Building Peace in Urban Setting
Lessons from the Ground and Recommendations for Collaboration
Report of the 2013 Annual Meeting
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The 21st century is proving to be the century of cities. Already by 2007 more than half of the world’s population was living in urban areas – a first in human history. By 2030, 6 out of every 10 people will live in a city, and by 2050, this proportion will rise to 7 out of 10. Urban growth is first and foremost the growth of cities in the developing world, which now account for more than 90% of global urban expansion. It is also growth concentrated in “marginal urban and surrounding periphery contexts, especially slums”. Cities today are economic magnets and the source of real opportunity for many. They are also sites of great poverty and grinding inequality in access to services, including all of the basics – housing, schooling, health care, food, transport, security, and justice.¹

In many poorer neighborhoods and slums, concentrated deprivation goes hand-in-hand with high levels of urban violence. Criminal gang activity and street violence are not at all new to cities, of course. But the intensity and organization of contemporary violence in some cities and their neighborhoods invites comparison to armed conflicts.² Analysts of “fragile cities” see the potential for chronic, quasi-war, forms of violence to spread to other city areas and intermediate towns where the state has lost the monopoly of force and there is a failure in local social contracts between governments and citizens.³

The rapidly evolving characteristics of violence are in a sense also a reflection of how the contexts of peacebuilding have changed in many settings. Cities are increasingly where the people are, and that increasingly makes them the primary site for the promotion of sustainable development. And sustainable development cannot be promoted successfully in situations of chronic violence any more than in the context of ongoing conflict. To quote The Report of the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda:

We must acknowledge a principal lesson of the MDGs: that peace and access to justice are not only fundamental human aspirations but cornerstones of sustainable development. Without peace, children cannot go to school or access health clinics. Adults cannot go to their

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:
workplaces, to markets or out to cultivate their fields. Conflict can unravel years, even decades, of social and economic progress in a brief span of time. When it does, progress against poverty becomes daunting. By 2015, more than 50 per cent of the total population in extreme poverty will reside in places affected by conflict and chronic violence. To end extreme poverty and empower families to pursue better lives requires peaceful and stable societies.4

This link between chronic violence and poverty underlines the critical need for practical innovation to respond to violence and fragility in urban settings. While much of UN peacebuilding practice is limited by the prerogatives of state sovereignty with respect to city-level efforts, there is clearly an interest and capability in the larger peacebuilding community to respond to the urban challenge.

The 2013 Annual Meeting brought together practitioners and researchers working on urban violence prevention and reduction, municipal planning and urban safety. It had the objective to better understand the challenges of building peace in ‘fragile’ cities and the potential role of peacebuilding in addressing these challenges. Overall, the Annual Meeting underlined that the peacebuilding community can provide a specific contribution to responses to violence and fragility in urban settings by focusing on:

- Small-scale interventions (e.g., small grants schemes and contributions to the work of local NGOs) to operate in a context-appropriate fashion;
- Funding support to grassroots political leadership in conflict situations, while privileging research and learning exchanges in non-conflict settings to protect the legitimacy of local leaders;
- Collaborative research platforms such as urban violence observatories and city labs for peacebuilders and urban violence specialists to work together in fragile urban contexts with local authorities to create bottom-up, tailored solutions.

This relatively modest agenda would draw on peacebuilders’ experience and expertise that can be connected to the existing work of some UN agencies, especially on urban safety and governance. The principle role of international actors to catalyse and facilitate work on the ground complements contemporary peacebuilding field analyses - pointing again to the importance of the conversations around the comparative advantage of different actors in building peace in different settings.

