URBANIZATION, PEACE, AND SECURITY

Antônio Sampaio

Thematic Lead for Cities and Illicit Economies at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

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ABOUT

Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) is a unique global network of 24 cities and over 40 community-based and international partners with the ambitious goal to halve urban violence by 2030. The network represents over 25 million people in cities across the world and was established in 2019. Peace in Our Cities is co-facilitated by three US-based independent institutions: the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies at New York University's Center on International Cooperation; the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego; and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security. PiOC is funded by these three organizations, which draw limited funds from their own endowments as well as from governments and philanthropic organizations. PiOC seeks to reduce and prevent urban violence worldwide—preserving lives and helping cities thrive. It does so by creating concrete, participatory, and evidence-based platform exchanges to reduce and prevent severe violence in member cities, while also building a global movement of Introduction urban-violence-reduction advocates. The PiOC approach is based on three lines of action:– Amplify policymaker awareness of the genuine scope and scale of urban violence and opportunities available to help cities address it.– Advance evidence-informed, balanced policy solutions and peacebuilding approaches to reduce the most severe forms of violence in urban contexts.– Accompany city leaders, community partners, and civil society through peer exchanges and information access to realize ambitious targets for violence reduction. In line with PiOC's central mission, this research effort is a direct response to demands from network members seeking evidence and actionable analysis that could lead to significant reductions in urban violence. This research effort is one such initiative to advance evidence-informed policy solutions to address different forms of serious violence in urban settings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global population's demographic and social transition into predominantly urban environments has implications for security dynamics and efforts to promote peace. Yet cities, their governments, and unique enablers for violence are rarely featured in international peace and security discussions among multilateral agencies, donors, development banks, and think tanks. This oversight risks rendering strategies to promote peace, prevent conflict, govern security sectors, and reconstruct and simply understand armed conflict and fragility unfit for purpose in a time of rapid urbanization.

The global population was estimated to have become predominantly urban (crossing the threshold of 50 percent living in urban areas) around 2008[1], and it will cross yet another threshold, two-thirds urban, by 2050.[2] The implications for the political organization of our world are not so well known: from 2020 to 2070, the number of cities[3] in low-income countries is forecast to grow by 76 percent.[4] From 1975 to 2015, the number of cities in sub-Saharan Africa tripled from 523 to 1,640, and in the Middle East and North Africa it quadrupled from 193 to 788.[5] These numbers signify not just a demographic shift but also a concrete political challenge: how can multilateral actors support and partner with the growing number of local governments, community leaders, and civil society groups emerging in this new landscape of cities, often in fragile or conflict-affected areas and with little planning, resources, and administrative capacities.

This report draws from a recent wave of academic and policy research on urban violence, conflict, and organized crime to call on policy communities to directly address these urgent challenges facing the increasing share of populations in fragile and conflict-affected settings living in urban areas—not just big cities but also small towns and secondary urban centers. Programs on international development, peace, and security tend to claim a focus on "local" priority and communities. But they rarely focus on cities as a specific workstream with cross-cutting features and challenges, rendering the field extremely fragmented. Research on criminal violence in Latin American cities, for instance, seldom builds upon knowledge from Africa or the Middle East – and vice versa. Conflict, fragility, and peacebuilding communities of practice among multilateral organizations (e.g., the United Nations and African Union), development banks, donor agencies, and national governments do not often dedicate specific attention to the urban space or to how urbanization affects their work. This despite the fact that most, if not all, work on peace, security, and development must address cities and towns—simply because this is increasingly where people live.

Linking Politics and (Urban) Space

This report tries to address this gap by proposing an urbanization focus on existing peace and security agendas – especially conflict, violence prevention and peacebuilding. The target audience for this report is multilateral organizations (such as the UN and regional groupings), development banks, donor agencies, foundations, and think tanks. The report lays out how international security threats impact cities and can be better mitigated and prevented by addressing the specific spatial and political dynamics of urban governance.

These various actors and sectors can better address urbanization, and cities in general, by focusing on the urban political space as an analytical framework of how transnational and local threats to peace, such as organized crime and nonstate armed groups, affect cities. The urban political space comprises elements that make peace and security dynamics in cities unique. It is defined here as the clustering of multiple powerholders, territorial claims, and governance systems in close proximity and unequally distributed in space.

In other words, peace and security practitioners should focus on the linkage of politics and space. Whereas threats such as organized crime, terrorism, and ethnic conflict are not exclusive to cities, "when they occur in urban areas they are unavoidably related in their drivers, intensity, manifestations, and consequences to the layout of the city and the socio-spatial processes that shape urbanization."[6] Adapting policy frameworks for cities is, therefore, not just a desirable strategy but also a critical step to make international peace and security frameworks fit for purpose in an age of rapid urbanization precisely in the world's most fragile settings.

INTRODUCTION

The peace and security challenges facing our world are multiple and urgent—recent wars in Ukraine, Sudan, and the Middle East; geopolitical tensions between great powers; and the emergence of new technologies of war (including the spread of weaponized drones) are a few prominent examples. As multilateral actors such as the United Nations, regional political groupings, and development banks adapt to this transition toward a more dangerous geopolitical environment, they face the additional challenge of—but also growing opportunities for—building peace and security at the local level. These two dimensions of security— the local and the global—have become increasingly dissociated from each other in global discussions and workstreams as many multilateral organizations and countries have come to see great-power competition as the defining driver of insecurity in our age.

This is a critical oversight in international security strategies, as local governance and security mechanisms are both drivers of and responders to crucial global threats, including armed conflict, organized crime, and climate change disruptions. The United Nations and the World Bank have diagnosed that armed conflict today is "often simultaneously subnational and transnational,"[7] and the United Nations' own *New Agenda for Peace* stresses the linkage between local and international trends in producing our world's current "interlocking threats."[8] To respond to the growing connectivity of transnational and local threats—and more importantly to prevent them from erupting into violence—security in the twenty-first century needs to adapt to an increasingly urban world where local governance systems are indispensable partners. Cities, as this report argues, are a missing link to connect the local and global dimensions of twenty-first-century peace and security.

By now, the world's transition into a predominantly urban one is well known among communities working on peace and security; the global population was estimated to have crossed the threshold of 50 percent living in urban areas around 2008[9], and it will cross yet another threshold, two-thirds urban, by 2050.[10] The implications for the political organization of our world are not so well known: from 2020 to 2070, the number of cities[11] in low-income countries is forecast to grow by 76 percent.[12] From 1975 to 2015, the number of cities in sub-Saharan Africa tripled from 523 to 1,640 and in the Middle East and North Africa it quadrupled from 193 to 788.[13] These numbers signify not just a demographic shift but also a concrete political challenge: how to support and partner with the growing number of local governments, governance institutions, and civil society groups emerging in this new landscape of cities, often in fragile or conflict-affected areas and with little planning, resources, and administrative capacities.

In other words, we are facing not only an urbanization of global population but also of governance—increasingly, people are being organized and governed by city administrations. These urban governance systems can be crucial mechanisms for peace, but they can also cede power or succumb to predatory groups or criminal interests or simply be unable to implement conflict-prevention or peacebuilding policies designed with national governments in mind.

