



Human security and cities: Challenges and opportunities

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Preface

This Fast Talk Team report draws upon the findings of an expert consultative process conducted by the Human Security Research and Outreach Program, supported by the Human Security Policy Division (GHS) of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT). The Fast Talk Team concept was developed to provide DFAIT with a timely and flexible means to access high quality policy-relevant research with the objective of:

- generating perspectives on new or emerging issues;
- refreshing thinking on existing issues; or
- enhancing the effectiveness of conferences and workshops by developing a pre-conference dialogue which helps to frame issues, focus discussion, and build expert consensus.

Fast Talk Teams bring together officials seeking policy development input with prominent Canadian and international experts through a three-stage consultation process that can be completed in a timeframe as short as 1-2 weeks. First, 4-6 experts are identified and asked to provide short 3-5 page written responses by e-mail to specific policy questions developed by DFAIT officials. Secondly, the officials and experts review the responses and participate in a 2-3 hour conference call to discuss them. Finally, a report summarizing the key findings of the written submissions and the conference call discussion is provided to all Fast Talk Team members for final comment and then circulated to officials.

The purpose of Fast Talk Teams is to generate policy-relevant research. They do not attempt to establish new policies for DFAIT or the Government of Canada. Thus, the views and positions provided by this paper are solely those of the contributors to this research project and are not intended to reflect the views and positions of DFAIT or the Government of Canada.

The Human Security Policy Division would like to thank the Fast Talk Team leader, Maciek Hawrylak, DFAIT colleagues, and the expert participants for their contributions to this Fast Talk Team effort.

Expert participants

Four experts participated in the October 2005 Fast Talk:

Peter Walker

Director, Feinstein International Famine Center
Tufts University (USA)

Arthur Fallick

Manager, Office of Research and Scholarship
Kwantlen University College (Canada)

Roger Keil

Professor, Faculty of Environmental Studies
York University (Canada)

Anton du Plessis

Director, Crime and Justice Programme
Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)

Six experts participated in the March 2006 Fast Talk:

Julie-Anne Boudreau

Canada Research Chair in the City and Issues of Insecurity
Institut national de recherche scientifique, Université du Québec (Canada)

Stanley Brunn

Professor, Department of Geography
University of Kentucky (USA)

Stephen Graham

Professor, Department of Geography
Durham University (UK)

J. David S. Harries

Professor, Continuing Studies Division
Royal Military College of Canada (Canada)

Peter Knip

Director
VNG International (International Co-operation Agency of the Association of
Netherlands Municipalities) (Netherlands)

Timothy Sisk

Associate Professor, Graduate School of International Studies
University of Denver (USA)

Executive summary

With the world now over 50% urban, and cities growing in size and power, the Human Security Policy Division (GHS) at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) conducted two Fast Talks on human security and cities (HSC) in October 2005 and March 2006, in an attempt to identify how this emerging issue impacts human security. Ten experts (four in the first session and six in the second) were engaged to provide insight on this topic.

The March 2006 Fast Talk asked its experts to consider the ways in which **failed and fragile cities, slum insecurity, urban conflict prevention, and local governance and democracy** impact human security. General insights from the October 2005 Fast Talk have also been integrated into this discussion.

Fast Talk results

On **city fragility**, respondents noted both external and internal sources of failure. Externally, terrorism has increasingly targeted cities for maximum disruption, while the growth in 'infrastructural wars' — perpetrated by states against the roads, water, and electricity systems that support the urban centres of enemies, or by insurgent groups who attack urban vitality using urban features like car and truck bombs — has posed a threat to urban civilian life and security. Internally, the implosion of global national politics into the urban world has been exacerbated by the militarization of gangs, police, and other armed groups, rapid urbanization and an urban youth bulge, social polarization in horizontally unequal cities, and resource scarcity/urban unemployment.

In many cases, scarcity, economic distribution, identity, and other types of conflict are playing out in cities. These conflicts are not merely reflectors of state-level tensions, but actually have internal local dynamics that can spill over urban boundaries.

Urban scarcity conflicts have developed in Brazil, Guatemala, South Africa, India, and elsewhere, often over water, food, jobs, and especially land. Zimbabwe's razing of homes in Harare, leaving 700,000 homeless, is the most prominent example of this type of conflict, which also highlights the nexus between state activities and local resistance.