**Box 1: Learning from urban violence research and programming: Key lessons for peacebuilders**

1. Analyses of urban violence must be truly local – They must be able to track the politics of positional struggles and the creation and recreation of informal local contracts.
2. For violence prevention to succeed, legitimate local leadership from all kinds of groups working together is needed.
3. To break cycles of violence, governments need to innovate beyond strong arm policies, including sustainable livelihoods programs and negotiating with gang leaders.
4. Urban violence reduction and prevention alike need to be embedded in efforts to change the relationship of national governments with cities and city dwellers. This may mean decentralization and the transfer of resources and technical capabilities to local authorities. It will almost certainly mean treating urban violence as a problem of the state (and not an individual issue) and recognizing city dwellers as fully-fledged citizens entitled to be heard and to enjoy ‘a right to the city’ like any other citizen.
Lessons from the ground for urban violence reduction and prevention

The Annual Meeting 2013 of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform drew the attention to the ever more diversified nature of peacebuilding contexts. The focus on the response to violence and fragility in urban settings connected the lessons from a great diversity of practice related to citizen security, urban safety, armed violence reduction, urban resilience, conflict prevention, and the transformation of gang cultures. Many city officials and local community organizations are at the forefront of these efforts and the Annual Meeting brought their voice to Geneva to reflect on lessons and options for supporting their work more effectively. From the fascinating exchanges that followed, there are four key lessons for building peace in urban settings:

1. You must have a local understanding of issues, actors and power arrangements
2. You need legitimate local leadership for violence prevention
3. States must risk moving beyond mana dura to break cycles of violence
4. The need to change the relationship between the city, citizens, and the state

1. You must have a local understanding of issues, actors and power arrangements

There is nothing apparently novel for peacebuilders in a call for contextually-sensitive conflict analysis. The meaning of what’s local, though, shifts down in urban contexts to actors and groups and political processes within and across neighborhoods and city areas. Many international peacebuilders generally equate ‘the local’ with state-level political elites, ideally in dialogue with representatives from civil society and community and religious group. They recognize, but cannot really engage with, the positional politics behind this dialogue – who speaks for the state, or as a non-state representative? Why was a specific ethnic group or minority excluded? In urban settings with chronic violence, the violence is nearly always wrapped up with struggles for position and the spoils to be gained from creating and recreating informal local contracts. To engage on the ground, you must know how the struggles are structured and work.

One illustration of such a local lens comes from the conflict in Syria. Proposed transition processes for Syria follow the pattern of most conflict analyses in ignoring the grassroots opposition that was the primary engine of the revolution. Hopes for a democratic and inclusive political force in Syria are concentrated on the Syrian diaspora, and especially the National Coalition. Drop down to the urban level, though, and grassroots organizing stands out in cities like Raqqa as leading defiance of the regime and then, as regime forces withdrew from the area, rapidly organizing for self-rule and for the provision of essential services such as water, schools and health-care clinics.

Today, the local council and the civil society organizations working with it are in a governance struggle in Raqqa with the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). On 17 June 2013 women in Raqqa led a demonstration outside ISIL’s headquarters against arbitrary detention of their male relatives. Other demonstrations in the city have targeted the jihadis’ manipulation of religion for their own political purposes. These kinds of grassroots opposition, and these kinds of competitions for city governance, are found in other urban centers in Syria besides Raqqa. The grassroots groups can be seen as democratically-oriented actors to seek to include in future negotiations. They only ‘emerge to be seen’, though, through understanding the politics on the ground in urban struggles.
While cities in conflict zones are familiar territory for peacebuilders, a megacity like Rio de Janeiro would be a new frontier. Urban violence research in Rio’s favelas shows the need to probe carefully the meaning of community leadership and the processes underlying its creation. Over the last decade, para-state militias have risen to become dominant actors in many of Rio’s favelas. The militias are quasi-state groups made up of a diversity set of actors, including, for instance, off-duty civil and military police officers, fire fighters, or prison guards. They have taken over community leadership – quite literally – through taking control of residents’ associations and otherwise occupying the political space in the favelas. The militias seek to decide on interventions in the favelas by the state or external NGOs. They select candidates to run for office and block rivals on their behalf. They also use clientalism with political parties to mediate access by favela residents to the government and its services.