Additionally, the densification of rural communities driving the birth of so many new cities means territories traditionally conceived by external actors as rural have become urban areas. This demographic and governance shift makes small and medium-sized towns and cities crucial geographies for peace and security action.[14] In the Lake Chad region, for instance, recent research has shown that large regional hubs like Maiduguri (in northeastern Nigeria) are relatively sheltered from insurgent groups like the Islamic State, but surrounding villages and towns—some of which doubled in size in 15 years—are increasingly vulnerable to predation and sometimes taxation by armed groups (see text box 1).[15] Other medium-sized centers grow equally rapidly: the city of Goma in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has received 700,000 additional people over the past two years (both in camps and in houses within the city) because of conflict, despite the fact that the city itself is a frequent target of violence.[16] Urbanization means peace and security strategies will be increasingly relevant for small but growing towns that are vulnerable to predation and utterly unprepared to protect themselves, let alone prepared to implement more-complex tasks such as conflict prevention or climate change adaptation.

The urban dimension of peace and security means adapting prevention and response tools to the urban space, from fragile settings such as the Lake Chad basin or the Democratic Republic of the Congo to much larger megacities such as Lagos or Karachi. There is a widespread sense among a growing community of experts that urbanization and the specificities of the urban space are undervalued and often completely overlooked by international organizations and governments working on conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and security. Policy-oriented research centers and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have raised the problem of sparse attention to urban areas in key peace and security frameworks such as security sector reform and conflict prevention.[17] Researchers working in the international development sector have also pointed out "a perceptible gap [in] the manner in which international donors, multilateral agencies, national and sub-national policymakers respond to urban challenges today," in large part due to a disciplinary separation between urban planning and the study of conflict and violence.[18] Scholars have also pointed out the way urban studies "tend to consider urbanization as an a-political process," bypassing the messy underbelly of conflict-generating politics linked to the urban space.[19]

This gap poses a great risk for multilateral bodies, country donors, and NGOs implementing their programs, as it calls into question how fit for purpose these international frameworks

are if they don't specifically examine the geographic unit where most of the global population lives.

The Urban Political Space as a Framework

This report tries to fill part of this gap by examining the implications of urbanization for promoting peace and security. It lays out how international security threats impact cities and can be better mitigated and prevented by addressing the specific spatial and political dynamics of urban governance.

Finally, it offers the concept of the urban political space as an analytical framework of how transnational and local threats to peace, such as organized crime and nonstate armed groups, engage with the governance and political economy of cities. The urban political space comprises the combination of political and spatial elements that make peace and security dynamics in cities unique. It is defined here as the clustering of multiple powerholders, territorial claims, and governance systems in close proximity and unequally distributed in space. This definition reflects how "classic" variables of the peace and security fields—such as armed groups, power, and alternative governance providers—are mediated in cities by spatial dynamics such as close proximity between adversaries, concentration of illicit economies, and socioeconomic inequalities. Competing claimants for power are also neighbors, which compresses social and political tensions into struggles for control over urban space.[20]

The local and the global jointly cluster in cities, with illicit economies connecting to global markets via urban infrastructure and becoming intertwined with local struggles there. Identifying the actors, economies, and governance patterns competing for limited urban space facilitates conflict prevention and peacebuilding tasks in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

Structure

This report has two main sections, the first on the problems and the second on solutions. It starts by laying out how two major threats to international peace and security—armed conflict and organized crime—pose specific challenges to cities in ways that are not often clear when using a national, disaggregated lens. The second part identifies the unique actions—those already undertaken and other potential ones—needed for urban peace and conflict prevention by cities, based on the concept of urban political space as a potentially unifying framework for peacebuilding and security at various levels. The concluding section proposes urbanization and the urban politics of peace as a distinct area of peace and security work that differs from national, international, or predominantly rural frameworks.

CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL URBANIZATION

Whereas cities have been sites of various types of violence for millennia, current patterns of urbanization alongside the impact of transnational criminal markets make cities increasingly vulnerable to nonstate armed groups imposing predatory forms of governance and resource extraction from urban infrastructure and population. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have challenged humanitarian responses and international law regarding hostilities in densely populated areas. More commonly, however, cities are the stage for low-intensity and protracted political and criminal violence.

Urbanization does not necessarily lead to increased risks of conflict or criminality. When urbanization is gradual or well managed, urbanites enjoy greater health, development, and security than their rural counterparts. When it is rapid and mishandled, especially in regions already affected by armed conflict and powerful organized criminal groups, social cohesion suffers, vast urban areas become vulnerable to predatory actors, intercommunity tensions tend to rise, and popular trust in government plunges.[21]

While Europe experienced rapid urbanization in previous centuries, the scale of this process in the Global South this century is "without historical precedent."[22] Graphic 1 (see page 7) shows the projected urban population growth (in percentages) from 2015 to 2035 in all 18 countries in the World Bank's 2024 list of conflict-affected countries, compared to the global estimate.[23] All countries except Ukraine are significantly above the projected global growth—with Ukraine being such an outlier because of a broader demographic trend of population contraction in some other Eastern European countries. Ten of the 18 countries are forecast to more than double their urban populations. For a country like Nigeria, with a large population, the growth in absolute numbers means a projected 100 million people being added to urban populations in a space of two decades. The scale of the challenge facing these conflict-affected states is clear from the proportion of urban populations living in poverty, which UN-Habitat has called the "urbanization of poverty."[24] In South Sudan, for instance, close to 70 percent of the urban population lived in extreme poverty in 2022.[25] With global poverty highly concentrated in fragile states—73 percent of people living in extreme poverty in the world are in fragile countries—it is not difficult to see how rapid urbanization will also mean a transference of poverty and its associated challenges to urban areas.[26]

Violence and Conflict Economies in the Lake Chad Region

Regional capitals in the Lake Chad region of West Africa, such as Maiduguri (capital of Borno state in northwest Nigeria) and Maroua (capital of Cameroon's Far North) are relatively protected from insurgent groups such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah lid-Da'awati wal-Jihad (JAS). These cities tend to concentrate security forces that deter major takeover attempts by militants. The same cannot be said, however, for small towns around those two cities. Despite having relatively small populations—usually fewer than 100,000 inhabitants—towns such as Mora, Kolofata, Tourou, Banki, Gwoza, and Rann have been severely affected by raids, looting, and taxation by the armed groups along roads. This predation has severely disrupted trade and human flows along Lake Chad's network of cities and towns, as the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has shown.[27]

Armed groups such as ISWAP and Boko Haram have usually targeted the premises of humanitarian agencies and local markets, but many attacks have involved fighters going house to house looting people's possessions and abducting residents. One town with historic importance for trans-Saharan trade routes, Malam Fatori, was deserted for seven years after its 30,000 residents fled Boko Haram violence in 2014.[28] Raids are usually accompanied by violence, with abductions and attacks on residents who resist the armed groups. Traders who have tapped into armed groups' microloans and could not repay them have usually been forcibly conscripted and made to join the fighters, while others are charged extortion money in exchange for "security."[29]

Aside from direct looting of towns, GI-TOC research has shown that armed groups tax several roads linking the Lake Chad region's urban system, imposing checkpoints and taxes on traders and individuals traveling by car between towns and the main cities, especially those connecting with Maiduguri, which is by far the largest in the region with over one million inhabitants. This is also accompanied by violence, with drivers reporting vehicles being set ablaze and abductions of women by fighters who consider them "spoils of war."[30]

This violence and disruption impact not only residents of the towns directly targeted but also the economic and food security of residents of larger cities that are apparently more protected. Armed groups have frequently attacked major fishing towns in areas under government control, such as Baga and Doron Baga,[31] and set up alternative villages for fishing and market supplies within their own territories, thus disrupting supplies to major urban centers such as Maiduguri and reducing government tax income.

