48 per cent of people in those regions live in cities, compared to 70 per cent in the Americas and the Caribbean, Europe and Oceania (Figure 2, below). However, urban growth is much higher in Africa and Asia than other regions (Figure 3). More than 2 billion people are expected to be added to African and Asian urban populations by 2050. 37 per cent of all such growth, globally, will occur in just three countries: India (adding 404 million urban dwellers); China (292 million); and Nigeria (212 million).[8]

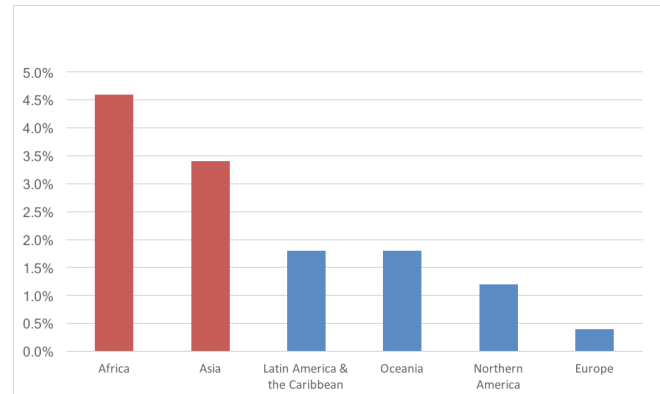**Figure 2: Share of Population Living in Urban Areas, 2015**
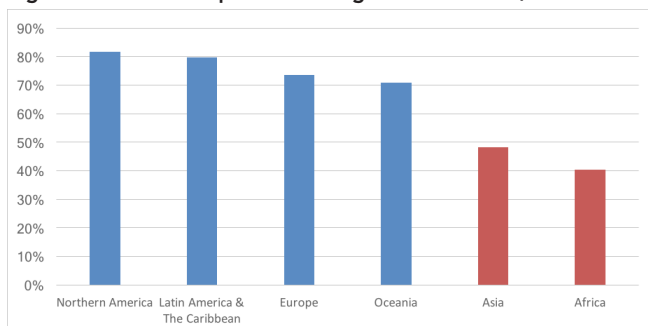
Source: UNDESA, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision (calculations based on "File 3: Urban Population at Mid-Year by Major Area, Region and Country, 1950-2050", available at: https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/CD-ROM/)

Urbanization – especially rapid urbanization – poses enormous governance challenges. This is concerning,

because rapid urbanization is common in fragile and conflict-affected countries (Figure 4), where growth has increased by 298 per cent over the past 40 years and is projected to continue.[9] While we must be cautious not to resort to alarmist, securitized rhetoric equating rapid urbanization to moral degradation or Malthusian time bombs,[10] it is true that urban violence – especially homicide – rates in some fragile countries not formally 'in armed conflict' now rival and even out-strip homicide rates in countries at war. The homicide rate in El Salvador in 2013, for example, was over 70 per 100,000; in DRC, around 21.[11]

Figure 3: Average Annual Urban Growth Rate, 2000-2015

Source: UNDESA, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision (calculations based on "File 3: Urban Population at Mid-Year by Major Area, Region and Country, 1950-2050", available at: https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/CD-ROM/)

Yet the link between urbanization, unrest, violence and conflict is complex. Violence in urban areas is heterogeneous, not uniformly distributed, and does not correlate in any straightforward manner to population size or urban geography.[12] Urban violence takes many forms, from inter-personal and gender-based violence,[13] to riots, to more structured and well organized forms of criminal or political violence, including communal contest and terrorism.[14] Urban violence does not necessarily precipitate the large-scale armed violence usually categorized as 'armed conflict'; and armed conflict in the countryside may – or may not – disrupt urban life.[15]

Despite this heterogeneity, three factors seem particularly significant to understand the relationship between urbanization and violence.

a. Demography

First, demographic stressors, especially the emergence of a large un- or under-employed urban youth population, seem to create risks of political unrest and violent political conflict.[16] The more urbanized a society is when it experiences a 'youth bulge', the more likely it appears to experience low-intensity political violence. This is especially the case when urbanization occurs in the context of low rates of completed secondary education.[17] In contexts where rapid urbanization involves rural-urban migration by poorly-educated young men in search of work,[18] weak urban employment and limited emigration opportunities may lead to frustration and unrest.[19]