Local residents benefit from increased security and welfare, and undoubtedly they give some legitimacy to the militias for this. The protection is selective, though, and it rests on silencing and exclusion, violence and fear. It is difficult to see such a perverse politics as community leadership for the public good. Certainly, the authoritarian and violent nature of militia leadership must be understood in order to comprehend the violence in Rio’s favelas.

Box 2: The politics of place and space in divided cities

One of the ways that the militias dominate community-based organizations in the favelas in Rio de Janeiro is to force them to operate from association buildings which the militias control. That is not only a practical but also a symbolic domination (putting the community groups visibly “under us”). In cities like Tetovo (Macedonia), Beirut and Tripoli, ethno-political conflicts divide shared space (physically breaking the context for shared identities) and create spaces to ignore or confront “the other”. Peacebuilding in such contexts must take into account the geopolitics of identity and life experience – aiming to have communities live side-by-side without violence, encouraging community-based processes to recreate shared space (e.g., through culture or sports) and making it possible to ‘trust’ places again (e.g., historical monuments, businesses). One should also anticipate and seek to prevent the reinforcement of spatial divisions and identities through walls and security, religious symbols and memorials, and other similar means.

2. You need legitimate local leadership for violence prevention

Raqqa and Rio de Janeiro demonstrate how local leadership matters a great deal to offsetting the effects of violence, or to its perpetuation in contexts where the state is absent or an uncertain and often-aggressive actor. The case of the commune of Treichville, in the city of Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, shows us that violence prevention efforts can succeed when they are led by local actors who foster a more democratic legitimacy: consult broadly, share information, and work collaboratively.

Among all of Côte d’Ivoire’s communes (or towns within municipal areas), Treichville stands out as having best weathered the 2010 post-electoral crisis with limited attacks or killings. The immediate source of the violence prevention was the close collaboration between different municipal committees and the traditional chiefs to exchange warnings about and mediate potential confrontations. Violence prevention efforts actually began in Treichville in the late 1990s, and it is thanks to the prior and ongoing work that systems were in place, and people could trust one another, in very tense circumstances.
A major role has been played by François Albert Amichia, the Mayor of Treichville, who has led this work at the communal level and as part of the network of Côte d’Ivoire mayors he helped to create in 1998. However, Amichia himself would say that sustainable prevention comes from institutional and community participation. Among other committees and groups formed to address insecurity in Treichville are the following:

- The Comité Communal de Sécurité (CCS) brings together representatives of the security forces in Treichville with those from community organizations and religious groups; the political parties; the private sector; associations for youth, women, and the aged; municipal services and planning offices; and the municipal administration.
- The creation of more localized security committees for each of Treichville’s 43 neighborhoods – these were essential to preventing massacres when the post-electoral conflict began.
- The Treichville Vigilance Sécurité (TVS) brigade, staffed by youth who had been involved in robbery and violent crimes, but who now are to earn their living as actors for security.
- The creation of annual joint operations during the end-of-year festival period between the different national and municipal police forces, as part of efforts to improve information sharing and have the security forces seen to work for the community (and so to improve the population’s confidence in them).
- The promotion of local governance structures, including local NGOs and a wise man’s committee.

The Treichville effort benefitted from funding and advice from UN-Habitat’s Safer Cities programme, as well as changes in Ivorian law to devolve some state competencies to the territorial collectives. These factors, while consequential, should not overshadow the important lessons from this case – that addressing urban violence is a long-term proposition, all kinds of people with leadership skills need to be brought into the work from all parts of the community (including youth, women and the aged), and that legitimate leadership is achieved not by individuals but by groups working together.

3. States must risk moving beyond mana dura to break cycles of violence

The violence prevention process was originally launched in Treichville because street crime and assaults were on an alarming rise. What about when violent crime is organized by gangs and entrenched at much higher levels – how do you check the killing and maiming in such racked city territories?