Economic distribution conflicts can be more pronounced at the local level, given frequent lack of oversight of city councils, and rampant corruption and

patronage at that level. Localized group-on-group conflict over delivery of essential local government services is a key problem for South African cities.

Early warning indicators for city fragility include rising murder rates and gang activity, rapid population growth without concomitant economic activity, more frequent and intense people-power events in cities (demonstrations, riots, strikes), and dominance of organized crime syndicates with respect to service delivery, among others. The dynamism of urban centres makes prediction difficult, however.

On **slum insecurity**, many slums operate in a police vacuum, with 48% of Latin American and Caribbean cities, or parts of cities, considered dangerous or inaccessible to police. In these cases, many slums are 'governed' by organized crime syndicates, gangs, militias, or other armed groups, who collect revenues through some loose tax structure, and use the slum as a base for urban protest or guerrilla activities.

In areas where police do patrol slums, their links with locals are weakened by poor community relations. Rio de Janeiro's slums are sometimes patrolled by a special police force that uses armoured personnel carriers to conduct operations.

In addition to these options for security provision, other slums have engaged in 'community defence' mechanisms. This pluralization of slum security weakens citizen allegiance to the state as security devolves from a public to private good.

On **cities and conflict prevention**, cities can play different roles at various stages of the conflict cycle. Prior to a conflict eruption or after a conflict has subsided, cities can use their symbolism, proximity to the people, mass communication, and 'city diplomacy' to improve the prospects for peace.

Local governments are also able to involve a greater variety of people with different backgrounds at a higher proportion than at the national level, and are able to engage their constituents at the most basic and concrete community level.

Finally, cities can also engage in city-to-city diplomacy, as the Municipal Alliance for Peace between Palestinian and Israeli cities has done, to engage in concrete development and community-building measures that directly engage the people on the ground.

In post-conflict societies, urban centres often emerge quickest from the ravages of war. Much of this resilience depends on security and crisis-management capacities, good governance, and building of urban social capital.

On **cities and democracy**, local democracy is a key step in replacing violence in the streets with non-violent conflict management. International IDEA has found that resuscitation of local authorities for security and service delivery purposes is a critical arena for immediate post-conflict environments. In many cases, once weapons are laid down, people's thoughts turn swiftly to urban services, such as water, housing, and jobs.

Local democratic institutions broaden the basis of peace at the community, municipal, and city level, as they diffuse values of tolerance, inclusion, accountability, and citizen participation at the most basic and personal level.

A properly governed and, especially, democratic city can manage 'disruptions from below' which threaten fragile peace processes in immediate post-conflict societies, while also infusing the inclusive and representative features of democracy in daily practice and business.

Final report

This final report is the summary of the key ideas raised both in the written submissions of our experts, and in the subsequent conference calls. Most of the content stems from the March 2006 Fast Talk, but key findings from the October 2005 Fast Talk are also included.

Failed and fragile cities

What causes city fragility or failure, whether as a result of external attack or internal decay?

Expert consensus was difficult to forge on this question. Some felt city fragility is due to external factors. For example, terrorism increasingly targets cities, while states are turning to 'infrastructural wars' designed to throttle urban dissent and living, e.g. state-perpetrated violence using bulldozers, rockets, and other implements targeting urban civilian structures in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Others, however, felt that city fragility is the result of the "implosion of global national politics into the urban world." These "implosive forces that fold into neighbourhoods the most violent and problematic repercussions of wider regional, national, and global processes" include ethnic tensions; fundamentalism; militarization of gangs, police, militias, and other armed groups; state failure; arms proliferation; rapid urbanization and a youth bulge; increasing social polarization; resource scarcity; structural adjustment programs; and deep unemployment (usually defined as more than 20%).

Urban infrastructure, while the source of much urban vitality, can also be a key source of fragility. The reliance of cities on technical, networked infrastructures to bring in food, energy, information, and people, and move out products and waste makes this infrastructure a target for state or non-state terrorist group violence. Moreover, heavily mechanized and networked cities have lost the skills necessary to provide essential services for themselves when disasters or war disrupt urban life, which may ironically make less advanced cities more resilient.