Figure 4: Urban Population in Selected Fragile and Conflict-Affected Countries, 2000-2015
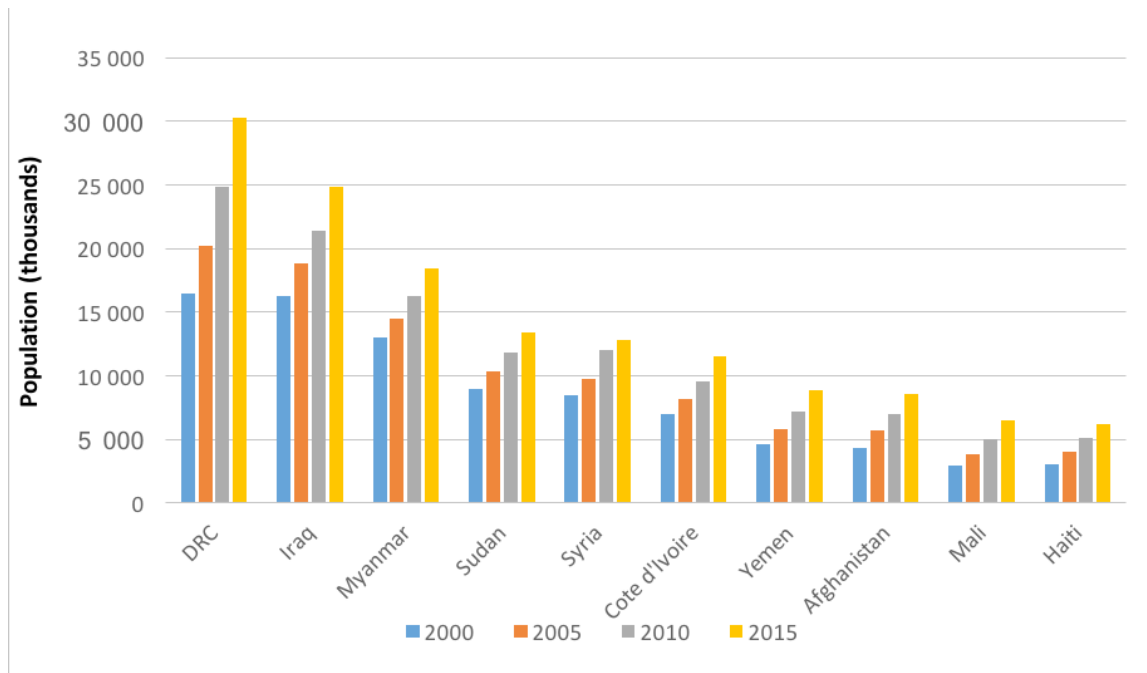
Source: UNDESA, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision (calculations based on "File 3: Urban Population at Mid-Year by Major Area, Region and Country, 1950-2050", available at: https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/CD-ROM/)

At one level, this may be good news for conflict prevention, because contemporary youth bulges are just that – bulges, which are expected to pass. This may imply that young urban men will 'age out' of violence in coming decades. One study suggests that the risks of armed conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, MENA and Asia will drop by as much as 40 per cent in the three decades between now and 2050.[20] But existing evidence also makes clear that factors other than demography and labour-market participation must also be considered to determine where and when urban youth will generate conflict and/or violence.[21]

b. Inequality

Here, a second factor looms large: socio-economic inequality, especially between ethnic, religious or geographic groups (rather than income inequality among individuals). Municipalities with lower income inequality (between individuals) appear to experience lower crime rates.[22] But some research suggests that the proximity of neighbourhoods with visible spending disparities (at the neighbourhood level) appears to strain social relations in ways that lead to violent crime.[23] Of course, disparities between different physical neighbourhoods often map onto other social cleavages, including race, and there is evidence that such differences in urban settings can generate violence within groups – and not simply between them.[24] Similarly, differentials in individual and group experiences of the urban built environment – the physical infrastructure of their neighbourhoods – may also influence participation in crime and violence.[25] Inter-group dynamics are thus central to understanding how urbanization leads to violence.[26]

c. Governance

Much urban violence manifests as social violence, violent crime, unrest, and what is often termed 'riot'. Whether such violence develops into more sustained, organized political violence seems, in turn, to depend on governance-related factors, especially the capacity of state actors to manage urbanization by providing growing populations access to livelihoods, housing stock, socio-economic services, security and infrastructure.[27]