Urbanization, poverty, and inequality are factors that exacerbate the challenges of conflict, organized crime, and other global threats and make urban governance systems less likely to be able to cope with security challenges, both direct ones linked to armed groups and violence and indirect ones linked to displacement flows to cities. The expansion of informal settlements and peripheries stretches the capacity of governments to provide infrastructure and law enforcement. This can benefit gangs and mafias in various ways, for example taking advantage of the void of public sector support to exploit vulnerable populations through the provision to goods and services, including "security" services - often of bad quality and high prices. But such a formal gap can also enable non-transparent, predatory government agents to collaborate with with gangs/mafias through an array of profit-seeking and exploitation schemes.

The humanitarian sector has been at the forefront of pushing for better rules and practices for conflict in urban settings, including through the campaign and successful signing by 83 states in Dublin in 2022 of the unwieldily named Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.[32]

Meanwhile, conflict prevention and resolution tools used by the United Nations, regional groupings, and national governments have been designed with nation states and central governments as part of the post-World War II frameworks and need adapting.[33] Whereas the United Nations has recognized the importance of urban safety in Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals, UN officials have not shifted their policy frameworks to, for example, adapt peacekeeping and address intercommunity tensions in cities such as Bangui and Port-au-Prince.[34] In postcrisis recovery, including from situations of armed conflict, UN-Habitat has highlighted that most "recovery frameworks do not have an explicit urban component."[35] A report by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) has pointed to how the "urban environment has been largely overlooked as a unique setting for SSG/R [security sector governance and reform] in existing research, policy debates and practice." This gap, according to DCAF, is driven by how security sector governance "seems to have gotten trapped between the growing importance and independence of cities, and the traditional role played by national governments in overseeing" it.[36] Finally, despite the growing incidence of urban armed groups affecting peacekeeping missions, including the forthcoming one in Haiti, UN peacekeepers and UN police have had little specific guidance or training for such environments.[37]

Armed Conflict

The nonstate, irregular, and urban character of armed conflict points to the need to adapt frameworks such as peacekeeping and postconflict peacebuilding to urban areas. Anthony King, in his book Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century, points to the somber recent history of urban conflicts in Mogadishu,

Graphic 1: Projected Urban Population Growth 2015–2035 (%) in Conflict-Affected Countries
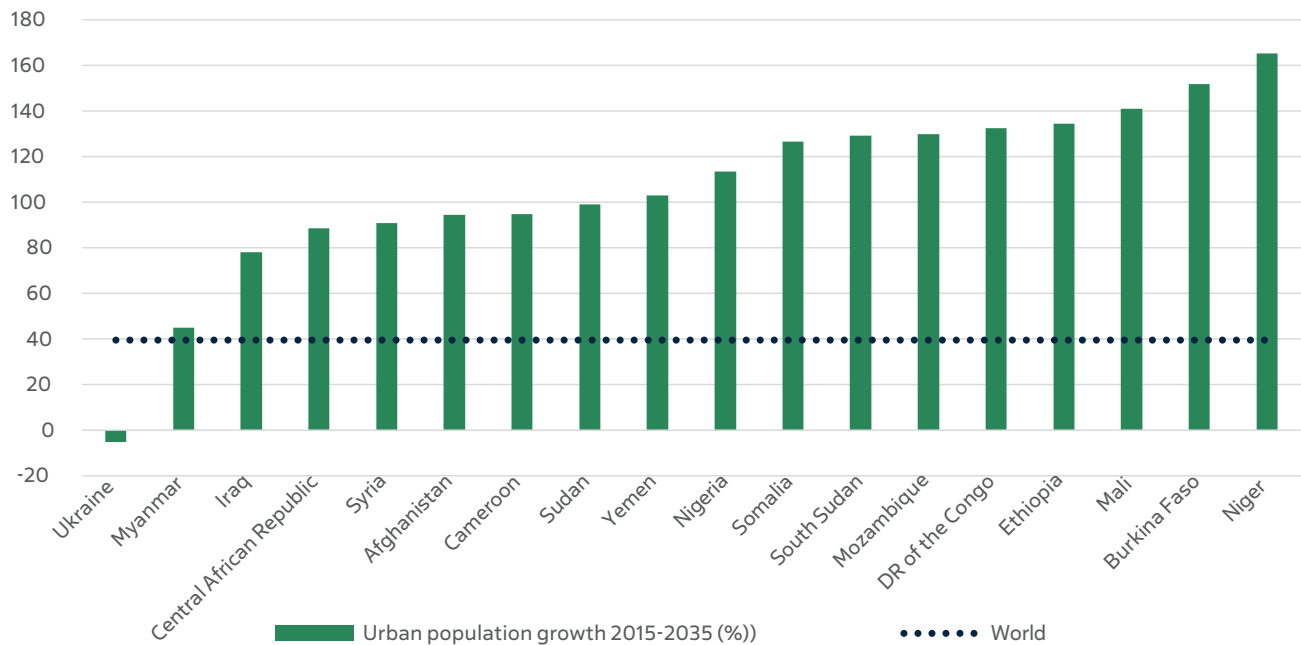
Source: UN-Habitat, World Cities Report 2022: Envisaging the Future of Cities, 2022. The fiscal year 2024 list of conflict-affected countries is at World Bank, "Classification of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations," www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/harmonized-list-of-fragile-situations.

Grozny, Sarajevo, Mosul, Baghdad, and, more recently, an even longer list of cities in Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen, and campaigns against Islamist jihadist terrorist groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba in Mumbai in 2008 and ISIS-allied militants in Marawi (Philippines) in 2013 and 2017. But he also warns against the lessons of these conflicts remaining a narrow technical military issue: "precisely because urban warfare always involves large civilian populations, it is imperative that policymakers, scholars, humanitarians, commentators and the general public all understand the realities of such conflicts."[38]

Whereas there is little that urban action could have done to prevent the Russian invasion of Ukraine, military lessons from the war point to the continued use of irregular forces such as proxy groups and other nonstate actors that tend to operate amid residential areas.[39] Their tactics include ample use of urban infrastructure and population as hideouts and resources—the frequent firing of missiles by armed groups from populated areas in Gaza and in Baghdad during the war against US-led forces are two such examples.[40] Irregular armed groups such as Hamas—with its "Gaza Metro" network of tunnels—point to the strategic advantages of operating deeply within civilian areas and therefore to defy not only existing military practices but also postconflict stabilization, peacekeeping, security sector reform, and peace negotiations.[41] To achieve their objectives, conflict-resolution and peacebuilding communities will need to understand the urban environment and its utility to conflict actors, especially nonstate ones.

If urban action cannot always prevent conflict, especially when it arrives from the outside (such as in a foreign invasion), peace and security practitioners can—and urgently must—engage with its specific drivers and enablers through the urban political space. Scholars have identified, for instance, how the built environment (buildings, streets, parks and other physical places) holds political and emotional meaning to certain communities, and how the destruction of physical space also entails violence to an immaterial sense of community and memory, which scholars have called "urbicide," or the killing of cities.[42] In other words, in urban conflict, places—and sometimes entire cities—can also die (or be obliterated or significantly altered) with emotional, physical, and political consequences for communities.

In a more practical and material way, the urban space presents specific imperatives for development and humanitarian work. The interconnection of systems and communities in cities, for instance, means that conflict has knock-on effects for the urban environment that may be unexpected unless a specific urban lens is used. The International Committee of the Red Cross has highlighted the impact of urban conflicts on public service systems beyond the more visible destruction of buildings, with infrastructural and network damages (many of which are below ground) affecting potentially millions of people who depend on health, energy, water, and food-supply systems that are part of the urban fabric.[43] Similarly systemic effects are possible in scenarios of irregular conflict involving

militias and proxy groups or situations of intense violence by organized criminal groups.

