



Report - Big Cities: Sources of and Approaches to Urban Insecurities in Fragile Contexts

On Thursday 13 November, the Secretariat of the Knowledge Platform Security and the Rule of Law hosted the expert event Big Cities: Sources of and Solutions to New Insecurities at The Hague Institute for Global Justice. The meeting was intended to provide an opportunity to absorb the latest scholarly and policy thinking on the role of cities in fragile and conflict-affected environments, as well as to discuss possible donor responses to problems associated with urban development. Supported by case studies, field experts, scholars and policy makers discussed the concerns of insecurity, segregation, and inclusive decision-making processes in the city.

Ivan Briscoe opened the conference by stating that rapid urbanization, especially in developing countries, is one of the engines of fast-growing economies and has become emblematic of the globalization process. However, there is much evidence to show that it is also the cause of significant social tensions and human insecurity. Most armed violence in the world today is likely to be urban. According to recent UN data, an estimated 480,000 are murdered each year, mostly by guns and in cities. Moreover, urbanization is progressing extremely fast: while in 2014, 54 percent of the world population is urban, by 2050 this is estimated to rise to two thirds.

Briscoe suggested that vertiginous, unplanned and unequal urban development has been associated with extreme cases of insecurity, as in the US-Mexican border town of Ciudad Juárez. However, he also emphasized that, despite the problems associated with “megacities”, we should not lose sight of the many attractions that cities, as beacons of modernity, continue to exert.

Understanding epidemics of urban crime and violence in Latin America

During the first session Manuel Llorens, professor of psychology at the Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas, gave an overview of the situation in Venezuela. He explained that even though levels of poverty and inequality have fallen in Venezuela over the last decade, homicide rates have risen. This, he says, defies the “logic” of general assumptions on the correlation of poverty, inequality and violence. The reasons for the growing violence are multiple, ranging from the deterioration of justice institutions in the country to an excess of firearms and an increase in drug trafficking activities.

Moreover, the situation in Venezuela has become more tense after the death last year of Hugo Chávez, which has led to clashes between chavistas and liberal students, and an ambivalent stance of the new government towards the use of weapons and violence by quasi-state forces. However, he showed there are also positive initiatives, such as Mujeres de Portillo: a group of mothers from a poor Caracas neighbourhood, who initiated peace negotiations with the rival neighbouring community after one of their sons was murdered. These mothers have become a symbol of the efforts of communities to reduce violence. However, Llorens believes such

initiatives are fragile due to the deep resentments and traumatization through violence of many community members, and are difficult to sustain without state support.

Chris van der Borgh, associate professor at Utrecht University, focused on the situation in Central America, particularly El Salvador. He explained that the origins of the infamous maras and pandillas lie in the gang culture in the ghettos of Los Angeles, where the first generation of gangsters grew up before they were deported back to Central America. Estimates of gang membership in countries in the so-called Northern Triangle are 20,000-24,000 in El Salvador (including 8,500 in prison), 12,000 in Honduras, and 22,000 in Guatemala. Young people join a gang because in a context of poverty and unemployment, membership promises friendship, solidarity, respect and protection. Gang identity is very strong, and membership lasts until death. It is therefore very difficult to create sustainable peace between rivals, as the fragile truce between Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 in El Salvador has demonstrated.

Van der Borgh pointed out that prisons are important hubs for gangs, serving as ideal places for recruitment as well as bases from where the leadership gives orders to members on the streets. Most gangs exercise territorial control and gain their income from extorting and taxing small businesses. However, van der Borgh highlighted that an increasing portion of gangs' income derives from organized crime and drug trafficking. Increasing links with organized crime, he argues, is changing the characteristics of gangs across the region.

Hybrid Urban Violence: between politics and crime (Africa and South Asia)

Nida Kirmani, assistant professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, provided a case study of the Lyari neighbourhood in downtown Karachi, Pakistan. Karachi is one of the world's authentic megacities, with an estimated population of between 20 and 25 million people. It is also the main economic hub in Pakistan, representing 54 percent of the country's tax revenue and 25 percent of its GDP.

Kirmani explained that Karachi sees roughly 2,000 deaths a year from political and/or ethnic violence, and that, while this may not seem much compared to the world's most violent cities (above all in Latin America), the perception of violence among its population is extremely high. The neighborhood of Lyari has a population of over one million, and is composed of various ethnicities of which the Baloch are dominant. Kirmani pointed to the central importance of heavily armed, ethnically oriented political parties in understanding urban violence in Karachi, and discussed the complex intersections and mutual dependencies between these parties, gangs and the state.

A long history of gangsterism in the working class neighbourhood of Lyari has since given way to a more stable relationship between the mob and politics. The population sees gangs as the main actors providing security and social support. However, Kirmani asks, what exactly constitutes this "support" when people's choices are constrained by a climate of fear? She pointed out that marginalized groups of men face multiple and shifting threats from a variety of forces including parties, the state and gangs. Fear and insecurities, she argued, strengthen

the power of competing violent actors (including extremists), thus creating more and more “no-go areas” in Karachi.