Where state capacity to govern is weak, alternative, non-state groups may emerge with governmental power over local neighbourhoods, populations, flows or markets. Frequently, state actors' relations with local populations are mediated through these non-state armed groups, which can use their intermediary role to extract concessions from the state, including permission to participate in criminal activity. This is particularly acute in urban settings as urbanization tends to foster and reorder relations between these different neighbourhood and social groups, and political organizations, precisely because it brings rapid development. State and non-state actors compete and collaborate to govern this development – setting the norms that shape how it happens, allocating resources to achieve it, resolving the resulting disputes – and capturing the rents it generates.[28]

The dynamics of urban violence in cities as varied as Havana, Jakarta, Karachi, Medellin, Nairobi, New York, Palermo, and Tripoli have recently been explained in these terms.[29] In each case, the dynamics of urban violence have been shaped by strategic interaction between formal political actors and informal non-state actors wielding violence as part of a localized, informal governmental strategy. Laurent Gayer, for

Figure 5: Global distribution of city fragility*
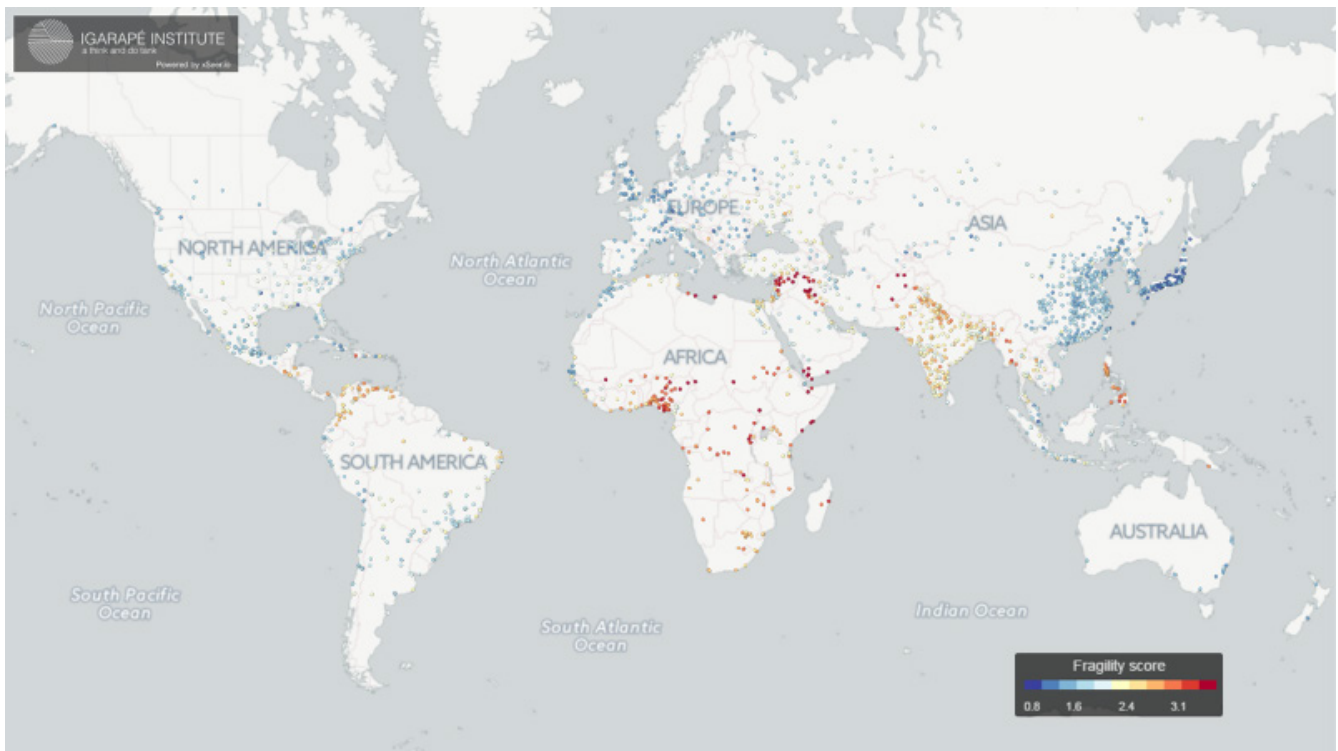
Source: Source: Igarapé Institute and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research
* The definition of 'fragility' used for this map addresses not only vulnerability to violence but also variables relating to poverty and natural hazards.