Much of the typology applied to the roots of internal conflicts can be applied to serve as sources of city fragility as well:

- **Scarcity conflicts:** Urban-level conflicts can develop from competition over scarce resources such as water, food, jobs, or especially land. The rapidly growing organized landless movements of Brazil, Guatemala, South Africa, Kenya, India, and Bangladesh suggest a potential for violence over land, as has occurred on a massive scale in Harare, where over 700,000 urban dwellers have been displaced.
- **Economic distribution conflicts:** Given the lack of oversight mechanisms or attention to local governance, economic distribution conflicts can be especially pronounced at the local level, exacerbated by corruption and patronage. As one expert noted:

Principal among economic opportunities over which conflict is waged are: jobs, employment, and regular sources of income, housing, transportation, and – especially – public budgets. Criminal violence and social violence become fused, with indistinguishable threats to human security emanating from private violence and destruction of social structures.

Localized group-on-group conflict over delivery of essential local government services is a key problem for South Africa.

- **Demographic and acculturation conflicts:** Rapid urbanization has already induced riots in cities unable to cope with the raised societal tensions and increased demands of new migrants. Even the physical features of cities — often loud, crowded, hot, and environmentally decrepit — have been associated with violence in studies. Such a conflict erupted in the 500,000-strong Kibera neighbourhood of Nairobi in December 2001, with scores killed and conflict along socio-economic and ethnic lines.
- **Identity conflicts:** With rapid urbanization, many ethnic groups are self-segregating in urban spaces, leading to ethnic enclaves with self-protection militias, gangs, and identity-based political movements. Horizontal inequalities mean that conflict can erupt between competing enclaves, or between enclaves and city forces. Karachi is a perpetual example of this kind of urban armed conflict, most recently in May 2005. The status of, and battle for, Kirkuk is another example of identity conflicts localizing in a city. In many identity-based conflicts, local authorities are often complicit in the violence.
- **Power/electoral conflicts:** Local authorities appointed by, or dubiously elected under, the supervision of national regimes also represent another

entry point for manipulation and intimidation, as was the case with local elections dominated by the Cambodia People's Party in February 2002. Given peace processes' relative neglect of local events, local-level operatives can cling to power long after conflict resolution at a national level, thereby blocking national peacebuilding at the local level.

- **Strategic military conflicts:** Capital cities are especially targeted during times of war, and can suffer from a degree of localized violence even when surrounding areas are largely peaceful. Sarajevo, Jakarta, Beirut, Cairo, Khartoum, and Jerusalem have all been targets of significant social armed violence. In addition to symbolic value, cities with strategic assets, including ports, airports, rail connections, and commercial value, are frequently targets of armed groups.

What would be some early warning indicators to warn us of failing cities?

Early warning indicators include rising murder rates/gang activity and high levels of access to small arms; rapid population growth without corresponding economic and social capital growth; dominance of organized crime syndicates and gangs with respect to service delivery; levels of state-perpetrated violence; more frequent and intense people-power events on city issues; a sudden increase in the number of violent crimes; consistent, coherent threats from a senior government or external aggressor; and, rural-to-urban and transnational migration figures. Traditional indicators of state fragility, such as infant mortality rates, may also apply to urban environments, particularly slums.

Most fragile cities also have very weak municipal governments. For the most part, this weakness derives from three elements: lack of full right to elections; insufficient resources, including tax base and secure land tenure; and, few city personnel on the municipal payroll, which places into question the allegiances of workers who are appointed and paid by the central government. The concentration of power, rampant corruption, and very poor capacity and performance of council mechanisms, as well as a lack of attention to sub-municipal-level representation, are other problems of local governance. Smaller and medium-sized cities (with populations of less than 500,000) also typically suffer in the shadows of larger 'showcase' cities and face higher debt burdens, fewer sources of income, and less influence at the state level.

Many state-level governments are also sceptical and suspicious of urban democratic mobilization and even undermine the financial and political power of cities. They do not engage in the small projects that can rapidly ramp up city capacity for security provision, including slum upgrading,

infrastructure investment, etc. Moreover, there is an urgent need for city-level failure assessments. Current data on cities is virtually non-existent, and this is impeding understanding of the roles of cities.