Organized Crime

Some of the impact of organized crime on cities has been well documented, especially through high-intensity armed violence in the streets of Latin America and state responses that often result in additional cycles of violence through repressive policies of militarized confrontation between police and gangs. Urban violence linked to organized crime is, of course, far from limited to Latin America. But relatively little attention has been paid to how urbanization affects these dynamics.

Urbanization presents organized criminal groups with valuable opportunities to use urban infrastructure and space to build illicit economies that are locally rooted and transnationally connected. This is because the badly managed expansion of cities, especially in low-income countries, leaves areas of precarious state presence where governance and security provision are shared with—or sometimes forcefully taken by—predatory armed groups such as gangs, militias, paramilitaries, and vigilantes, often through corrupt alliances with state agents. At the same time, Global South cities tend to be concentrated in coastal areas and are connected to global markets and financial systems through ports, airports, and communications infrastructure, making them valuable nodes for transnational flows.[44] A recent example of this is the surge in criminal violence in the Ecuadorean port city of Guayaquil, where homicides increased fivefold from 2017 to 2022.[45] A hotspot of criminal activity has been the southern neighborhood of Guasmo, next to the city's port, which has become a key node for transnational cocaine trafficking and a target for territorial disputes between gangs.[46]

Urban communities do possess tools for informal collective mobilization to respond to the precarity of state-regulated public services, for instance, through local community leaders and activism to campaign for local government resources. But in many cases these informal systems are either taken over or replaced by criminal groups that prey on communities by imposing "taxes" and charge higher prices for precarious provision of goods such as water and electricity.[47] The regulation or direct control by criminals of basic service provision—including water, electricity, and housing—has been detected in several urban settings, including conflict-affected ones. In Karachi, Pakistan's megacity and economic hub, mafia groups, street gangs, and political militias have infiltrated the profitable water-provision business, including in some cases syphoning from formal water providers for reselling through tankers or bottling services.[48]

Nonstate armed groups taking on these types of roles (often in alliances with state actors) has been called criminal governance.[49] Criminals rarely take up responsibility for public goods without a direct link to profit, however. A more accurate term is hybrid governance, with nonstate armed groups exercising "state-like functions such as dispute resolution and resource allocation while overlapping or interacting with certain forms of state governance."[50] These hybrid arrangements are likely to be fundamental features of the urban political space in cities affected by organized crime, militias and other predatory armed groups.[51]

Criminal Power and Governance in Guayaquil, Ecuador

The city of Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest port hub, has seen a steep rise in criminal violence and brutality. Homicide rates increased fivefold from 2017 to 2022,[52] and residents have seen decapitations, bodies hanging from bridges, and bombings.[53] On January 9, 2024, the city made headlines worldwide when a group of masked armed men invaded the studio of a local TV news show and took journalists hostage during a live broadcast.[54] Behind these gruesome episodes lies a complicated web of gang territorial dynamics that have come to increasingly challenge state authority and affect the rules governing communities.

Urban territories play a critical role in criminal violence, and in Guayaquil territorial disputes revolved around strategic areas for the sale and trafficking of cocaine and extortion or security rackets against businesses and residents. The fragmentation of a criminal organization known as Los Choneros ended its monopoly over cocaine markets and created several smaller groups, which increased demand for weapons and the competition for urban drug and extortion markets.[55]

One area of particular importance is the southern neighborhood of Guasmo, located next to Guayaquil's port and facing some of the worst violence.[56] Guasmo lies at the intersection of global organized crime and local criminal governance and, as such, poses profound policy challenges to Ecuador and the region. The convergence of two sources of vulnerability makes Guasmo particularly prone to violence: one is the transnational cocaine trade coming through the port and managed by criminal organizations in the city; the other is the lack of opportunities for social and economic development through legal means.[57] These two factors strengthen criminal groups' grip over young men and underpin their continued ability to control territories, especially in a context of precarious public services and law enforcement.

Land and Real Estate Crimes

A rising form of organized criminal activity exploiting informal power and security provision is land and real estate crimes—grabbing and building on valuable urban land with monetary value skyrocketing as urbanization drives up demand for housing in cities. A 2019 report by Enact, a European Union-funded project to counter organized crime in Africa, argued that "the most

dominant type of national and transnational organised crime in Africa is the usurpation and, thereafter, exploitation of land and property rights."[58] This criminal market is a catalyst of many other criminal activities, such as the provision by criminal groups of basic infrastructure and services including water, electricity, public transport, and a rough form of security, all of which rob the state of tax revenue and lock marginalized communities in predatory and violent governing rules by armed groups.[59] Equally damaging to countries' development prospects is the way land and real estate crime create a perpetual sense of insecurity, as existing residents in informal settlements are evicted by criminal groups—often with allies in state agencies—to make way for new developments and new residents are left in equally precarious positions without land tenure or access to courts.[60]

Although this form of crime is widespread—and has been frequently studied in the context of Italy, for example—populations in conflict-affected and post-conflict settings are even more vulnerable. Armed conflict often results in the destruction of land registries and population displacement from rural areas into precarious living arrangements in cities, often in informal settlements under the influence of land mafias, gangs, and militias. This uniquely urban type of crime—linked to housing and space in areas where displaced populations hope to find jobs—has critical implications for conflict and post-conflict settings, as the majority of refugees and internally displaced populations are living in cities, not camps.[61] Armed groups sometimes confiscate civilians' land and houses in conflict contexts. The Islamic State, for instance, confiscated over $100 million in real estate property in Syria and Iraq (though this may be an underestimate).[62] Former warlords in Kabul also acquired significant tracts of land there as land values appreciated by an estimated 1,000 percent between the US invasion in 2001 and 2012, with even more money available as former warlords, politicians, and former mujahedeen demanded bribes or lucrative government contracts before they allowed public infrastructure investment, including bridges and roads, to go ahead near their land.[63]

Militias and Urban Expansion in Rio de Janeiro

From 2016 to 2020, the west zone of the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro experienced a fivefold increase in reports of unregulated construction activity.[64] This activity was not a sign of thriving urban development but rather of precarious rule of law and the growing power of militia groups.[65] The militias are armed groups formed by off-duty or former military police officers, with extensive networks in public agencies used to formalize illicit land and real estate activities. Thanks to this dense web of corrupt contacts within politics, law enforcement, and local state agencies, militias have been able to illegally seize protected public land; build new, unregulated settlements; and strengthen profitable service-provision businesses.

Land and real estate crimes provide valuable opportunities. One operation by city hall and public prosecutors in 2021 interrupted the building of eight unregulated buildings in the western Muzema neighborhood valued at a total of $1 million.[66] The projects appropriate land earmarked for environmental protection or as historical sites, and unlicensed buildings are often erected in precarious grounds such as swampy and flood-prone areas that place communities at risk.[67] The militias serve as planners and architects of new residential communities and use their contacts in public agencies to help make authorities turn a blind eye as extensive construction activity is established despite the lack of official authorization. Militias then sell flats and houses with promises of legalizing land tenure thanks to Brazilian legislation that facilitates regularization of informal housing.