example, describes the dynamics of violence in Karachi as those of a "battleground for rival armed groups competing for votes, land, jobs" and extortion rents.[30]

d. Locating the risk of violence

The interaction of these three factors – demography, socio-economic inequality, governance – varies significantly not only between cities, but also within them.[31] But it is the accumulation of risk factors that seems to best predict the onset of unrest and violence at the city level,[32] and participation in violence at the individual level.[33] Recognition of this has provided a basis for mapping urban fragility at the city level.[34] (See Figure 5.)

Increasingly, researchers are also beginning to understand how to identify and locate the risks of violence within cities. High levels of violence are usually concentrated in specific districts, neighbourhoods or even street corners.[35] These often appear connected to the capacity to extract rents from valuable flows, markets and transactions.[36] Closely related, vulnerability to urban violence appears to be specific not only to *place* but also to an individual's location within a social network that has been exposed to – or developed a culture of – violent conflict resolution. In most cities, around 0.5 to 1 per cent of the population is usually responsible for 75 per cent of homicides.[37]

2. Can we prevent violent conflict in urban settings?

Particularly in North America, practitioners focused on urban and community violence reduction have developed

an increasingly robust body of evidence suggesting that specific types of interventions targeted where these risks intersect are highly effective.[38] Urban violence in these contexts, it turns out, is highly 'sticky' – unlikely to be displaced.[39] It can be deterred – if the state and community work effectively together to send focused deterrence signals.[40] And because the networks through which violent behaviours are reproduced and transmitted can be mapped, such interventions can also be effectively scaled. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that these insights may be able to be adapted from the contexts in which they emerged – particularly relating to inner-city gangs – to other urban violence contexts, including those involving terrorism.[41]

Although we have improved our understanding of how to locate the risks of *urban violence* and thus prevent it, there are at least three obstacles to applying these lessons to the prevention of *violent urban conflict* in urban settings: a) conceptual; b) data-related; c) capability- and mandate-related.

a. Blinkered thinking

Conflict prevention theorizing and practice have tended to focus on the social and political characteristics of rural terrain as the major theatres of armed conflict, treating urban violence as a category apart.

The celebrated civil war scholar Stathis Kalyvas has even chastised his peers for not taking this rural character of armed conflict seriously enough, arguing that urban civil war

and insurgency are extremely rare – and that other forms of urban violence, such as riots, terrorism and organized crime should be separately studied.[42] Other scholars, however, argue that civil war theorists have ignored important urban insurgencies, especially in the Middle East and South Asia, and thus overlooked how urban governance mis-steps can generate civil war and intersect with 'civic conflict'.[43] These lessons have taken on an added urgency in the context of the so-called 'Arab Spring', in which urban protest and dissent generated political upheaval and armed conflict.[44] Other scholars argue that contemporary armed groups do not break neatly into ideal-type political and criminal categories, but rather tend to combine and switch between different strategies for governmental power – including insurgency, terrorism, and organized crime.[45]

The failure of much conflict prevention theory and practice to consider the specific dynamics of urban conflict is all the more noticeable, given the significance of urban combat in 20th Century warfare, whether in Beirut (since the 1970s),[46] US military operations in Mogadishu (1993) and Iraq (since 2003),[47] Russian military operations in Chechnya (1994–1996 and 1999–2000)[48] – or contemporary Syria.[49] International peace operations have likewise struggled with urban violence in recent years, whether in Mogadishu, Port-au-Prince, or Bangui. Military theorists have paid growing attention to urban operations, from the concept of 'Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain'[50] to the later concept of 'three-block warfare', which has played an important role in recent stabilization efforts.[51] The ICRC argues that as armed conflict increasingly occurs in urban environments, it has cumulative and long-term impacts on essential services, with consequences for people's health, education, livelihoods and dignity.[52] Much contemporary terrorism also seems focused on urban targets, perhaps because the terrorizing effects of striking civilian targets are greater in urban centres than in rural settings.[53] And cities hold a crucial place in post-conflict recovery efforts, because they can serve both as engines of economic recovery and as venues for conflict relapse.[54]