We also need to bear in mind that unlike at the state or global levels, much urban violence tends to occur almost spontaneously. Deadly ethnic riots — normally violence perpetrated by 'old' city-dwellers on newly-arrived ethnically-different migrants — in East and West Africa occur with little or no warning, though they are reflections of deeper settlement dynamics. It may be difficult, therefore, to develop early warning indicators in such cases.

How does the concept of 'urbicide', or the express attempt to deny or kill a city, intersect with the concept of failed and fragile cities? Is Richard Norton's concept of 'feral cities' a useful one for us?

Urbicide denotes the kinds of violence that cities often attract from state security apparatuses. It is precisely the type of language of feral cities that we need to avoid in order to steer clear of the argument of 'cleansing' cities of unwanted citizens or activities. The clearest and most recent examples of urbicide were in Harare, Mumbai, and Manila, where urban cleansing can lead to increased threat of violence and fragility. We must also bear in mind that we are presupposing that there is one standard, Western form of the city, whereas, of course, urbanity comes in many shapes and sizes.

Slum insecurity

Given the impenetrability of slums — both physical and psychological — what adaptive strategies have slums implemented to provide security where there is no police presence, e.g. gangs and community-organized structures?

As one respondent noted:

The urban slum may be within the administrative framework of a city or a metropolitan area, but be governed by city security forces or by gangs, mafias, paramilitary units, warlords, and other non-state elected or appointed officials. They may "govern" by fear and intimidation, collect revenues through some loose tax structure, and use their slum as a base for urban protest or guerrilla activities.

Many of these gangs feature high concentrations of youth, given that half of all slum dwellers worldwide are under the age of 20.

Gangs and violence in slums are only one potential outcome. Family ties and ties to place can be as strong in slums as in many traditional rural areas, so some slums adopt a 'community defence' approach. As opposed to upscale areas, one expert noted, slum security:

... is more people-based ... than technology-based (lots of people with time on their hands but no technology). Also, since the "legal" process in slums usually ends at enforcement; there being no jails, the "rule of law" is short and clear.

Moreover, there is in essence what one expert called "the pluralization of security systems where non-state security personnel outnumber formal police."

The result of this pluralization is that citizen allegiance to the state is weakened as the state no longer monopolizes violence, and security devolves from a public to private good. This has impacts on how people see their relations with the state apparatus.

In terms of conflict cities, why have peace support operations (PSOs) such as the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) in Port-au-Prince not been able to solve slums like Cité Soleil?

A PSO is not competent to 'solve' the complex mix of human and material factors that make up a slum. No PSO can 'pacify' a slum, and military-only solutions will not satisfy the security/development needs of a slum population.

PSOs should also liaise with local peace committees, made up of local police, political elites, and civil society, to engage in proper community policing.

Are there any successful examples of urban disarmament, demobilization and, reintegration, and what lessons have we learned?

Liberia is an example, but requires further research.

Cities and conflict prevention

To what extent is it reasonable to emphasize the role of cities in larger national or regional peace processes?

The space of manoeuvre for cities in the face of national or international forces is not great. Most cities do not enjoy the unparalleled autonomy that many European cities used post-World War II to build peace from the ground up. Nonetheless, the courageous examples of the Municipal Alliance for Peace (Palestinian and Israeli mayors who continue dialogue and try to develop concrete cooperation projects between their cities), and the Tuzla, Osijek, and Novisad triad of Balkan cities suggest that localities which practice peace at the local level can at least reduce the amount or intensity of armed violence within their boundaries, if not nationally. Primarily, therefore, cities can serve an intermediary role in conflict situations.

In what ways do urban features, such as active civil society, act as shock absorbers for countries teetering on the brink of conflict?

The symbolic power of cities cannot be underestimated, especially in the modern media-driven world. As one respondent noted:

If a city works well in the midst of surrounding conflict, it projects the image of an alternative and provides a sense of possibility for change. This sense of efficacy is often a spark for political action.

The choices of brave locally-elected leaders can have a galvanizing impact on peace. Certain cities are also key centres of cultural, historic, or religious status, such as Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Khartoum. While this can be a source of violence, progress in these cities can have a multiplier effect on peace efforts in a region or country.