But the illegality does not stop at the construction stage. Residents' associations in these developments retain strong links to the militias and impose an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, including via control of postal delivery and services such as electricity, cooking gas, public transport, cable TV, and security; the latter is considered an essential service due not only to the threats by the militias but also to the ever-present threat of drug gangs, which have in general been rival to the militias.[68] This control over both resources and population is maintained through "coercive practices like threats, beatings, torture, and murder."[69]

Gendered Impact of Urban Insecurity

Research has also highlighted the gendered impact of these various urban security issues. For instance, in land and real estate crimes, women and girls are more vulnerable than men to sexual exploitation in the case of eviction and are in some contexts subjected to sexual extortion in return for land services, according to Transparency International.[70] The violence following the 2007 elections in Nairobi, for instance, caused neighbors to fight neighbors in densely populated areas such as the Kibera slum, resulting in displacement and a rise in sexual violence against women.[71] The power acquired by predatory and violent nonstate armed groups, membered predominantly—and sometimes exclusively—by men, in marginalized urban areas with sparse law enforcement presence is a ubiquitous facilitator of sexual violence, forced prostitution, and other gendered forms of crime. In unsafe urban spaces, research by the Safe and Inclusive Cities program has found that lack of piped water or sanitation systems in low-income areas impact women differently because of the risk of being raped while going out of the house.[72] In Latin American informal settlements, women whose husbands are in jail have to cope with extortion demands from gangs in the streets and from those inside the jail who demand money to keep their husbands alive.[73]

TOWARD SOLUTIONS: AN URBANIZATION, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA

A great amount of attention has been paid by peacebuilders and the international development sector in the past few decades to "local" solutions and actors. When discussing the need for a more specific "urban" focus, international organizations' staff sometimes argue they work extensively with "local" actors. Surely, the argument goes, the multiple interactions that international organizations, development banks, western development agencies, and NGOs have with local civil society groups, activists, and communities count as "urban" projects and as supporting urbanization. Perhaps, but prominent experts on peacebuilding and conflict prevention have also pointed out that although urban peacebuilding (though not usually with this name) is addressed by a "plethora of academic fields and communities of practice," they "do not engage with one another in a systemic manner."[74] Furthermore, the term "local" is not specific enough about the unique local government agencies, mayors, and other authority actors (such as local community or tribal leaders as well as violent actors) that can be needed for project implementation or, if not engaged with, can create project blockage.

The "local" is, of course, everywhere in peacebuilding theory and practice. The "local turn in peacebuilding"—a response to critiques of peacebuilding as a top-down (donor-led) process overly focusing on national and central states—has been ongoing for about three decades now, and yet "there is still substantive frustration with regards to the conceptual fuzziness of 'the local,' and with the continual failures of international interventions in actually taking into account local perspectives, promoting local agency and establishing local ownership." In other words, "Who, what and where is the local?"[75] Ironically, the peacebuilding field, which has preached about the "local" for decades, is trailing security and military studies in examining and planning for urbanization and conflict in cities, since the latter have significantly engaged with the urban space because they understand war as "a social institution [...] that tends [...] to occur where people are."[76] The humanitarian sector—tasked with relieving civilian suffering in conflict—has been consistently discussing the specifics of responding to wars in cities (prompted by the significant urban destruction of conflicts in Syria and Iraq) since at least 2017, when the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Institute for Strategic Studies kickstarted a debate on the topic. It was prompted by a "growing consensus among practitioners [...] that responses to urban armed conflict should extend beyond short-term aid and lay the groundwork for dealing with longer-term challenges posed by urbanization."[77]

Yet the same cannot be said for peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and response mechanisms such as peacekeeping—core purposes of the United Nations and crucial goals for several other multilateral bodies. This has been detected by experts, who called for these fields "to understand why divided cities are resistant to peacebuilding efforts and the scarcity of peacebuilding research rescaled to the urban level."[78]

Assigning Departments and Senior Staff to Coordinate Urban Work in Donor and Multilateral Agencies

A practical contribution of the urbanization, peace, and security agenda would be to increase cross-regional coordination on policies and programming. Approaches have been siloed in regions and certain popular topics—great attention has been paid to individual case studies such as Cape Town, Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, and Medellín. But there is sparse discussion on how to make lessons from these settings more widely applicable. At the same time, most donor and multilateral agencies have urban development departments that do not engage with safety, violence prevention, or peacebuilding communities.

A first step to achieve greater synergy would be to build departments or place senior staff in multilateral and international development agencies focused on urban peace and security, forming a bridge between three broad communities of practice: fragility and conflict, violence prevention (which usually focuses more on criminal violence), and urban infrastructure and economic development. Conversations with multiple people in these three fields reveal that many, if not all, of their programs overlap with challenges in cities, but there is little specific attention to the urban space, engagement with local governments, or cross-fertilization.

An Urbanization, Peace, and Security Agenda

Whereas the need for local action to build peace is already well accepted, the multilateral sector—along with aid donors, national security structures, and local governments themselves—lacks a common conceptual framework of core features of peace and security in cities.

So what are these unique features? This report argues that peace and security policies will enhance their impact in an urbanizing world by focusing on the urban political space—defined here as the clustering of multiple powerholders, territorial claims, and governance systems in close proximity and unequally distributed in space. This definition includes some of the main elements that have been identified in the recent literature on urban conflicts and organized crime and that can be unique entry points to build peace in cities.

Clustering, Close Proximity, and Inequality

One of the many insights from recent research on urban conflict and organized crime is the identification of a "spatiality" of violence in cities.[79] This spatiality refers to the intertwining of urban geographical features and the politics of conflict, violence, and organized crime, that result in unique security dynamics, many of which are illustrated in the discussions above. Concentration (or clustering) alongside the density and populational diversity of cities makes the mixing of diverse groups, ethnicities and sects not only likely but unavoidable—forcing tensions and rivalries to play out in a geographically compressed area.[80]

At the same time, different areas in the same city can have radically unequal access to economic resources, policymakers, political influence, security provision, and public services.[81] Stark inequalities in a single interconnected social space can exacerbate or even create new tensions between communities. For instance, when certain ethnic groups have privileged access to or favors from policymakers, socioethnic tensions can be exacerbated.[82] Even certain criminal groups can be favored by authorities to the detriment of other groups with less powerful allies. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, areas dominated by militia groups formed by former military police officers have historically been less affected by violent police operations than those controlled by drug-trafficking gangs – a likely reflection of militias' stronger (illicit) ties to police forces.[83] Security provision is perhaps the most acutely felt inequality in cities, as affluent areas even in profoundly violent cities often receive far greater attention from law enforcement and private security even as informal and other low-income settlements witness cycles of criminal and police violence.[84]

These inequalities, tensions, and conflicts take place in a clustered way, with rival armed groups, competing criminal interest (including some by state actors), and law enforcement competing over spaces and resources that exist often within walking distance of each other.

Multiple Powerholders

Cities facing conflict, violence, or organized crime are likely to host a multiplicity of actors who operate at the same time. Research by Clionadh Raleigh of the Conflict Location and Event Data project has shown that urban political violence is more commonly perpetrated by small groups such as militias, paramilitaries, and identity groups associated with communal violence and falls short of the levels associated with civil wars, which have traditionally seen larger rebel groups based in larger rural territories. The classification problem, especially how urban violence cannot be easily categorized as civil war nor as purely criminal (materially-motivated) violence, may be part of the reason why peacebuilders have not embraced urban topics more avidly.[85] Moritz Schuberth has put forward the concept of community-based armed groups as a subtype of armed actor essentially linked to local, "parochial" objectives such as community protection, vigilantism over a delimited residential area, sectarianism over politically important cities, and purely criminal actors—categories that would mark militias, paramilitaries, vigilantes, and gangs as typical community-based warriors as opposed to insurgent groups connected to national and sometimes international political goals.[86] (This definition seems to leave out terrorist groups, which exemplify a type of nationally or internationally motivated armed group operating mostly in cities.) Regardless of typologies, which are always tricky, several studies agree that cities have become hubs for "intense struggles between disparate interests and multiple stakeholders."[87]

Criminal actors and illicit transnational flows also cluster in cities as hubs in broader networks and supply chains for consumer markets (usually in rich countries)—not just drugs but also weapons, minerals, wildlife, timber, and even humans. Transnational illicit flows can play a decisive role in providing criminal groups with the money and weapons to wrest control over certain urban areas from the state and build the types of hybrid governance structures discussed in the previous section—with extensive corruption of local authorities, municipal agencies, and security forces.