Thus, even if the civil wars of the past have been primarily rural affairs, this may not serve as good guidance for what violent conflict over governmental power will look like in the future. The siloed approach to urban violence – separating community violence reduction, criminal justice approaches and conflict prevention efforts – risks overlooking the fact that the violent competition for governmental power in cities may not look like 'civil war', but manifest in other forms. Adapting urban conflict prevention efforts to benefit from the insights of urban violence prevention requires looking beyond this blinkered thinking – and looking for other manifestations of violent competition for governmental power in urban contexts.

b. You can't treat what you don't look for

Our ability to 'look for' these other manifestations of violent competition for governmental power in cities – whether formal or informal – is hampered by at least three existing limitations in current data collection practice.

First, most conflict data sets focus on 'battle deaths',

and simply do not capture riots, communal contests, and other forms of organized violence – including mixed political-criminal violence – that may be typical of the violent competition for informal governmental power in urban contexts, but do not meet the criteria of 'battles' in the traditional sense.[55] Urban violence may not meet the 'intensity' requirements, or be clearly attributable to defined armed groups with political goals, in the ways that these datasets require for violence to be coded and captured. Yet there are both theoretical reasons, and, increasingly, empirical evidence suggesting that competition for governmental power in cities takes these non-traditional forms. One recent analysis of data from Africa, for example, suggests precisely that where political violence occurs in urban settings, it is morphing from higher-intensity contests that generate significant 'battle deaths', to lower-intensity violent competitions that manifest as riots and communal tensions.[56]

Second, many (though not all) 'conflict data' sets focus on Africa. Yet Africa is the least urbanized region. It would not be surprising if conflict analysis and theorizing based on datasets in the least urbanized region miss important aspects of urban conflict dynamics. To better understand – and prevent – urban conflict, we may need to extend data collection and analysis efforts in other regions.

Third, much urban violence happens at the sub-national – and even sub-municipal – level. Indeed, as we saw, in many cases, urban violence 'sticks' to specific street corners, even as the personnel involved change. Most conflict data simply do not operate at this resolution.

c. Managing prevention in urban settings – mandates and capabilities

Beyond data-related issues, addressing violent urban conflict also raises important questions for international actors engaged in preventing conflict, relating both to mandates and capabilities.

In many cases, the international community lacks a formal mandate to engage in conflict prevention activities in urban settings, because urban violence is seen as a domestic law and order issue, rather than a peace and security issue – and certainly not a question of *international* peace and security. Moreover, while, as we saw in section 1, the risks of urban violence may be growing in Africa and Asia, to date 'urban violence' is often associated with Latin America – a region which has largely eschewed outside intervention since the end of the Cold War.

Nonetheless, there is a growing awareness in the international community of the need to prepare to prevent violent urban conflict – and of its increasing impact on ongoing international engagements. From Haiti to the Central African Republic to Somalia, peace operations are deployed in densely populated urban environments in which non-state armed groups compete and collaborate with state actors for formal and informal governmental power. In the aftermath of armed conflict, rapid urbanization is often associated with the return of displaced populations – including ex-combatants – and combines with a lack of

economic opportunities and low levels of social capital and community networks to generate urban violence and crime. In such settings, the presence of demographic, socio-economic inequality and governance risk factors identified earlier in this paper, coupled with endurance of networks of war and ready availability of arms, recruits and illicit opportunities in urban settings, can entangle countries in a spiral of violence. Such patterns have been particularly evidenced in Guatemala, El Salvador and, to some extent, Liberia.[57]

Cases as diverse as East Timor and Afghanistan suggest that the concentration of international actors – and associated funds – in capital cities can have distorting effects on national political economies, rewarding those who can capture rents from supplying housing stock, goods and services to wealthy visitors, fuelling economic and political grievances and fostering rural-urban divisions.[58] Similar patterns were evident in the reconstruction of Beirut following the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).[59] Yet international actors in cities rarely have guidance on how to link procurement decisions to conflict prevention strategies.[60]