Proximity to the people is another key local advantage. Local governments are able to involve a greater variety of people with different backgrounds — minority groups, socio-economic groups, genders — at a higher proportion than national or international governance structures. Moreover, city entities are able to engage their constituents at the most basic and concrete community level, rather than at the abstract national level. Where mayors and local representatives exhibit leadership, these figures are sometimes the first point of mediation between warring parties.

Mass communication is a distinct urban conflict resolution advantage. As one expert wrote:

The density and accessibility of urban populations, the accessibility and availability of public spaces, local media, organized civil

society, and the Internet mean that it is relatively easy to mobilize support or resistance, and to inform or consult people in cities.

The burgeoning field of city diplomacy also points to a growing direct role for cities in conflict management. In conflict situations, cities can use silent diplomacy to foster dialogue between parties in conflict, as well as engage in acts of solidarity which can generate international attention for the problems that the local governments in the conflict area are facing, such as visits by European mayors to urban conflict spaces in Colombia. This city-to-city track can obviate state control, but also complement negotiations at a national level.

In post-conflict situations, what are some examples of strong and vibrant cities leading the way to peace, and what are the factors which build urban resilience in the face of conflict?

Johannesburg played a major role in overcoming apartheid, while the aforementioned Balkan triad signed a *Protocol on the promotion of inter-ethnic tolerance* (<http://www.citizenspact.org.yu/protocol.htm>), signed by representatives of the city authorities and civil society in all three cities. All were remarkably less convulsed by conflict than other Balkan cities.

In Macedonia, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Search for Common Ground worked with local governments to encourage exchange visits and economic projects between cities with mayors of varied ethnic backgrounds. In Skopje, environmental projects were created which employed multiple ethnic groups. This may have played some role in preventing Macedonia from becoming another Kosovo.

Factors necessary for urban resilience include security and crisis-management capacities; inclusion in democratic processes; fairness and proportionality; building of social capital through economic incentives (active civil society and integration); and, justice and reconciliation mechanisms.

A final factor in urban resilience may come from slums and so-called weak cities. Namely, these settlements or areas are forced to eke out existence and security against all odds, and as a result have an in-built capacity to cope with the grinding obstacles of day-to-day life.

Finally, can cities themselves, because of the wealth or power that they generate, stabilize weak states and prevent conflict from erupting?

Cities can serve as early warning indicators of potential conflicts, and swift action at a city level can help forestall conflict, as it did in Turkey. The city of Barcelona supported the mayor of Diyarbakir in his struggle against imprisonment, preventing the escalation of a potential conflict between ethnic Turks and Kurds. In Columbia, several mayors have created, in close collaboration with civil organizations, 'peace guards' to protect various places, stabilizing those areas.

The idea of peace committees is also crucial to establishing peace at the local level, thereby building the foundation for peace at a higher level. In South Africa, a network of peace committees contributed to the larger peace process where local-level authorities were weakened by forms of political violence.

The opportunity for micro-credit and small-scale demonstrative projects is great in cities. Tangible successes can have strong symbolic effects magnified beyond their actual benefit. As the city is a mass of small moving parts, we need to feed and support those parts with small, targeted projects to be able to strengthen the resilience of variegated cities.

Cities and democracy

Is democratic, mass, and largely peaceful urban protest on the rise, and if so, why?

Mass urban protest is certainly on the rise, as local governments around the world are increasingly speaking for their citizens, while their citizens are increasingly fed up with governments in general. Mass urban protests are increasing the space of social justice.

Most protests are directed at national-level decisions, but actually find expression in cities, especially capitals, e.g. the recent unrest in Gabon or Liberia.

In post-conflict societies, should state-building be complemented with democratic city-building?

Local democracy is the first step in replacing violence in the streets with non-violent conflict management. A 2005 report by International IDEA found that there is recognition in the policy community that resuscitating local-level state capacities for security and service delivery is an important, if not critical,

arena for early and immediate intervention in post-war situations. Lessons learned from previous UN peacebuilding missions reveal that failure to develop local-level democracy frustrates the pursuit of security and hampers service delivery. Where municipal-level governance is democratic and where there is community involvement in decision making, security, relief, and development, those activities are more likely to be sustainable over time.