Mapping powerholders also means incorporating the positive and catalytic effect that local governments and civil society leaders have. Pathfinders, one of the co-facilitators of the Peace in Our Cities initiative, has laid out these positive effects in a recent paper arguing for advancing Sustainable Development Goal 16, focused on building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies through alliances with local and regional governments. One example is the integration of refugees into local society with local government support such as counseling and guidance in judicial and health matters.[88] UN-Habitat has responded to situations of armed conflict and disaster in the Arab world by helping development and humanitarian actors address interconnected urban systems and infrastructure, for instance, by guiding governments to spatially plan and build city extensions to house displaced populations and "build back better" after war.[89]

Territorial Claims

Territory is central for any conflict, and conflict essentially fragments space.[90] Peace and security strategies should engage with the role of inherently urban territorial dimensions—"the role of urban neighbourhoods, road infrastructure and roundabouts in territorial strategies of authority, and legitimacy by armed groups or urban gangs."[91] The issue of identity-based mass violence in cities has also started to be analysed as a distinct category in which victims' identities are linked to the urban space, a concept that is being further refined with the goal of preventing mass atrocities in cities.[92] This research has identified that acute violence in cities is sparked by the intensification of boundaries and political identities, which provide a critical enabler for the involvement of armed actors—political or criminal.[93]

In an urbanizing world, political power and its usual associated prerogatives—such as security provision, imposition of rules over certain territories, and control of borders—have fragmented even within important economic centers in middle-income countries

such as Brazil and South Africa, not to mention conflict-affected ones. This manifests in practice through "spatially circumscribed" armed groups replacing the state in key functions and serving as alternative sources of allegiance, welfare, employment, and protection.[94] This can be seen in territories that "belong" to militias or gangs. In the Lake Chad region, vigilantism against Boko Haram has in large part taken the form of armed community members (such as the Civilian Joint Task Force in northwestern Nigeria) patroling towns and cities and setting up checkpoints.[95] Urbanization, Diane Davis further argues, has shifted the traditional role of "no-man's lands" for illegal economies operating in impunity and violence from (rural) borderlands to cities, especially informal settlements and other marginalized areas that often become popularly known as "no-go areas."[96]

Governance Systems

The fragmentation of political power also results in the splintering of the urban space into areas with different sources and types of governance. Not all of them feature the central state in prominent positions, nor are they all peaceful. Governance is often a fuzzy term, but Francis Fukuyama has suggested a broad and politically meaningful definition as the "ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services." These are roles traditionally associated with states but that can also be performed by nonstate armed actors, albeit usually amid a great deal of intimidation and predatory (criminal) activities.[97] Hybrid systems are not always predatory, and indeed, experts have called for a greater acceptance of nonstate social ordering mechanisms from community leaders and other (nonviolent) socially embedded actors.[98] When it comes to urban conflict, violence, and organized crime, hybrid governance arrangements often have the participation of nonstate armed actors (such as gangs, militias, and vigilantes) and actors within the state or politics—for example, the way Nigeria's Bakassi Boys were co-opted by politicians as vigilante forces and even officially integrated into the state by some regional governments.[99] Similarly, in urban Kenya, gangs can assume vigilante roles and then be turned into political militias by influential politicians, especially around the country's usually historically violent elections, while controlling criminal enterprises in public transportation—the popular minivans known as matatus.[100]

Local governments and mayors have a crucial role to play because of their inherently granular local knowledge and the capillarity of the social support and service-provision mechanisms. This role can be enhanced by international networks that have gained much relevance and visibility in recent decades in key global governance topics, especially climate change (an area the C40 grouping of cities has helped to influence). One of the oldest such networks, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), has leveraged city diplomacy by organizing municipal peace talks involving local and regional governments, agencies, and civil society groups to discuss postconflict reconstruction.[101]

Applied Uses of the Urban Political Space

Peace and security adaptation for urbanization needs not reinvent the wheel nor completely change existing frameworks. Instead, it means engaging with the urban political space and integrating the issues of clustering, proximity, and inequality into analyses, assistance, and foreign aid. Cities obviously vary in contexts and needs, but they are also human-made systems that share some characteristics. This report proposes that adaptation should focus on integrating politics and space: considering, for instance, how the concentration of threats (e.g., illicit economies, armed groups, political grievances), their interaction with urban infrastructure (e.g., ports, airports, informal settlements), and governance of poorly serviced areas affect safety and peace. Responses, on the other hand, can be made urban-sensitive by addressing not only centralized authorities (e.g., national governments, elites, armed group leaderships) but also city leaders and communities within their spatial context (e.g., how interventions in housing, infrastructure, other elements of the built environment, and municipal agencies can further reconciliation or safety). The frameworks presented below are drawn from various policy and academic circles (e.g., humanitarian actors) but have not trickled down to peacebuilding or prevent conflict. However, they could form the practical backbones of adapting programs and policies for urban peace and security.

Area-Based Peacebuilding and Security

Area-based approaches have long been used by the humanitarian sector to target specific areas for improvement of systems used by urban communities, such as water, sanitation, psychosocial support, and, perhaps most importantly in urban settings, shelter or housing.[102] Area-based approaches involve "the targeting of geographic areas with high levels of need, delineated by physical, social or administrative boundaries."[103] Such approaches can be adapted and transferred to deal with security issues, including in peacekeeping missions that overlap with urban spaces: the stabilization of certain urban areas with multiple powerholders might require special attention, higher personnel commitment, and engagement with multiple stakeholders to fill in gaps in service provision and governance. Neighborhoods with sectarian or ethnic tensions in conflict-affected countries could also be targeted through urban planning and zoning that prioritize the building of common spaces that promote individuals and groups mixing and infrastructure that ensure all communities are serviced by essential goods such as water and electricity.

Urban Conflict Prevention of Violence by Militias, Paramilitaries, and "Armed Politics"

Multilateral organizations have traditionally struggled to move away from the categorical separation between criminal violence and armed conflict. There is a wide array of armed groups that

fall somewhere in between these two categories that challenge political authority even while heavily exploiting illicit economies, short of the threshold that the international community considers armed conflict. These armed groups—militias, paramilitaries, armed wings of political parties—use what Paul Staniland has called "armed politics" where they engage with politicians and the state even while they instrumentally use violence.[104] These community-based groups are often linked to specific cities or areas associated with certain ethnicities, sectarian groups, or simply low-income communities marginalized by formal (state-regulated) services. They form a category of armed politics that should be a central focus of conflict prevention in cities. This is in addition to violence-prevention efforts by local governments and NGOs focused on more-domestic forms of criminality, such as gangs.

This is more or less what a UN University paper proposed in 2017 but was never followed up on. The paper argued that urban conflict prevention by UN bodies should not be seen as the same as prevention of all urban violence but rather as prevention focused 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."[105] It further proposed that disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) could be adapted to better integrate former combatants according to the realities of community livelihoods, local job markets, and different identities of urban areas. This framework could benefit environments of low intensity but protracted violence occurring in cities in such places as Libya, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, some parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, and Colombia (in areas where the National Liberation Army is still operational), among others.