Even where they are mandated to address urban violence or violent urban conflict, this poses significant operational challenges for peacekeepers who often lack the necessary capabilities, training and resources.[61] But there have been limited successes, notably in dealing with urban gangs in Haiti.[62] Beyond the operational dilemmas associated with urban stabilization, negotiating with urban armed groups with hybrid criminal-political agendas also poses strategic challenges for international actors, since they frequently lack effective deterrent capabilities, credible socio-economic incentives for exit from violence and political guidance on how to tackle criminal markets and their ties to local governmental power.[63] The challenges associated with navigating complex urban systems and local governance networks are similarly acute for humanitarian and development actors, accustomed to operating in rural terrain.[64]

The central problem is, as Antônio Sampaio has explained, that we are operating with a "toolbox that has limited application for urban environments".[65] International mediation efforts, for example, tend to focus on national level political dialogue, rather than bottom-up, community-driven violence reduction efforts. And the limited experience with support from international actors to engagement with urban gangs – such as the OAS' role in supporting the 'gang truce' process in El Salvador – has not yet had overwhelmingly positive results.[66]

What might better adapted efforts to prevent violent urban conflict look like?

3. Managing exits from urban violence

In the preceding sections, we argued that cities are inevitably sites of contestation and competition for governmental power. It is no accident that the root of the word politics is 'polis', Greek for city or community; the same intimate relationship between cities and politics is reflected in the English word 'citizen'. But politics – and urban life – can be as much about cooperation, innovation and development as about violence, destruction and insecurity.[67] We should not, therefore, aim, to 'prevent conflict' in cities, *per se* – but rather to develop an approach to violent conflict prevention that embraces the political nature of urban life while discouraging the use of violence in the contestation for governmental power.

'Preventing urban conflict' thus requires assisting local actors to organize and govern the competition for power in inclusive, sustainable and – centrally – non-violent ways. This requires building governance capacities, supporting effective urban planning, and assisting urban safety and security initiatives. There is clearly a role for the international development community in supporting such initiatives to build peaceful, just and inclusive cities, in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 11 and 16. But where does 'conflict prevention' *per se* fit in? What role is there for international actors in 'preventing violent urban conflict'?

The central role of 'conflict prevention' is in preventing urban violence from becoming entrenched in the competition for governmental power – or, put another way, from preventing urban conflict becoming routinely violent. To do this, the 'prevention of violent urban conflict' should focus on identifying violent competitions for urban governmental power that risk impacting formal politics and assist parties to this competition to find ways to govern the city without routine resort to violence. To do this, we suggest, existing conflict prevention tools – such as mediation and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) – will need to pay more attention to the contemporary realities of urban life – to urban group identities, networks, livelihoods and culture. This will involve finding ways for cities to manage non-state groups that prevent them from becoming violent or, where they have become violent, to help them exit violence and join the lawful order.

To date, state and city authorities have tended to use criminal justice, policing and military tools to attempt to manage urban conflict and destroy urban armed groups,[68] as attested in Central America in recent years through *mano dura* efforts. But these typically end up increasing the intensity of violence because non-state armed groups fight back, or because they create 'vacancy chains' in criminal markets, with groups competing violently to fill spots left by state interventions to remove other actors.[69] On the other hand, efforts that encourage these groups to transform their behaviours, while maintaining their identity and harnessing their social capital for more civic purposes – such as business or community engagement – seem more promising.[70] In Haiti, for example, Community Violence Reduction initiatives encouraged local gangs to abandon violence and transform themselves into local, for-profit service provision organizations.[71] And in New York, gangs such as the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation have been transformed into community justice and social support organizations.[72]

We are just at the beginning of understanding what a coherent approach to the 'managed exit' of such non-state

armed groups, and their members, from urban violence looks like. Early experiments in this area, such as gang truces and negotiated community violence reduction, seem to have features in common with existing approaches to conflict prevention, mediation and DDR. These commonalities include the use of trusted neutral mediators, sequenced trust-building, the creation of safe spaces and security guarantees, and management of community perceptions and interests.[73] But there are also important differences, which suggest a need to re-tool existing 'conflict prevention' methods to accommodate the realities of contemporary urban life.