Broadly speaking, local-level politicians say they have more in common in terms of responsibilities to their cities than they do in terms of their political party lines. The local level forces authorities to focus on priorities rather than politics in many cases.

It may be possible to city-build (as a complement to state-building) only in small cities. As one respondent noted:

It is my experience in several peacekeeping missions that in only small cities, with some recent history of internal cooperation, and some strict and consistent security support is such post-conflict progress imaginable.

The Balkan triad is one such example, but the failure of Sarajevo, Dili, and Nicosia in the early stages of those conflicts suggests that current expectations for city-building should be modest indeed.

In post-conflict environments, city-building must begin immediately. However, as warlords and other elites may be strongest in the post-conflict period, elections may not be the outcome of city-building. Rather, we need to look at other types of local-level democracy that build civil society in conjunction with national elections. Nonetheless, local elections are an excellent way to inculcate the principles of democracy, and should be held as soon as circumstances allow.

With cities being the level of government closest to the people, should reconstruction efforts look to build democracy and governance institutions from the ground up?

As one expert noted, "Very often the physical, social, economic, and cultural dynamics of cities recover remarkably quickly once the mass violence stops."

However, ineffective and unrepresentative local government that cannot provide basic urban services leaves a vacuum that can be filled by

opportunistic gangs or even extremist groups (e.g. Hamas) that build legitimacy by providing those services.

Democracy at the local level broadens the basis of peace at the community, municipal, and city level. Strong systems of local democracy diffuse values of tolerance, inclusion, accountability, and citizen participation through a wider network of government and in a proliferation of arenas of interaction.

Nonetheless, we must be wary of decentralization efforts, especially in Africa. There, decentralization has been ineffective in establishing viable democratic local institutions and processes. Voter turnout and citizen involvement in city deliberations has been very low.

To what degree does local democracy feed up to the national level?

The first link between local and central is the fact that, as one of the experts noted:

Local-level conflict and violence can undermine broader attempts to consolidate peace through democracy by causing "disruptions from below" that increase insecurities, exacerbate differences, challenge capacities for security, and reinforce intolerance. Robust local democracy systems are more likely to manage and contain such disruptions from below than are municipal authorities lacking in legitimacy and the consent of the people.

Moreover, democracy at the local level can bring democracy to the widest range of actors, and allow democratic practices to permeate across a wide spectrum of people.

While we should not speed into local elections in post-conflict environments, they should possibly be held before national elections (though the usefulness of national elections for political party integration and national identity building are critical as well). Local elections can reduce uncertainty by providing insights into the strength of relative factions and parties, test the electoral administrative framework, help stabilize particularly volatile areas where power is intensely contested (as in Kosovo), and, of course, build democracy from the ground up. The reduced scale of preparing for local elections also makes them more manageable in the immediate post-conflict period.

Further developments

In addition to these four themes, where else are cities exerting independent impacts on traditional human security concerns?

Several new avenues for research were identified by our experts:

- the ways in which political insurgencies of various sorts are exploiting the impenetrable qualities of many informal settlements, as bases for the prosecution of strategies of political violence;
- the parallel re-organization of formal state militaries into organizations whose de facto function is to fight against the urbanizing insurgencies just outlined;
- the ways in which both terrorist and insurgent groups and formal state militaries are increasingly targeting the everyday infrastructures and sites of cities within their respective programs of political violence;
- the nexus between technology and cities;
- the role of sport as a conflict resolution field; and,
- the role of urban diasporas in preventing and fuelling conflict.

Moreover, with rapid urbanization in much of the developing world, are cities more likely to be building blocks of peace or tumbling dominoes of conflict?

We need to explore the barriers to putting international city organizations on the global agenda. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is a viable partner, and has found some support in the international community. However, the UN still does not recognize local autonomy as a universal principle, and cities are still classified as NGOs rather than government partners. The growing and positive role of UCLG-Africa in spreading professional, democratic, city-level administration has helped to transcend language and colonial-experience barriers that had inhibited effective regional association development in Africa. Experiences such as this are rare, but point to the viability of cities as full-fledged agents of peace.