Urban Political Settlements

In a perspective that has refreshingly renewed the "local turn in peacebuilding," Achim Wennman has proposed "urban peace as a policy framework," aimed at managing and transforming "the political and economic order of cities," including illicit economies. Urban political settlements can serve as a framework for local, national, and international actors to engage with multiple powerholders, possibly through the mediation of local governments, to broker localized deals with competing armed actors and therefore stabilize neighborhoods.[106] The UK-based African Cities Research Consortium has also used the urban political settlement concept to draw attention to the arrangements between local, regional, and national political actors and how they influence security in the city. It also integrates the "'multiple powerholders' perspective by asking, for example: 'How do the main producers of in/security and un/safety link to political elites and what role do these (in)formal actors play in sustaining and producing the political settlement?'"[107]

Urban political settlements are inevitably linked to the management of economic resources, given the role of cities in modern societies as centers of wealth, industries, service sectors, consumption, and financing. This is where the concept of urban resources is useful.

Urban resources have been proposed by this author as "sources of income for armed groups linked to the agglomeration of people and the scarcity of essential goods and services (housing, water, security provision etc.) resulting from inefficient urban governance." In Mogadishu, Somalia, extortion by the violent extremist insurgent group al-Shabaab enriches the group and undermines government authority in the country's political heart. In Karachi, during a particularly intense bout of political violence during the late 2000s and early 2010s, party-affiliated militias and gangs fought for control over land in informal settlements to enhance their influence and favor their own social groups (such as Mohajirs and Pashtuns).[108] Analysis of distribution of and strategies to access urban resources are essential to promote political settlements in cities, especially in a global context of transnational organized crime that has permeated cities all over the world. Reaching peace in cities increasingly means managing competition for urban resources, including through better law enforcement presence accompanied by effective governance and access by marginalized areas to the broader opportunities of the urban space.

Urban Security Sector Reform

Security sector reform (SSR) is a framework usually applied to conflict-affected, postconflict, or otherwise extremely fragile countries, as internal security matters are not usually the subject of external "reform" frameworks from international actors. A study by DCAF has highlighted the "considerable research gap" in understanding the institutions responding to growing urban violence, both criminal and political. The study argues that overcoming such a gap is critical given the uniquely urban issues faced by local security, such as the concentration of threats in peripheries and informal settlements, the often-repressive police approaches to slum dwellers, and the high incidence of land crimes.[109] DCAF also mentions the diversity of informal security providers coinhabiting the urban space with the formal state providers, such as private security companies and militias.[110] The multiple powerholders issue may be part of the reason why SSR documents, such as those produced by or for the UN, rarely mention cities or urban spaces. SSR initiatives "have had limited engagement with non-state actors involved in providing security services to communities and cities," such as militias, self-defence forces, and private security companies.[111]

There is a huge task ahead, therefore, for local, national, and international actors to work in coordination to improve the legitimacy, responsiveness (to vulnerable communities), and government oversight of the security sector in cities. Once again, local governments stand out as promising entry points for engagement with the multiple powerholders problem, given their close relationship with vulnerable communities in the course of providing other services. Integrating alternative security providers into other national or local forces has been seen as a viable, albeit challenging, undertaking, whereas demobilization with incentives for urban employment is another potential way out.

What Should Be the Goals and Scope of an Urbanization, Peace, and Security Agenda?

There are several challenges and threats to peace and security in cities. As James Cockayne, Louise Bosetti, and Nazia Hussain have argued, the role of organizations like the United Nations in preventing conflict should be to work on instances of violent competition for "urban governmental power that risk impacting formal politics"—in other words, violence aiming to control urban spaces and impose rules on populations with potential or actual harm to the state's prerogative of regulating services and monopolizing legitimate use of force.[112] Contested urban spaces, to put it simply, should indeed be among the top priorities of not only conflict prevention but also peacebuilding, peacekeeping, security sector governance, and anticrime efforts.

The scope of an urbanization, peace, and security agenda would include the following:

– Armed conflict, both internal and involving foreign states, which impacts cities' critical systems, human security, infrastructure, and postconflict recovery capacity.

– Paramilitaries, militias, and vigilantes: These types of armed groups are widely used in contexts such as West Africa, East Africa, South Asia, and even some parts of Latin America as local protection forces, armed wings of political parties, and "hired guns" for certain politicians to advance their agendas. These groups are most visible in urban areas through armed presence, checkpoints, extortion, and sometimes involvement in illicit economies. International and national actors face the challenge of managing their impact on local security and developing a more accountable and cohesive urban security sector.

– Transnational illicit flows and organized crime: The role of cities in transnational illicit flows is already well understood, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime works on research and direct support on these issues. More efforts could be made, especially from the research and think tank communities, to unveil the complex ways that transnational illicit flows through ports, airports, roads, and financial systems impact the security and governance of urban space. Urbanization, in particular, should be factored into these analyses to understand the new frontiers of transnational illicit flows and organized crime—for instance, how criminal actors exploit small and medium (but growing) urban areas in fragile contexts.

Intercommunal violence: Violence between communities in cities has led to a thought-provoking discussion on "urban geopolitics" (restricted so far to academia), centered on the political symbolism that cities have for certain social groups—ethnic or sectarian groups, or marginalized populations living in informal settlements.[113] Peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and international development projects can impact these dynamics for worse—by unwittingly reinforcing certain groups' grip over urban governance or resources, or simply by neglecting urban areas—or for better—by prioritizing local peace settlements and managing the equitable provision of services and distribution of political positions and economic resources.

Identity-based mass violence in cities: This category of violence is a relatively new concept, linking the field of atrocities prevention to urban violence to develop better prevention approaches. It relates to violence, both structural and proximate, "motivated by the perpetrator's conceptualisation of their victim's identity, for example their race, gender, sexuality, religion or political affiliation," concentrated in certain urban spaces.[114] The urban dimension of atrocities is important because "places are suffused with political meaning, transforming the built environment into a geopolitical stage," as Ariana Markowitz has argued. In a pioneering study of urban atrocities, Markowitz mentioned xenophobic police violence against Somalis in Nairobi, persecution against Hazaras by the Taliban in Mazar-I Sharif, urban planning and redrawing of neighborhoods to homogenize areas of Aleppo in Syria, among other examples where identity and urban space jointly affected people's vulnerability.[115] Identifying these concentrated forms of violence, which are often slow burning, and working with local and national authorities to prevent them from escalating or continuing should be among the priorities of conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts.

Coordination should be a further goal of multilateral and other external actors in supporting urbanization, peace, and security. Currently, as this report mentions, expert discussions and policy approaches are fragmented—for instance, the many lessons on local violence reduction and prevention from Latin American cities are rarely discussed in the same forums as African, Asian, or even US cities affected by similar trends, including gun violence. Furthermore, research and analysis on urbanization from a peace and security point of view are the result of occasional and ad hoc initiatives from isolated think tanks and university departments, not something that is consistently promoted and incorporated into strategies at the highest levels of the multilateral system or donor priorities. This inconsistency poses challenges for the development of expertise and the sharing of lessons. UN-Habitat has a crucial role to play in helping to coordinate peace and security initiatives, both through its Safer Cities and crisis initiatives, especially if better integrated into other UN departments such as peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and World Bank initiatives to counter fragility, conflict, and organized crime.