Many governments in Central and Latin America have first tried mana dura (or strong arm) strategies of harsh repression. These strategies answered to the political need to be seen to do something, as well as to the anger of victims and their families. The problem is that, while they might temporarily check the violence, mana dura strategies have not been very successful in the longer term. This is why some governments (notably including that of Brazil) are now moving to pacification strategies with muscular clearing operations, but also promises of community policing and the provision of basic services.

A different approach is being tested in San Salvador, a city and territory subject for years to extreme gang violence intertwined with mana dura military operations. A breakthrough in San Salvador’s cycles of violence came in March 2012, when El Salvador’s two main gangs announced that they had established a truce and ceasefire between them, and pledged to
reduce the number of homicides in the country. The effect was dramatic: homicides fell from an average of 14-17 homicides per day to 5.5 per day – in percentage terms a decline of 59.7%.

The truce was brokered with imprisoned gang leaders by representatives of the Catholic Church working with intelligence officers and a former guerrilla leader (who was also a former Member of Congress). It was thanks to the backing of the Minister of Security and Justice, David Munguía Payés that the deal brokers could meet with the gang leaders, much less that the gang leaders could communicate with each other or with gang members outside of prison. Members of other gangs have since been brought into the truce. Groups have formed in El Salvador to advance the peace process, and the international community has become actively involved in consolidation, notably including the Organization of American States and the European Union. Interpeace, one of the institutions behind the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, has been working with the Humanitarian Foundation to develop social programs for ex-gang members.

This is a promising but fragile peace network. While coalition-building for it continues, challenges are also mounting. The truce has been controversial for not including the end of gang extortion in the deal and (as the opposition party has charged) for how it makes the state partners with criminals. Munguía Payés was ousted from his post in May, 2013, on the grounds that as a former military general, his appointment was unconstitutional. The gang leaders issued a press release regretting the court’s decision and warning that it put the security of Salvadoreans at risk. Looking towards presidential elections in 2015 the government sometimes expresses support for the truce, and sometimes sends the contradictory message that the truce reinforces the gangs’ territorial control and their connections to international drug traffickers.

Whatever the eventual outcome of the Salvadorean experiment, its success to date has drawn interest from Honduras and Guatemala, where similar gang-based quasi-war violence has become institutionalized and mana dura strategies have proven ineffective to change this. In the right circumstances, could negotiation with the perpetrators be a bitter but viable means to break the violence cycle?

Box 3: Lessons from the Tivoli Gardens incursion and its aftermath

On 23 May, 2010, Jamaica’s military and police forces entered the Tivoli Gardens neighborhood of Kingston, Jamaica, in order to search for and arrest major drug lord Christopher “Dudus” Coke. The incursion succeeded in extracting the gang leader, but at a high cost in immediate deaths and in the rioting and gang-police confrontations which followed. Rather than backing down, the police kept up the pressure. This brought the situation under control, and also worked for a few years to reduce gang-related homicides. But today the gangs have come back to fight for territory in downtown Kingston. They are also spreading their operations to new communities on the city’s periphery in order to escape police pressure. The violence is spiralling back out of control again.

A practical lesson to draw from this experience is ‘strike while the iron is cool’: capitalize on periods of reduced conflict to make social investments, especially in youth, and in this way to address the poverty drivers of urban violence. Mediation and dialogue are much needed in places like Tivoli Gardens to show people that the state is not only a repressive apparatus and to convince them to believe in it. Most importantly, though, people must be able to answer ‘what next?’ for themselves and their families without their futures depending on the drug gangs. This means developing sustainable livelihoods programs in the community to create concrete alternatives. Unfortunately, in this case the Jamaican government’s program to help boost social development has been delayed in its implementation – and an opportunity to create more lasting change is being lost.
4. The need to change the relationship between the city, citizens, and the state

If there is one lesson that came out loud and clear at the Annual Meeting, it is that urban violence reduction and prevention must be embedded in efforts to change the relationship of national governments with cities and city dwellers.