The ghettos of Nairobi are not altogether dissimilar according to Naomi van Stapele, a post-doctoral fellow at the VU University Amsterdam. She discussed how police and crime are deeply intertwined in the everyday experience of the people in the city of 5 million inhabitants, two thirds of whom live in informal settlements. In fact, the police is perceived as one of the most powerful gangs of the city (thousand are reported to have been killed unlawfully by the police in recent years), whereas the various gangs are vital allies of politicians at the time of elections, granting access to urban territory and voters. As a result, Van Stapele raised the crucial question as to what crime means in this context, given that popular understanding deviates so greatly from legal formality. Gangs dealing in heroin, for instance, tend to label themselves “companies.”

As in Karachi, political parties play a major role in urban violence, where competition around elections result in shifting alliances between gangs and political parties. Moreover, certain gangs appears to act as allies or franchises for the Islamist terrorist group Al Shabaab, although the nature of these links are difficult to specify. However, unlike the gangs in Central America, membership of Nairobi’s gangs is not for life. When adulthood is reached, members leave as easily as they joined. Finally, van Stapele emphasized that it is not only the police and gangs that are involved in crime in Kenya; NGOs as well as businesses are also dependent on money and power resulting from patrimonial relationships structured by political parties.

Yusuf Hasan, MP for the National Alliance in Kenya, confirmed that there is a need to look differently at violence and crime in the city of Nairobi and that “we need to change the notion that the government knows all”. He confirmed that Nairobi’s development under British rule as a segregated colonial city is still very marked; even though the native black population is accepted in politics they are still socially marginalized in urban spaces, and are thus amenable to the support and services provides by gangs. Indeed, one of the main gangs, the Mungiki, claims to be the heir to the Mau Mau rebellion against British colonial rule.

It is in this context of widespread extra-legal activity and factionalized gangs that the rise of the Islamist terrorist group Al Shabaab must be understood. Hasan nevertheless emphasized that the new Kenyan Constitution can contribute to positive change, as it is unique in guaranteeing both social and economic rights.

The City in the Global Context: mobility, segregation and technology

Turning to global trends in urban policy, Alberto Vanolo, from the University of Turin, discussed the potential problems with so-called “smart cities” of the future. He expressed concern as to the growing popularity and lack of critical analysis regarding the use of new technologies to manage the harms of rapid urbanization. He stated that while technology, such as smart phone apps, can help with certain urban co-ordination problems, it will not solve the very complex issues of urban unrest derived from social inequality and resource scarcity. Private profit-seeking companies, he argued, will have far too great a say in matters

that should be addressed by democratically chosen representatives: Vanolo labelled this phenomenon “privatopia”. Moreover, he associated the very dependence on technology with a failure to address core issues of sustainable living for an expanding global population, as well as generating an excessive emphasis on security from fear, and thus on surveillance, enclosure and stigmatization of perceived anti-social behavior.

Rivke Jaffe, associate professor at the University of Amsterdam, elaborated further on the role of private actors when discussing how global security actors (both official and non-official) move across skills and across borders in the global marketplace for urban policies. For instance, she demonstrated how models of urban warfare that originate in Israel are exported to other areas, such as the favelas in Brazil. Similarly, the same company that designed the Palestinian wall is now contracted to build a wall on the US-Mexico border.

On the basis of recent research, she identified three of the most popular models of security and development policy as applied to urban issues: “neo-liberal responsabilization,” in which citizen responsibility for security is emphasized; the “culturalist” approach, which tries to tackle an embedded “culture of violence”; and the epidemiological approach, which treats violence primarily as an issue of public health. Moreover, at the city level, security policies are transferred between different security providers in spite of their surface differences. For instance, in Jamaica, where Jaffe has performed much of her research, the police has copied practices of local dons, ranging from extra-judicial killings and the establishing of curfews to painting mural drawings and organizing police-citizen dance parties.

Adesoji Adeniyi, coordinator of the “Megacities” project at the Ramphal Institute, went on to draw similarities between the case of Nairobi and his hometown of Lagos, Nigeria. Estimates as to the population of Lagos vary hugely: according to the national government this is 9.1 million, while the World Bank estimates it to be 21.5 million. Lagos is also known as the “megacity of slums,” considering that, like Nairobi, two thirds of its inhabitants live in the city’s ghettos. Lagos is home to around 218 different ethnic nationalities and is the economic heart of the country, making up 20 to 25 percent of Nigeria’s GDP.

Adeniyi argued that, when trying to tackle problems associated with rapid urbanization, policy makers in Nigeria fail to address the root causes of socio-economic exclusion. These include: poor city planning, the lack of an adequate support structure for local administration, and weak coordination between federal and state governments on Lagos affairs. Far from addressing these issues, the main initiatives for urban regeneration appear to be oriented towards creating new satellite towns geared exclusively towards the purchasing power of the upper classes. An identical phenomenon was identified in Nairobi by Yusuf Hassan, who warned of the extremely high land and property prices that excluded from home ownership not just the poor, but also vast swathes of public servants.

Wieger Apperloo, director of “Urban Matters” at Cordaid, stated that there is a need to convince donors to invest money in projects aimed at tackling urban insecurities. He said that while the international community is often more than willing to invest in basic infrastructure, it is hesitant to give money for the more complex process of engaging communities. He

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concluded by stressing that, when designing policies aimed at changing slums into thriving communities, it is vital to involve local citizens in the process; to design policies with them, instead of for them.