Urban armed groups are frequently involved in informal and illicit markets, which offer livelihoods and prestige; urban conflict prevention efforts need to find incentives and leverage that address these interests and woo groups away from violence and crime.[74] The research touched on in section 1 suggesting that urban violence is 'sticky' also points to useful insights into how such interventions can be focused, targeted and calibrated, to offer different incentive packages to different actors in urban armed groups. And related 'focused deterrence' and community and gang violence reduction initiatives point to the potential utility of joined-up strategic signalling from international and state actors to encourage urban armed groups to give up criminal livelihoods and cultures of violence.[75]

Another important difference between existing conflict prevention and urban violence prevention approaches relates to amnesty: while amnesties have been used in the past to woo armed groups with political agendas back into lawful orders, their use in transforming armed groups with criminal agendas has been less closely studied.[76] Important new experiments are now beginning in this area, for example in the implementation of the peace accord between the FARC and the Colombian government, which gives judges the discretion to determine whether specific crimes are eligible for amnesty. This will have significant implications for the future dynamics of Colombia's coca production and trafficking markets. [77] While this may at first seem to relate primarily to violence in the rural settings where FARC is strongest, the realities of Central American cocaine trafficking mean that the dynamics of violence in those rural settings are intimately related with cocaine flows through cities in Colombia and other parts of Central America – notably Mexico. And the success or failure of this

approach to amnesty may also colour how amnesties are used in dealing with other armed groups with mixed political and criminal strategies in the future.

And a third important difference between existing conflict prevention approaches and urban violence reduction negotiations relates to the identity of mediators: evidence to date suggests that 'former' gang and urban armed group members may be effective interlocutors in dialogue with such groups aimed at preventing conflict and violence. 'Formers' appear to operate as highly credible disruptors of the transmission of habits and norms encouraging the use of violence to resolve disputes, and have been central players in reducing urban violence in a variety of North American programmes.[78] Yet international actors have little experience working with and supporting such actors.

4. Conclusion

Much, therefore, remains to be learned. What we can say, however, is that the strides made in recent years in urban violence prevention offer important new pathways for research and practice in preventing violent urban conflict, if we have the imagination and commitment to figure out how to adapt them to this new context. The central challenge is to avoid trying to shoe-horn the variety of forms of violence and armed groups that operate within cities, and that often provide urban populations protection, livelihoods and social services, into our pre-existing 'conflict prevention' thinking and categories. Instead, we must accept the city on its own terms and adapt international efforts to support conflict prevention to those realities.

For international actors, there may also be a tendency to want to prevent *all* conflict and *all* violence. But conflict is an inevitable part of urbanization and of the informal political contestation within urban life. And while the prevention of all violence may be a worthwhile goal, it is not synonymous with the prevention of violent urban conflict. In this paper, we have argued that international actors should focus on those urban competitions for governmental power which are at risk of having violence become entrenched, with implications for national and international politics. Figuring out where those risks arise is perhaps the first, central challenge for adapting 'conflict prevention' theory and practice to the future reality of humankind's urban existence.

ENDNOTES

*   Security Council Resolution 2282 (27 April 2016).

†   Guterres highlights the importance of recognizing the links between peace and sustainable development, UN News Centre, 24 January 2017.

1.   See John de Boer, 'The sustainable development fight will be won or lost in our cities', Word Economic Forum, 24 September 2015.

2.   United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/352) (New York, 2014), p. 1.

3.   See e.g. Jeffrey Herbst, "Population Change, Urbanization, and Political Consolidation", in Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis (Oxford: OUP, 2006); Joel S. Migdal, "Urbanization and Political Change: The Impact of Foreign Rule", Comparative Studies in Society and History Vol. 19, No. 3 (Jul., 1977), pp. 328-34.

4.   See e.g. D. Kruijt, 'Divided Cities: Urban Informality, Exclusion and Violence', in Sourcebook: A Rich Menu for the Poor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands (The Hague, 2008).

5.   Robert Muggah, "Fixing Fragile Cities: Solutions for Urban Violence and Poverty," Foreign Affairs, 15 January 2015 (available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2015-01-15/fixing-fragile-cities); John de Boer, 'Resilience and the Fragile City: Reducing Vulnerability to Complex Urban Crises', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Working Paper, March 2015;

6.   See James Cockayne, Hidden Power: The Strategic Logic of Organized Crime (Hurst/OUP: London/New York, 2016).

7.   UN-DESA, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, op. cit., p. 1.

8.   Ibid.

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