CONCLUSION

This report has argued that neither initiatives focused on central (national) state nor vaguely defined "local" actions are sufficient to adequately promote peace and security in urban environments. The global trend toward urbanization, especially in conflict-affected, postconflict, and fragile settings, requires deep consideration within the urban political space. In other words, it is critical to engage with the powerholders, territorial claims, and governance providers—many of them informal—that compete in a clustered context where adversaries live side by side. An important spatial dimension of urban peace and security is the concentration of illicit economies and organized crime exploiting cities' international connectivity, which frames the opportunity context for the structuring of more serious and organized armed groups.

This report has argued that in addition to global demographic trends, the growing linkage between global and local security threats—through organized crime and the growing incidence of armed conflict in cities—justify a greater focus on cities. The international security debate is justifiably preoccupied with great power competition and voices of national political elites. But it cannot lose sight of the massive social, political, and demographic transition taking place in vast areas of the Global South. Ignoring urbanization and the local-global nexus risks reducing the applicability of peace and security toolboxes—security sector reform, conflict prevention, DDR, peace settlements, anti-organized crime efforts—if they are not based on a deep understanding of the type of environment where over half, and soon two-thirds, of the global population lives.

Cross-Cutting Policy Recommendations

The report has suggested in the previous section some practical frameworks drawn from the peace and security literature and proposed potential adaptations to urban environments. It has also suggested that donor and multilateral agencies should assign departments and senior staff specifically tasked with promoting urban peace and security, with the crucial mission of linking the various programs on peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and security to a context of urbanization. These final recommendations pertain to the broader international system and cut across different communities of practice.

– **Establish a group of experts to advise on better coordination and action on urbanization, peace, and security.** The main goal would be to review how the international peace and security architecture interacts with and reacts to global urbanization trends and suggest adaptation measures, especially in key frameworks used by multilateral organizations, development banks, donor agencies, NGOs, and think tanks, such as security sector reform, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, responses to organized crime and community resilience. The panel would also seek to further develop the urbanization, peace, and security framework proposed in this paper. This panel should ideally be assembled under the auspices of the United Nations, with a leading role for UN-Habitat, and co-facilitated by city networks such as UCLG and Peace in Our Cities. It should include experts and practitioners working on urbanization from a peace and security perspective—conflict studies, political science, criminology—and from a developmental perspective— urban studies, planning, international development, humanitarian action. Its impact would be greater as a permanent panel that convenes regularly to ensure cohesion and continuity of efforts, especially in terms of take up by various agencies and organizations. Its target audience and key interlocutors would be multilateral organizations, regional groupings (such as the African Union, Organization of American States, and OSCE), development banks, aid donor agencies, NGOs, and think tanks working with donor agencies and national state actors such as interior security ministries and urban development agencies.

– **Draw on local governments through their global networks to better link international and local efforts.** One hurdle in integrating cities into peace and security discussions usually dominated by national states is where to begin, given that different cities have different contexts and priorities. Fortunately, our world has seen an explosion in the number and capacities of global networks of cities— from UCLG, one of the oldest, to the Global Parliament of Cities, one of the newest—and civil society groups working on city diplomacy and other cross-cutting urban issues— such as the Global Cities Hub, the Peace in Our Cities initiative, Strong Cities Network (focused on countering radicalization), and others. UCLG has increasingly worked with national and international bodies to promote local consultations on postconflict reconstruction and convene mayors to share lessons on responses to displacement and migration.[116] This paper is being launched alongside another one by Pathfinders, another member of the Peace in Our Cities initiative, focusing on examples of local government and city diplomacy initiatives that have advanced peace and security at the local level as part of a vision to adapt Sustainable Development Goal 16 to cities. This paper calls on the other side of the equation—international and national actors—to adapt their mechanisms and strategies to the urban space and to the global context of urbanization. Finally, UN-Habitat remains a crucial actor in this effort, even as its work has been more prominently associated with technical support on issues such as planning and housing. Better integrating UN-Habitat's urban-safety and crisis-response frameworks to larger UN efforts on peacebuilding, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and security sector

reform would add an urban-sensitive lens to international peace and security.

- **Support a research agenda on urbanization, peace, and security.** This report has mentioned several times the little attention or effort being paid to urban specificities in key areas such as conflict prevention, security sector governance, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. While there is competition for policy attention in a world of "polycrisis,"[117] urban safety is a key objective highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals and in the *New Urban Agenda* adopted by UN member states at Habitat III.[118] The academic community has greatly advanced the study of urban violence, conflict, and organized crime, but there are major gaps—for instance, research is unevenly distributed among regions, with the most frequent focus being Latin America (understandably, given the high level of urbanization there, around 80 percent, compared to other developing regions and the high levels of criminal violence). Major gaps also need to be filled in comparative research that bridges knowledge and lessons between different continents, and in policy-oriented work expanding on how urban areas can contribute to peace and security in an increasingly dangerous world. Research initiatives are under way in several universities, but few multilateral bodies, donor agencies, or think tanks have projects or even researchers focused on urbanization from a peace and security perspective. Again, the situation in Latin America is slightly different in this regard given the widespread impact of criminal violence. Greater international and cross-regional policy attention and coordination should be promoted among organizations such as the United Nations (including the Security Council, UNDP, and UN Peacekeeping), the World Bank (especially its fragility, conflict and violence workstream), regional development banks, regional bodies such as the African Union, and national donor agencies (which usually focus on cities solely from an economic development perspective but not consistently in terms of violence or conflict prevention).

ENDNOTES

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3   The full definition of cities used by this report is "contiguous grid cells of 1 km2 that have a density of at least 1,500 inhabitants per square kilometre. The contiguous cells should have a total population of at least 50,000." Lewis Dijkstra, Aneta J. Florczyk, Sergio Freire, Thomas Kemper, Michele Melchiorri, Martino Pesaresi, and Marcello Schiavina, "Applying the Degree of Urbanisation to the Globe: A New Harmonised Definition Reveals a Different Picture of Global Urbanisation," *Journal of Urban Economics* 125 (September 2021), 3.

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About the Author

Sed aliquet semper nulla vitae condimentum. Nam at fringilla sapien. Nulla ut dui odio. Donec tellus velit, aliquam molestie facilisis ut, hendrerit in urna. Aliquam malesuada feugiat faucibus. Curabitur at pulvinar arcu, id hendrerit neque. Vivamus ornare commodo auctor. Aliquam posuere lacus in rutrum condimentum. Sed vitae vulputate mi, eget volutpat dolor. Proin eu tortor vitae est viverra consectetur. Maecenas risus neque, sollicitudin sit amet lorem at, luctus efficitur lacus. Praesent mattis, quam eu efficitur posuere, justo odio accumsan mi, at molestie felis mi eget neque. Vestibulum pretium suscipit dui, non sollicitudin massa feugiat non.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Peace in Our Cities network or its partners.

About Peace in Our Cities

Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) is a growing network of cities and community partners and international organizations working together to reduce urban violence by 2030. The network creates evidence-based, participatory exchange platforms to reduce and prevent violence in member cities while building a global advocacy movement for urban violence reduction. The network:

– **Amplifies** knowledge of the scale of the urban violence problem and solutions that have proven to work.

– **Advances** evidence-based policy solutions and peacebuilding approaches to reduce violence in urban contexts.

– **Accompanies** city leaders and community and civil society partners through peer exchanges and information access to realize ambitious targets for violence reduction.

Peace in Our Cities is cofacilitated by three organizations: the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego; Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, Center on International Cooperation at New York University; and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security. Find out more about Peace in Our Cities: peaceinourcities.org.

About the Global Initiative

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