On one level, this may mean decentralization and the transfer of resources and technical capabilities to local authorities so that they can tailor solutions and engage populations in those solutions. Devolution of powers and the granting of funds for programming are part of Treichville’s success story. It is also a general conclusion reached by agencies like UN-Habitat for how to make cities more secure. Local authorities may be corrupt, disorganized, and otherwise a poor bet for making sustainable changes in their municipalities. They are also closer to the issues and the affected populations than their regional and national counterparts, and they may be committed and surprisingly capable given the right kinds of support.

It is important to note that in this vision of devolution, decentralization does not translate into decoupling from the state. National governments would still provide policy frameworks and plans and make budget allocations. They would still be actors in urban pacification and peacebuilding - as in San Salvador, directly involved in launching broad-based negotiations or, as in Kingston, contributing judiciary and security forces to address the ability of organized crime to change locales and to operate transnationally. What would change is that local authorities would now be the implementing arms for most violence reduction plans or prevention efforts, with powers and resources given them to support this new role.

On another level, the changes required concern how the state acts towards the city populations living in the urban areas blighted by violence. Are these populations excluded (legally and/or practically) from the state’s duties and areas of responsibility? Or are they recognized as citizens who have ‘a right to the city’ equal to any other citizen of the state? Dialogue must replace incursive repression, livelihoods and other social development projects must accompany violence reduction programmes. Underlying proposals like these is a vision of a different, democratic and rights-based, political economy of the state in poor, violent, and dispossessed urban areas. One might ask whether the liberal ideal embedded in this vision really has much to do with the states in question.

In counterpoint to such doubts is the recent campaign in New Delhi to give women equal rights to their city. Most of us have heard about the 2012 New Delhi gang rape and fatal assault of a young physiotherapy student while she was returning home from a movie with a companion. This femicide was regrettably not at all an exception in Delhi, which the city’s Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, has called a “rape capital”.

This time, however, the incident received widespread national and international coverage and thousands came out on the streets to protest against the Government of India and the Government of Delhi for failing to provide security for women. After the victim’s death, further protests were staged all over India as well as internationally.

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One effect of the protests was to pressure the police to investigate the case and prosecute the perpetrators (relatively rare in cases of reported attacks on women, particularly Indian women – and one of the reasons why so few attacks are reported). Five men were arrested. Four of them, adults at the time of the incident, have been sentenced to death; the fifth, a juvenile when the attack occurred, has been given a 3-year prison sentence.
Beyond the prosecution, another effect of the protests was to send a message to officials in Delhi and at the national level that the everyday harassment and abuse of women is a denial of their rights and freedoms. Activists and women’s groups have been working for years on violence against women issues without achieving much progress. This time they were able to insist to government officials that they had to take real action in response. Among the initiatives which followed are these:

- A judicial committee was appointed with J. S. Verma, a former Chief Justice of India, at its head, to suggest amendments to criminal law to toughen the statutes on sexual assault. This committee consulted widely, including working directly with the women’s movement. Many (perhaps 90%) of the Committee’s suggestions have now been incorporated into amendments to the Indian Penal Code, Evidence Act, and Code of Criminal Procedures.
- A Commission of Inquiry was set up to identify lapses during the incident, and to suggest steps to make Delhi and the National Capital Region safer for women. Subsequently a task force has been established in Delhi to look into women’s safety issues and to regularly review the functioning of the city police force.

Several observations are worthwhile about this case. First, it may take many years for an excluded group to begin to gain a ‘right to the city’. Second, this right will not likely be acknowledged until the violence is seen as a problem of the state (and not as an individual issue). Third, cities like Delhi have a fragmented governance to go with their fractured architecture. To put in place a strategic framework you must look at a plethora of institutions, and work on changing norms in all contexts and at all levels. Finally, laws matter for the state commitments they represent, and also for the standards they set for citizens to insist on action by the state.

**Peacebuilders in the city: Some recommendations**

We have seen that the landscape of urban violence is highly variable and often difficult for outsiders to understand, including those living in richer parts of the same city. We have also seen how urban violence reduction or prevention efforts are highly political, turning for their success or failure on the creation of broad-based legitimate local leadership, national coalition-building, and the rewriting of state-municipal contracts and the laws and social contracts between national and local governments and the people living in poor neighborhoods and slums. How might international peacebuilders – taken here as actors external to the cities and states in question – usefully contribute to addressing violence in such circumstances?

The following suggestions were made at the annual meeting:

- **Prioritize small interventions vs the launch of ambitious programmes:** This means for instance small-grants schemes and contributing to the work of local NGOs. A good example here is the project being carried out in Albania by DCAF (the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces) to promote community policing. Among the project’s elements are small-grants schemes to involve youth groups in generating innovative partnerships for urban safety with the local police. The small-grants schemes are context-appropriate in terms of the youth component.
• Provide support to local political leadership: In cases where the state is absent (for example, in Syria) it is important to pinpoint the grassroots community leaders and work with them instead of with diaspora leaders – especially by providing them with funding. It is admittedly very difficult in such situations to know who to support, and there is a real risk of funds being waylaid. The only way to proceed in such contexts is via building relations of personal trust. In other cases where the issue is to change the relations of the city with functioning governments (for example, in Brazil or India), the strong recommendation is that politics must be done without external funding, as this is the only way that it can be legitimate. External actors can still contribute, however, through promoting learning exchanges about experiences in other cities and countries, and supporting relevant research.

• Fund and manage collaborative action research platforms: These were recommendations for more ambitious research facilities, including ‘urban violence observatories’ of ‘city labs’. With respect to urban violence observatories, government strategies are seldom data-driven, making it difficult to identify how to intervene effectively or to learn about results and correct action plans. Observatories would enable better-informed policies. Beyond this, they can be useful focal points to mobilize political agendas and bring different actors together. With respect to ‘city labs’ peacebuilders and urban safety specialists work with legitimate local authorities to create bottom-up, tailored solutions. The proposal has the real merit of promising on-the-ground exchanges between these communities of practice, so that they can learn directly from one another.

This relatively modest agenda would draw on peacebuilders’ expertise without evoking the peacebuilding apparatus, privileging small ‘p’, community-oriented and more informal, peacebuilding over capital ‘P’, internationally-negotiated, multilateral interventions or programmes. Such modesty is to the good, in that large-scale international peacebuilding copes badly with the hybrid violence and shifting sociopolitical relations characteristic of most urban violence contexts.7

Peacebuilding’s entry into urban violence reduction also risks generating sovereignty and reputation-based resistance from host governments. They will fear that peacebuilders’ involvement in their slums is like declaring that their country is in a state of civil war, or accepting that international agencies have the right to negotiate directly with sub-national actors to provide basic security and development assistance. Peacebuilders will need to keep a low profile to offset these negative perceptions; and this is why an agenda that focuses on the discrete provision of support of local efforts stands a better chance to help reducing violence and building peace.
Endnotes


About this paper

This paper is a distillation of the main points raised during the 2013 Annual Meeting of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. All views expressed in this paper relate to the interventions made during the 2011 Annual Meeting. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Rapporteur, or the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. This paper is also available at http://www.gpplatform.ch.

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The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is an inter-agency network that connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and worldwide. Founded in 2008, the Platform has a mandate to facilitate interaction on peacebuilding between different institutions and sectors, and to advance new knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding issues and contexts. It also plays a creative role in building bridges between International Geneva, the United Nations peacebuilding architecture in New York, and peacebuilding activities in the field. The Platform's network comprises more than 3,000 peacebuilding professionals and over 60 institutions working on peacebuilding directly or indirectly. As part of its 2012-2014 Programme, the Platform provides policy-relevant advice and services, ensures the continuous exchange of information through seminars, consultations, and conferences, and facilitates outcome-oriented peacebuilding dialogues in five focus areas. For more information, visit http://www.gpplatform.ch.

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